Can't Find My Way Home
by Clowns_or_Midgets

Summary

Sam finds himself trapped in a time that isn’t his own. Searching for a way to return to the present - and his brother - comes with many challenges and he’s going to need friends, old and new, to help him along the way.

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Notes

See the end of the work for notes
When Sam woke, he felt sharp jabs all over his stomach and legs. He opened his eyes and saw he was lying on dirty ground strewn with mulchy leaves and twigs. The scent of earth was strong in his nose.

When he sat up, he realized the jabs were coming from the twigs and broken branches digging into him. He stood, dusting the debris from his clothing, and looked around. He was completely alone. Surrounded by trees, he could see the moon lighting the canopy above. There wasn’t another soul in sight.

The last thing he remembered was Anna plunging the bar into his stomach and the burning pain. No, that wasn’t true. He also remembered the moment his heart gave one disjointed thud before an incredible lethargy swept over him. He had felt it before, and he knew what it meant. He had died. Anna had killed him after all.

He didn’t understand his current location though. He was pretty sure Hell would be more eternal pain and damnation than an empty forest, and Heaven, even if it wasn’t an impossibility for him to be there, would be better than this. The only option he could think of was some kind of purgatory for damned souls before being moved on to the Pit.

Suddenly, fear coursed through him. The last time he had seen Dean, Uriel had been choking him. Would he and Anna have been satisfied with Sam’s death or would they have wanted Dean’s life, too?

“Dean!” he shouted. “Dean!”

There was no sound other than his own voice trailing away. Dean would never leave Sam’s call unanswered when it was so filled with fear. He would do what he could to reassure him. He wouldn’t leave Sam to suffer. He couldn’t be here.

“He can’t be here,” Sam whispered to himself.

If this was some kind of purgatory for damned souls, Dean had no place here. He would be in Heaven. That was if he was even dead. They could have let him live. Sam hoped he was alive and reassured himself that if it was the terrible alternative, he would have peace. That was what Dean deserved. Sam was the one that deserved pain. His crimes had been terrible.

Feeling reassured, Sam appraised his situation. He could start walking and see where he ended up, or he could wait here for the demons to come and escort him on. The obvious answer was to wait, since there was no way he was going to get anywhere good walking, but the Winchester in him rebelled against the idea. He wasn’t going to wait here for them to come for him. If they wanted him, they could come find him.

He took one last look around, still seeing nothing that could help him, and then started walking. He had no sense of which direction to take, so he walked straight forward, stepping over the larger branches and crushing the twigs underfoot. The air was cold in his lungs, and his breath misted. He marveled at the details of the place. Surely heat and cold were gone now. At least until he reached Hell anyway. If common beliefs were true, it was going to be hot there.

There was no way to gauge time, but he didn’t feel he had been walking long before he heard a rustle behind him.
He froze. It was the sound of an angel’s arrival, and there was only one angel that he thought would trace him to this place, only one angel that wanted something from him. The one that had even threatened to bring Sam back if he was to kill himself. Sam supposed the promise had weight after all.

“Lucifer,” he said darkly without turning.

“I find that very insulting.”

Sam spun around, shocked by the familiarity of the voice. John Winchester stood behind him. He looked exactly the same as he had when Sam had seen him last—was it minutes, hours or days ago? There was something about his eyes, though. They didn’t look like his father’s. They were timeless.

“Who are you?” Sam asked.

He looked disappointed. “I thought you would have known already. I assumed your intellect would be higher. If I am not your father or Lucifer, as you know I’m not, who would I be in this body, this family lineage?”

The answer presented itself to Sam and he shuddered. “Michael.”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s good to finally meet you, Sam. I have waited for this moment a long time.”

“Get out of my father!” Sam snarled.

“I will in time. I am only borrowing him for a while. I needed to speak to you, and he was available and willing. Winchesters will do anything for family.”

Sam felt some relief at the fact his father wasn’t bound to be an archangel’s vessel for all time, but at the same time, he was afraid for the rest of his family and Michael’s comment about the Winchesters’ dedication to each other.

“Where’s Dean?”

“Dean is fine,” he said calmly. “I have already returned him to 2010. It will take him a minute or two to wake up, but he will be unaffected by his adventures.”

Sam stared into his eyes, searching for a lie. What disconcerted him was that he didn’t see one. He thought Michael was telling the truth, which made him wonder what was coming for him. If Michael had been planning to rescue him, he would have dropped him off with Dean. The fact he was here alone made Sam sure the archangel had a different plan for him.

“Dean’s really okay?” he asked.

“Didn’t I just say as much? You two are equally obsessed. How do you ever manage to save anyone else when you’re so consumed with each other’s safety all the time?”

Sam just stared at him, not saying a word.

“Dean is fine. He may even be awake already. Now, it’s time to talk about you.”

“Are you here to take me to Hell?” Sam asked.

Michael frowned. “Hell?”
“It’s why I’m here, right? I died and ended up in this place. Why else would you want me?”

Michael chuckled. “This place is New Mexico, Sam. And I am not here to take you to Hell. I am not taking you anywhere, in fact. It’s where I am leaving you that matters.”

Sam didn’t understand what he was talking about, but the fact he wasn’t headed to Hell made him feel a bit better about the situation.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” he said. “Where are you leaving me?”

“Here,” Michael said, spreading his arms. “I won’t leave you alone, of course. You’re going to need a….” he sneered, “guardian angel. Anna, if you please.”

There was the sound of breaking twigs, and Anna stepped out of the trees and came to stand with Michael.

Sam froze at the sight of his murderer. She looked at him with a strange expression, it was almost pitying, and then turned to Michael.

“Anna. Now that you have had a little time to appreciate your resurrection, are you ready to do as I wish?” Michael asked,

Anna nodded. She was nervous, Sam could tell, but she met Michael’s eyes as she said, “I am ready to do whatever you need.”

“Good.”

Michael walked toward Sam, and Sam backed away. Michael grabbed his arm and held him so tightly that Sam thought he was going to break a bone.

“This might hurt a little,” he warned as he laid a hand on Sam’s chest.

Sam cried out with pain as the light passed between Michael’s hand and his chest. It felt like his flesh was on fire. It only eased when Michael released him and stepped back. Sam bowed over panting and holding his chest. His heart was pounding so hard he felt like he’d run a marathon.

“Anna, a demonstration, please,” Michael said.

Sam straightened up quickly, fear in his eyes, as Anna walked towards him, her angel blade dropping into her hand. He turned away and started to run, and then felt a burning pain in his back that peaked as the tip of a blade pierced his shirt right over his heart.

He was dead, he had to be dead, but the pain didn’t end. He felt a drawing sensation as the blade withdrew from him and he fell forward onto his hands and knees.

“Get him up,” Michael said in a bored tone.

A hand grabbed his upper arm and he was hauled to his feet and spun around to face Michael. Anna walked away from him and stood beside Michael.

“What did you do?” Sam asked her, his hand coming to the point the blade had exited him. There was blood, but perhaps not as much as there should have been. The blood aside, he should not be alive to even check. Her positioning had been perfect.

“She proved a point,” Michael answered. “I can’t spend my time following you around and putting you back together each time you fall apart, and I want the vessel in physical health if nothing else.”
Did he mean Sam was invulnerable now? The fact he had just been stabbed through the heart lent credence to the belief. But why would he do that? What purpose would it serve?

The possibilities to it for Sam were endless now though. He could take any hunt and be safe. He could face anything. Dean wouldn’t be happy about it, Sam risking himself, but he would have to see what this meant for them. Sam could do anything.

Sense caught up with his racing thoughts. Why would Michael do anything that would help him? Why would he do something for Sam?

“Why are you doing this?” Sam asked.

“You will see soon enough. I think it’s better for you to find your own way than to have it all laid out for you. And I have spent all the time with you that I have patience for.” He turned to address Anna. “I don’t think he will pose a problem, but make sure to keep a watch over him.”

“Yes, Michael,” she said with a bowed head. “I won’t let you down.”

“I hope not, or I will kill you, and next time there will be no returns.” He looked at Sam. “I won’t see you again for a long time, Sam, and when I do, you will be a different man.” He smiled slightly and then disappeared.

Sam turned quickly to Anna. He had no faith she would help him, as she had stabbed him twice already, but she was the only one who had any idea about what was happening to him. He tried to appeal to the woman that he had first met, not the angel that wanted to kill him. “Anna, what’s happening? Why am I here? What is Michael doing?”

For a moment he thought she would answer, but then she shook her head and pointed past Sam. “You should leave. The road is that way. You need to make arrangements.”

“Arrangements for what?” he asked, disregarding the rest.

“Life,” she said simply. She looked him up and down, nodded to herself, and disappeared.

Sam stood motionless for a moment, trying to make sense of what had happened. Why had Michael brought him here, and why would he have done whatever it was that made him invulnerable? There was more happening than a simple relocation to a forest in New Mexico.

Whatever their plan was, Sam needed Dean and Castiel to make sense of it. He patted down his pockets, but his cell had been removed. He had lost his gun in the fight with Anna, but when he bent and checked his boot he found he still had the small switchblade he kept on him.

Since he couldn’t call Dean and get him to come pick him up—or to reassure him as Dean had to be worried by now—he would need to make his own way. He set off walking, hugging his jacket around himself against the cold air.

It seemed to take a long time, but he supposed that was because there was no way to gauge time passing. When he eventually heard the cars passing him, he hurried his pace. He broke out of the trees into a dimly lit parking lot beside a convenience store. At first he didn’t notice anything odd as his gaze was focused the phone booth by the road, but as he began to pass the cars, he noticed the common denominator of them. They were all older models.

He went into the booth and picked up the directory attached to the shelf. He turned it to look at the front page and his breath caught in his throat as he saw the year on the top of the cover.
Michael hadn’t just abandoned him in New Mexico.

He had abandoned him in 1978.
Sam’s fingers loosened, and the directory slipped from his hand to dangle from the shelf. He backed out of the booth and looked around him. The cars and the dated visage of the store mocked him with the reality of his situation. He was really here still. This wasn’t some kind of nightmare. He was trapped in 1978 without his brother.

The thought tried to overwhelm him, to drown him in horror, but he couldn’t let it. He had to hang on to himself if he was going to get home. He could react to and make sense of what Michael had done when he was back with Dean, Bobby and Castiel.

Castiel! That was who he needed. Castiel would get him home.

“Cas,” he called. “It’s me, Sam. Michael has done something to me. I’m in ’78 still, and I have no idea how to get back.”

He waited, heart beating hard, for the sound of an angel’s arrival, but there was nothing. It took him a moment of pushing down the weight of defeat to realize there could be nothing. Castiel couldn’t find him anymore. He had the sigils on his ribs that hid him from angels’ senses.

Defeat rushed up again. It was like his mind wanted to give in already. The truth of his situation was fighting to beat him down. His heart was stronger though. He needed to be with Dean and the others, and losing himself to despair was not going to help that. He had to stay strong.

Castiel couldn’t find him, so he had to find Castiel. They’d left him in Lawrence in that hotel. He had been pretty wrecked when they’d left him, but perhaps he would have had a chance to recover. If not, Sam could wait until he had, and then they could get back to 2010 together. To hell with Michael, Sam was getting back to his family.

He broke his situation down into facts. He was in New Mexico so, depending on the part of the state he was in, he was around a half-day’s drive away from Lawrence. He needed a car and some cash for gas.

He looked down at his shirt and saw the bloodstains and tears from his dual stabbings. He couldn’t be seen like this. He checked the jacket and saw it was unmarred apart from a small stain of blood that had darkened to black. He zipped it closed, thinking the mark could be explained away as a coffee spill if anyone asked. He hoped no one would ask.

The car posed no problem as he was in a parking lot, but he would have preferred to have a set of keys to simplify the situation. He looked at the store to his right and weighed up the sense of rolling it. He had his knife.

He disregarded the idea when he thought about his location in time. A clerk in 1978 was likely to be armed when handling cash at night without the other security means of the future. He didn’t want to put his invulnerability to test by bullet. He would wait until someone came out.

He ducked into the shadows beside a dumpster and waited. Just a few minutes later he heard a door open and footsteps approaching. A man was whistling a tune as he walked to his car, a pale blue Lincoln, with a sack of groceries in his arms.

As Sam stepped out of the shadows, the man looked startled. He was middle-aged and smartly dressed, well to do, a good match for the car he was approaching.
“Can I help you?” he asked politely.

Sam grimaced guiltily as he walked towards the man with his hand outstretched. “Keys.”

“Excuse me?”

“Give me your keys, walk away, and I won’t hurt you.”

“You’re not going to hurt me, son,” the man said. “But if you need a ride…”

Feeling like an asshole, Sam took another step towards him and pulled his knife from his pocket where he had stowed it. He flipped it open and lifted it so it caught the dim light of the store’s window.

The paper sack dropped to the ground as the man’s hands flew up in front of him. “There’s no need for violence,” he said. “You can take whatever you want. I have money.”

“Keys. Wallet,” Sam said.

Keeping one hand raised, the man’s other hand crept toward his pocket and pulled out a set of keys and a brown wallet. He held them out to Sam, and Sam saw that he was shaking. He felt even worse at the man’s reaction, but this was for a greater need. Sam needed to get to Castiel so he could get home. This man was the way he was going to do that. And he wouldn’t hurt him really. The knife was just a threat.

Sam took them.

“Please don’t hurt me,” the man said. “I have a wife and children. My girls are only fourteen and eleven. They need me.”

“I’m not going to hurt you if you do as I say,” Sam said. “You’re going to go into the forest and run for five minutes before you even think about coming back.”

He needed long enough to get away before the man called in help. He thought the fear he had instilled in him would be enough to make him obey. Even if it wasn’t, this car would get him out of town quickly.

“Which way to Arizona?” Sam asked.

The man pointed left. “That way.”

“Thank you,” Sam said, hoping the misdirection would work. If this man told the cops he was heading west they would hopefully swallow the bait and leave him free to escape east. “You can start running now.”

The man turned and ran into the trees. Sam wasted no time before unlocking the car and climbing in behind the wheel. He brought the engine to life and the radio started playing a cheesy hit from the *Grease* soundtrack. Sam snapped it off as he reversed out of his spot and pulled right on the road. He gunned the engine and raced along the empty streets, searching for signage that would get him to the interstate.

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Sam drove until the gas gauge slipped deep into the red and he was forced to stop for gas. He had just passed into Kansas, and he was confident that the car was safe now. The cops probably hadn’t
even searched for it in New Mexico, but now he was across the state line he thought it was safe with the time’s limited communication between states. He still didn’t relax though. He couldn’t until he was with Castiel again.

The tension helped him stay awake. Though his body was weary, his mind was alert. It was like when they were running on low sleep rations for a hunt; the need to be ready for action overpowered the body’s need for rest. He was used to this, even though he had been awake and running on adrenaline for a while. The last time he’d gone to sleep in a motel felt like a long time ago. When he was at Bobby’s again, he would sleep. He would take time, set aside the apocalypse, and just rest. At least that was what he told himself.

He pulled up at a gas station and checked the wallet he’d taken from the man in New Mexico. He was relieved to find a thick fold of bills. He was sure he’d have enough to fill the tank and plenty more besides. He’d lucked out with his victim. He checked the price and a breath huffed out of him. He was going to have more than enough cash to get by at these prices. Gas was seventy cents a gallon. He had to laugh at the thought of Dean’s face if he was there. It was a running joke between them that the Impala’s gas tank ate money.

There was a kid dozing on a grubby plastic chair by the door, but when Sam tapped the horn, he jolted awake and leapt to his feet. Sam rolled down the window as he approached and said, “Fill the tank, please.”

The kid grabbed the pump handle and rushed to the back of the car, saying, “Yes, sir.”

Sam waited as he filled it, watching the numbers click over on the pump display until they stopped at $8.40. Shaking his head wonderingly he pulled out two five-dollar bills and held them out of the window to the kid. “Keep the change,” he said.

The kid grinned at the extravagant tip. “Thank you, sir.”

Sam smiled at him and then started the engine. He waved a hand in farewell as he drove out of the forecourt and onto the road again, speeding into the traffic in his impatience to get to Castiel.

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When Sam reached the outskirts of Lawrence, he felt a wave of relief. He was close to getting home now. He drove through the streets to the hotel they’d left Castiel in and pulled up out front. His heart was pounding hard—with excitement or nerves he wasn’t sure.

He threw himself out of the car and rushed through the doors inside. The man behind the desk had hair longer than Sam’s that was ungroomed. He was wearing a red turtleneck with a low hanging strand of Indian beads. He looked up blearily at Sam and started to say, “You looking for a room…” when Sam cut him off.

“I’m just visiting a buddy. Where’s the honeymoon suite?”

“Fourth floor,” he said. “But…”

Sam was already running through the door marked ‘stairs’. He took them two at a time and when he reached the fourth floor, he raced along the hall. It occurred to him he didn’t know the room number when he spotted a porcelain panel on the wall beside one of the rooms with flowery writing declaring it the ‘Happy Day Honeymoon Suite’. He knocked loudly on the door, thinking if Cas was still suffering the strain of bringing them back he might not hear him; he could still be out cold.
There was no response, and he knocked harder with his fist. “Cas! It’s me, Sam. C’mon, man, open up. I need help.”

He pressed his ear to the door and listened hard. There was no sound from within at all, though if Castiel was unconscious, Sam guessed there wouldn’t be. He patted his pockets but his lock picking tools weren’t there. He couldn’t remember if he’d transferred them to his new pants when he’d changed last. It didn’t matter either way; he didn’t have them.

For a moment he stood defeated, and then an idea occurred to him. A place like this, in this time, wasn’t going to have good locks. He checked the wallet and saw that there was an American Express card tucked into a pocket. He crouched and slid the card carefully in between the frame and the lock. He jiggled it a little then smiled as the lock clicked open. He got quickly to his feet and pushed open the door. His smile faded when he saw that the room was empty.

At first he was able to hang onto hope as he rushed inside, calling Castiel’s name. There were two doors leading off of the room and he thought he could be in one of those. He crossed the room and pulled open a door, sure he would find Castiel inside. It was an empty closet though. He cursed and rushed across to the second door. He opened it and rushed into the bathroom and switched on the light.

“Cas?” he said hopefully.

He wasn’t there.

Sam staggered back a step, his mouth dropping open. Castiel was gone. Sam was trapped.

“No,” he growled, clinging to a faint flicker of hope. If Castiel had woken up, he would have gone to find Sam and Dean to help them against Anna. Sam had to believe that was what had happened. Anything less than that was going to take his strength to keep going.

He ran out of the room and pounded along the hall and down the stairs, bursting into the small lobby. The man at the desk looked up and said, as if he’d been paused on their interaction before, “But he left.”

“How long ago?” Sam asked.

“A few hours, maybe. It’s hard to keep track. It was real early though.”

“Did you see which way he went?” Sam asked, making for the door.

“Uh… up maybe. I don’t know, man. It was kinda hard to keep track. I think the other man took him.”

“What other man?” Sam stepped up to the desk and fought the urge to lean over and take the man by the throat.

“Okay, so your buddy was here with me. He was asking about the Winchesters, where they lived. He looked real sick, you know, and I asked if he needed anything. He said he just needed his friends, and that was when the other guy showed up. And I mean showed up, not arrived. I don’t know if I smoked too much dope on my break or if this is some crazy Twilight Zone thing, but he appeared out of nowhere with this funny sound.”

“What did he do?” Sam asked intensely.

“He grabbed the sick man by the arm and said something about his time being up.” He frowned.
“Yeah, he said, ‘Your time is up. You will go home’. The sick dude looked kinda scared, and he said something about Sam and Dean, but the other dude squeezed the sick dude’s arm hard. It looked like it hurt. That was when it happened. They just disappeared with that funny sound again. You think they’re from the government?”

Sam’s heart sank. Michael had taken Castiel. “No. I don’t think so,” he said dully.

“Shame. It would have been cool to have a government super-powered pitcher on the team.”

“What?” Sam asked dumbly.

“John Winchester,” the man said. “That was who he looked like, the other guy. He’s on the baseball team and I thought maybe the mechanic thing was a double-life. It happens, you know. We just don’t read about it in the propaganda filled newspapers.”

“It wasn’t a government thing,” Sam said defeated. “It was something different.”

The man leaned forward. “C’mon then, tell me who they were. I promise not to tell anyone. How did they disappear like that?”

“I don’t know,” Sam lied.

“But what does it mean? Stuff like that doesn’t happen for no reason. Are they coming back? Is it something to do with Fort Leavenworth? Are those army guys experimenting with teleportation? Is it like Star Trek? Were they transported?”

“Yeah, sure,” Sam said idly. “That’s exactly it.”

“Wow. That’s far out.”

Sam pushed down his panic and tried to make sense of the situation. It was hard as his mind was reeling. If Michael had sent Castiel back to 2010, Sam couldn’t get back with him. He was trapped. What was he supposed to do now?

He had to know what was really happening, why Michael had done this to him, and what he hoped to gain by sticking Sam so far in the past. Since he couldn’t call on Castiel for answers, he was going to need his ‘guardian angel’. He needed Anna.

“I need the room a little longer,” he said.

“Sure. No problem. The room’s paid up through tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Sam said.

“Later, man.”

Sam walked slowly back through the door and to the stairs, trying hard not to let the despair win. He would get the information from Anna, and then make a plan of what to do next.

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The room door hadn’t closed properly behind him in his haste to get out before, so he didn’t need to card it open again. He walked inside and clicked it closed behind him. He took a breath and spoke into the empty room, “Anna. I need to speak to you. I’m in the Honeymoon Suite of the Virginia Hotel, Lawrence.” When there was no arrival, he spoke bitterly. “Come on. You’re supposed to be my new guardian angel, so guard already.”
There was a flutter and Anna said, “That is not what he meant by guardian, you know.”

Sam turned his glare on her. “I don’t care what he meant. I need help, and since you’re here, you’re going to give it.”

“Am I really? And what exactly do you think you have over me that will make me do anything for you?”

“I don’t have anything,” Sam admitted. “But I think there’s still a part of you that’s a decent person. You were brave when we met you before. I don’t know what Michael has over you to make you work with him, but you were good once, and I think you want to be again. Helping him stuff me here is not good. I helped you once. Me and Dean saved you from the demons and the angels. Don’t you think it’s time you stepped up and returned the favor?”

“What Michael has over me is none of your business. You know why I came for your parents. You know enough. Can you tell me you would have done anything different in my place?”

He couldn’t. He had told Lucifer he would kill himself to escape him, and he would have had Lucifer not promised to bring him back. If he thought it would save lives, he would end his, but he couldn’t do that now. Even trapped in 1978, out of Lucifer’s reach for a while, he couldn’t die because Michael had made him invulnerable. He couldn’t prevent his own birth either. He could never hurt his parents.

“Why is Michael doing this to me?” he asked. “Why leave me here?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“You’re lying,” Sam accused.

“Maybe I am. It doesn’t matter either way. Knowing why won’t help you. You’ll still be trapped here. Face it, Sam, you’re not going anywhere. Lucifer won’t save you, as he doesn’t know you’re gone. The Lucifer of this time is trapped in the Cage still. Really, Sam, this is the safest you’ve been in years. Michael has protected your body, and there is no one coming after you. You should be grateful.”

“For this?” Sam asked, throwing up his arms. “Sticking me here without Dean?”

“Yes.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Face facts fast, make it as easy on yourself as you can. You’re here for the duration. You can’t be with Dean until it’s the right time, which is 2010. You’re here for the next three decades no matter what you do, so you might as well start as you mean to go on. Create a life. There is no way back and you know it. There is no way to time travel without an angel, and there is no angel to help you. Castiel is still a good soldier in this time, and he would never believe you even if you told him the truth. You’re stuck, so deal with it.”

Sam saw the truth in her eyes, at least the truth of what she believed. He was trapped here until he could find a way out. She might not believe there was one, but angels didn’t know everything about the world. There were thousands of creatures out there, gods and goddesses. There was power. He would find one of them to get him home.

“You understand,” Anna said with satisfaction. “Good. I’m going. Oh, one more thing. Michael wiped your mother and father’s memories. They don’t remember you and Dean. They can’t help
you.”

“I could tell them the truth,” Sam said.

“You could but you won’t. You want them to have peaceful lives, and your presence would be anything but peaceful for them. Do the right thing: leave them alone. Find your own way.”

Sam swallowed hard and nodded stiffly. He wasn’t acknowledging her; he was accepting to himself the truth of what she was saying. He couldn’t interrupt John and Mary’s lives. He had to do this alone.

Anna vanished with a soft sound and Sam blew out a breath. His heart ached and he wished more than anything that Dean was there with him. He wasn’t though. Sam had to make the best of what he had.

He was alone, in 1978, and until he could find a way home, he had to take care of himself.
It was three hours after Anna left that Sam finally accepted that he had to move. He had to make himself do something other than just sit on the edge of the bed. There were things he needed to do. He obviously wasn’t going to be getting home overnight, so he needed somewhere to stay. He couldn’t stay in the hotel as that would swallow his money fast. He needed somewhere quiet to lay low and get his head together while he looked for a way back to 2010. There was only one place he could think of in this time and that was the place he’d just left: the Campbells’ safe house. That would have weapons, too. Though Anna had said no one was coming for him, he couldn’t relax unless he had some way to defend himself. All he’d had on him now was the short-bladed knife.

He pushed up from the bed and made his way out of the room and along the hall. The man at the desk looked up excitedly when Sam passed through the lobby, perhaps thinking Sam was going to share more secrets the ‘propaganda filled’ newspapers skipped over. Sam didn’t stop. He just raised a hand in farewell and said, “I’m done with the room,” and then walked through the door to the street outside.

He went straight to the car he’d stolen and unlocked the door. Several people watched him and he guessed it was because of his zipped jacket on the warm day, perhaps even the style of the jacket. His jeans were fairly innocuous and his boots were plain work boots.

He climbed into the car and started the engine. The traffic passing was light, and he pulled into the stream and set off. He remembered the journey from his parents’ house to the Campbells’ place, and it wasn’t hard to calculate the difference in the route from town. One thing a life on the road taught you was how to recall journeys with ease.

Soon he was on a dirt track off the main road leading to the old house. It was set far back from the road, and Sam thought that would work in his favor. He wanted privacy; new neighbors would have meant having his guard up all the time. The situation was hard enough without needing to play a part all the time. He wanted peace to feel freely.

The house was large and raised from the land with steps to reach the door. He felt a sense of trepidation as he walked up the steps and pushed open the door. A part of him hoped he would find Dean inside where he had left him, that Dean would tell him this was all some crazy joke thought up by Michael, that they were going home together. He knew better though.

The hall was empty, and Sam knew from the absolute silence that the whole house was, too. He walked across the creaking floor into what had once been a living room. The thin curtain was fluttering in front of the broken window that John had been thrown through. Sam wondered if he was okay. Anna had said that Michael had wiped their memories, so surely he’d healed their injuries, too.

To the right of the room, by the wall, there was a smeared pool of blood. He supposed that was where he had lain after Anna had stabbed him. The fact so much of his blood was there while he was fit and well now was a strange feeling.

He turned away from it and shrugged off his jacket, draping it on the dilapidated wingback chair. There was an arch and through it a kitchen. Sam went inside and saw that there was an old refrigerator and stove. He knew from their previous visit that there was no power in the house. The whole place was filthy and the paint peeled from the walls.

He opened a cupboard and saw it was filled with boxes marked as belonging to the US Army.
pulled open out and opened it, seeing more individual boxes stamped in black with Meal, Combat, Individual.

“C-Rations,” Sam said wonderingly.

Samuel Campbell really had thought his safe house through. Sam took out a box and peeled back the lid of the can marked M-2. A thick glob of jellied sauce was in it, dotted with chunks of meat and beans. It was possibly the most unappetizing thing Sam had ever been faced with under the guise of a meal, and he knew he wouldn’t be able to bring himself to eat it cold, despite the fact his stomach was aching with hunger.

He opened a box marked B-1 and found crackers and two small discs of chocolate. Sam grabbed the crackers and gulped them down one by one, only realizing as he finished that he’d not considered what he could drink. With a plea for help from the universe, Sam went to the sink and turned a faucet. There was just a rumbling sound at first, and then water chugged and splashed into the sink.

Sam cupped his hand under the flow and scooped water into his mouth. The dryness in his mouth and throat eased, and he felt better. He washed his hands and face and then shut off the flow and shook his head, sending droplets of water into the air.

He walked through the kitchen and into the hall again. There were four doors leading off of it, the first a bathroom with an old and grimy bathtub with a shower attachment and basin with a spotted mirror above. He used the toilet and then went back into the hall and tried the next door. The room was a contradiction to the rest of the place he’d seen already. It was as grimy as any of the other rooms and looked as though it hadn’t been used in long years, but someone had once tried to make it nice. The peeling paper on the wall had a floral pattern that might once have been pretty, and the tattered curtains at the window matched the bedspread. Sam guessed this would have been Mary’s room had the Campbells needed to come here to stay. Her parents had tried to make it nice for her. A puzzle piece of his grandparents’ nature slipped into place. Dean had said Samuel was a dick that didn’t seem to like anyone much, least of all him, but he and Deanna had tried to ease the upset of having to be here for Mary, to create a homey place for her.

He slipped the door closed and opened the next. It was a large room with a desk and chair under the window and many boxes and trunks strewn across the floor. Sam opened one of the boxes and saw a disordered pile of books. He recognized the names of a few he’d seen at Bobby’s: the Daemon Dierum and Key of Solomon. Others were unfamiliar, but the titles made Sam sure this was Samuel Campbell’s hunting library.

He opened one of the trunks and sucked in a breath. He’d hit the jackpot. It was full of weapons. There were guns, boxes of ammo and knives among bags of salt and flasks of what Sam assumed was holy water. He guessed Mary wanted to rid herself of the reminders of hunting and had brought it all here after her parents’ deaths. He was glad for both the weapons and the books. He had a lot of time to fill, and bulking up his knowledge would be a good way to do that.

He left the room and went to the last door. It led into what was obviously supposed to be Samuel and Deanna’s room. The bed was a large wrought iron affair and there was a pile of blankets on the end that looked dusty and moth eaten.

Dirty and uninviting as it was, Sam knew the bed was exactly what he needed. He hadn’t slept since they’d left 2010 and he was feeling wrung out even before the massive overload of emotion he’d been through in the past day. He staggered towards the bed and threw himself down without pulling back the bedclothes. He grabbed one of the blankets from the end of the bed and draped it over himself.
As exhausted as he was, he thought he would struggle to sleep with everything that was rushing around his mind. He was wrong. He had barely closed his eyes before exhaustion swept over him, rushing him to sleep with one last thought.

Was Dean really okay?

xXx

Sam knew when he woke that it was early. The light through the window had a reddish dawn cast, and the birds were loud with their chorus as they greeted the day.

He was confused at first, unsure of his surroundings. The bedclothes he was lying on smelled musty, and the walls were covered with peeling wallpaper. It wasn’t the first time he and Dean had crashed in an abandoned place to save money, but something felt wrong. His mind was clouded as if he had slept too long.

He climbed out of bed and went in search of his brother and a bathroom. The bathroom was just down the hall from him, and he used the toilet and washed his hands with cold water before turning his attention to the next search.

“Dean?”

He walked into the hall again and tried the next door off of the hall. It opened into another bedroom; this one was empty though. Sam supposed Dean was somewhere else. He walked back through the hall and into a large living room. His breath caught in his throat as he saw it. Dean wasn’t there, but the reason why came to him at once when he saw the broken window through which his father had been thrown.

This wasn’t where he belonged. It was 1978 and he was alone. Michael had trapped him here for some unknown reason and sent Dean home.

With staggering footsteps he crossed the room and fell into the chair by the archway into the kitchen. He buried his face in his hands and groaned as the reality of his situation settled over him. He didn’t know what to do, how to get home. He couldn’t even seem to think properly. His mind was overwhelmed with the horror of being here.

Soon, stillness wasn’t enough. He needed to act. He had to vent his rage some other way. He lurched to his feet and marched out of the door to the trees surrounding the house. He made straight for the oldest and most gnarled tree, and began to pound it with his fists. He felt the pain jarring up his arms, and he relished it. The pain grounded him, transferred some of his emotional pain to physical. He’d always been able to handle physical better. His knuckles split, but they healed almost straight away even though his blood spattered the tree. It made him angry. He wanted evidence of his actions, but Michael had stolen even that from him.

Only when he had exhausted himself did he stop and lean his forehead against the trunk. “What do I do?” he asked quietly, and then his voice rose to a shout. “What the hell do I do?”

There was no answer but the birds that had continued their chorus, unconcerned by the noise he was making. They must have known he was powerless, too.

“Dean, help,” he whispered. “Cas, take me home.”

There was no answering voice, no sound of an angel’s arrival. They couldn’t hear him as they didn’t exist here. Dean hadn’t even been born, and Castiel was a loyal angel that wouldn’t recognize his nickname. There was no point calling to the real Castiel, as he wouldn’t help in this
time. He was still a soldier. There was no one to help him.

“What am I supposed to do?”

Though there was no one to respond, he realized the answer was simple. He had to get himself home instead.

He straightened away from the tree and took a breath. He couldn’t rely on anyone to fix his for him; he had to take care of himself. There was a wealth of books in the study to start with, and if they failed, he would find more.

He walked back into the house and the kitchen. He washed the blood from his hands and rinsed his mouth with water. He didn’t have a toothbrush or anything else to clean himself up, but that didn’t matter in the face of his other problems. Getting home mattered more.

He went into the study and lifted a pile of books onto the desk and sat down. He took out the first few books and examined the spines. The first he knew as books of demonology, and he disregarded them as useless. The second was the first volume of a supernatural bestiary set, and he opened to the first page. He knew that somewhere within the pages of one of these books there was the answer to his problem. He just needed to find it.

He set the book on the desk, leaned over it, and began to read.

xXx

Sam slammed the book closed and added it to the pile of ones he’d already read. He bowed over and pressed his fingertips to his temples in an attempt to offset the pain thudding in his head. He had overstretched himself, he knew, but he couldn’t bear to stop. He had been living on water, c-ration crackers and chocolate for three days, and he was spent. He snatched sleep in the hours his eyes wouldn’t stay open, working late into the night with the glow of the Coleman lamp lighting the pages.

He needed more than this endless research, but how could he stop when the next book might be the one with the answer? He was a mess, he knew, and Dean would be pissed if he saw him, but he was doing this for Dean as much as himself. He had to get home to his brother.

He glanced at his watch and saw it was past nine in the morning. He’d been working since dawn lit the sky around six after only a few hours’ sleep. He should stop and get himself something to eat, but the thought of more crackers or chocolate turned his stomach. He needed to eat though. If he carried on like this he was going to burn out completely and be powerless to help himself.

He stood from the chair and walked into the bathroom. He rinsed his mouth and wished for a toothbrush once again. Something so simple was one of the things he missed so much. A shower, too. He didn’t even have soap. He had fresh clothes as he had found Samuel’s stash of spare clothes in a duffel, and though the pants were too short, the shirts fit if a little loosely. The pants didn’t matter while he was here alone, but if he was going to venture into town to get what he needed, he would have to change into his own.

The thought brought him up short. Was he going to town? He looked at the pile of unread books in front of him, and the boxes of undiscovered volumes he hadn’t even looked at, and sighed. He could spend weeks here just reading, building knowledge on everything that would help him hunt other monsters when he got home, but he would ruin himself. He had to stop at least long enough to get something more than c-rations to eat and some supplies to clean himself up with. As little as he wanted to stop, the idea of being fed and clean was irresistible. He thought he had to do it.
Perhaps the break would be good for him. It might give him a clearer head to keep on looking.

Sam stood and walked into the bedroom where his own clothes were piled on the dresser. He shucked off his borrowed jeans and pulled on his own. He sat down on the side of the bed and put on his boots then went into the living room to fetch his jacket. He checked he had the stolen wallet and keys then went outside.

The fresh air felt good, clearing his head a little and making him feel energized. He realized he should have done this sooner. Even only coming out for a few minutes air would have been better than what he had been doing.

He unlocked the car and climbed in behind the wheel. The engine came to life smoothly, and he reversed away from the house and turned onto the track that led him to the road.

He remembered seeing a small grocery store on the way to the house and he directed himself there. The roads were quiet until he got closer to the center of town, and then he started seeing other cars passing. It was a strange experience to see so many new looking classic cars on the roads. He felt like he had slipped into the midst of some rally.

When he got to the store, it was even stranger. The cars were out in force, but so were the people, and the hairstyles and clothes were so different. It overwhelmed him with the vast gulf between this time and what he was used to. It made him realize properly that he was in a completely different era. When he was at the house, he could pretend he was just separated from Dean. Being here made him realize he was separate from his home and time, too.

He felt a lump forming in his throat as he pulled into a stop and climbed out of the car. It was stupid, but this felt like too much to handle. He wanted familiarity and comfort; what he had was difference and unease. He tried to push down the feeling and focus on the simple action of getting a cart and making his way to the door, but he didn’t succeed. By the time he was at the entrance, he was fighting the urge to turn around and escape back to the house. He came to a stop near the door, making people skirt around him, and took a couple deep breaths to try to calm himself. He was partially successful and was just starting to walk forward again when he heard a voice that jolted him and made him come to a dead stop again.

He turned back slowly and saw two women greeting each other effusively. He stared at them, his lips parted with shock as he took them in.

The smaller woman, the one that had Sam’s attention, was wearing her hair longer than Sam had seen before, held back from her face with a red scarf that matched her flowing top. Her jeans had flared legs and her wedge-heeled sandals added a couple inches to her height. The clothes were vastly different to the style he had last seen her in, but it was her face that showed the most marked change. She was over thirty years younger than the woman Sam had known, and yet there was no mistaking her.

It was Missouri Mosely.
1978

Sam took an unsteady breath as his mind tried to catch up to what he was seeing.

Missouri was really here.

He hadn’t seen her in four years, but he felt an inexorable sense of comfort at the sight of her. She was someone from his time, someone he had known and cared for then, and someone from this time, too. It was like finding a lighthouse in a storm, a connection to Dean.

Except she wasn’t. She had no idea who he was yet. She might not even know who John and Mary were. He was more than just a stranger; he was an impossibility, a man out of his time.

He couldn’t go to her.

The realization brought a lump to his throat. He had been through too much to handle and he’d not taken care of himself. His days of continuous research and neglect of everything else had drained him, and he didn’t have the self-control he usually did. That vulnerability was what caused him to speak her name and take a few staggering steps towards her.

As soon as he realized what he was doing, he stopped dead, but it was too late to avoid her notice. He quickly walked back to his cart and pushed it out of the flow of people around him who were muttering their annoyance as they passed. He came to a stop beside the row of carts and tried to get a grip on himself. It was too late to avoid Missouri though. Sam heard her exchange goodbyes with her friend, and though he was looking down into his empty cart, he saw her approaching in his peripheral vision. He closed his eyes, cursing his mistake, only opening them when he heard her speaking. “Do I know you?”

Sam looked at a spot past her shoulder and said. “No, sorry. I don’t think so.”

“It seemed like you knew me. You said my name.”

She sounded so much like the Missouri he knew, but different at the same time. She didn’t have the commanding note her voice would develop in the future. She was gentler now. Had life hardened her or was she being gentle as she could see what a mess he was?

He chanced a glance at her and saw her eyes were soft with concern and her brow furrowed. He saw another glimpse of the woman he knew, remembering her speaking to him after Mary had banished herself to take out the poltergeist. She had been kind to him then, too.

“Oh,” she said with dawning understanding. “You knew my mother.”

Sam looked at her, confused for a moment, before realization caught up. She had seen her own face in his mind, aged enough to believe it was her mother’s.

“My face?” she asked, her tone awed. “That’s me.”

Sam shook his head quickly. “I should go.”

She lay a warm hand over his where it gripped the handle of the cart tightly and said, “Stay a little longer. I think we need to talk.”

Sam looked into her eyes at last, pleading with her to understand. “I really need to go.”
“I think you need to talk more. And I need to understand how you knew my mother. Let’s go get a coffee. There’s a place just down the street.”

Sam was torn. He knew he shouldn’t, he should leave Missouri to her life until it was time for them to meet, but at the same time he needed her. He wanted someone to talk to that might understand. If anyone could in this time, it was Missouri.

His want outweighed his uncertainty and he nodded slowly. “Okay.”

She smiled at him and said, “Come with me.”

Sam pushed his cart back toward the waiting rows and followed her across the parking lot and onto the sidewalk. They walked past a few stores, coming to a diner with an illuminated sign above the window naming it as Daisy’s.

Missouri pushed open the door and gestured Sam in ahead of her. Sam hesitated just inside the door, taking in the dated décor and people at the occupied tables. The air smelled of fresh coffee and cooking, and Sam’s stomach rumbled. Missouri led him over to a booth in the corner under a window and slipped into the seat facing the door. Sam sat opposite her and fiddled with the salt shaker as she fixed her eyes on him.

“Did you know my mother?” Missouri asked.

Sam shook his head wordlessly.

“It really was me I saw in your mind then?”

“Yes,” Sam said quietly.

“How old was I?”

“I’m not sure,” Sam admitted. “It’s how you’ll look in 2010.”

Missouri huffed out a breathy laugh. “I’m going to look like that? I guess it’s time to start using night cream then,” she joked.

“You’re going to look great,” Sam said.

“You’re sweet,” she said. “And wrong. I’m sure I…” She trailed off as a woman in a pink uniform and white apron came to their table. She was probably in her thirties and her blonde hair was long and pulled back from her face.

“Missouri,” she greeted with a smile. “What can I get you today?”

“Hey, Daisy. I’ll have a coffee and my friend will have…?”

“Coffee, please,” Sam said. He wanted food, needed it, but he thought keeping this meeting brief would be better. He could eat later.

Missouri frowned at him and said, “And he’ll take your breakfast special. Orange juice, too. Make it a double serving.”

“I don’t think…” Sam started, but the waitress had already jotted down their order and walked away.

“It’s on me,” Missouri said.
“I have money,” Sam said. “I just don’t have much time.”

“We’ll be quick,” Missouri said. “I have just a few questions.”

Sam pushed aside the sugar pot and said, “Okay. I’ll answer what I can.”

“Are you psychic?” she asked.

Sam’s lips pressed into a thin line. He was psychic in way, but not the way she was asking—at least not anymore. His visions had died with Azazel. It was the other powers that had lingered.

“Not really.”

“So you haven’t seen me in 2010. You will know me in 2010,” she stated.

Sam’s cast his eyes down at the tabletop. “Yes.”

“Who-ee. A genuine time traveler here in Lawrence. Never thought I would see that. How does it work? Is there a machine or something?”

“No. It was a friend that brought me back,” Sam said.

“He must be a pretty special friend.”

Sam thought of Castiel and a smile curled his lips. “He really is.”

“What else is happening in 2010?” she asked. “Oh! Have you cured cancer yet?”

“Not yet,” Sam said. “The treatments get better all the time, and more and more people are surviving, but they’ve not cracked it yet. They’re trying though.”

“Seems to me they’d have done better concentrating on curing cancer than making people bounce around time.”

“It’s not like that,” Sam said. “It’s not a science thing Cas can do. He’s… different.”

Missouri dropped her voice, “He’s something supernatural?”

Sam shouldn’t have been surprised she knew about that world already, she was a psychic after all, but the question made him wonder what her introduction to the world had been and how much she knew.

He started to answer her but then stopped as someone called, “Order up,” and the waitress carried over a tray holding a plate full of food and the coffee and juice. She set everything down and said, “Enjoy,” before leaving them again.

Sam reached for his fork and began to scoop up the eggs, unable to resist. After three days of c-ration crackers, they were ambrosial. He turned his attention to the fried potatoes and bacon and barely held back a moan of satisfaction.

He had cleared a quarter of his plate when Missouri cleared her throat. Sam looked up abashed, and said, “Sorry. I’m just really hungry.”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I am curious though, so if you could eat and talk, that’d be great.”

“Okay.”
“Why have you been eating c-rations?” she asked.

Sam winced. She was reading his mind with abandon. He was scared he was going to let something slip that he shouldn’t—the truth of what was happening in his time even. She didn’t deserve to spend the next three decades living in dread.

“Can you stop that?” he asked apologetically. “I’ll tell you what you want to know if I can, but I’d rather my thoughts were my own.”

“I’m sorry,” she said contritely. “I forget I’m doing it sometimes. And I’m impatient. You’re this huge mystery to me, and I want to know more. I’ll stop.”

“Thanks,” Sam said. “I’ve been eating c-rations because they were all I had. I didn’t plan to stay here long when I arrived, and when things went wrong, I kinda lost myself.” He gestured to his meal with his fork. “This is great though.”

“How did things go wrong?” she asked.

“I’m stuck. I came here with my brother and friend, and this other person took them home but left me here.”

“You’re trapped thirty-two years in your past?” she asked, her tone awed.

“Not trapped,” Sam said defiantly. “I don’t care what they say. I’m getting home.”

“Of course you are,” she soothed. “Calm down.”

Sam took a breath and sighed it out. “I’m sorry.”

She waved away his apology and asked, “How do you know me in the future?”

“You helped me and my brother on a hunt,” Sam said. “You were good to us.”

“You helped me and my brother on a hunt,” Sam said. “You were good to us.”

“I’m hunting again?” she asked, looking startled.

“You’ve hunted before?” He was equally surprised.

Missouri was tough and had handled herself on the poltergeist hunt, but he had never pictured the woman he’d met as a hunter. He’d seen her as more of an adviser.

“I have,” she said proudly. “My husband, Richard, and I hunted together when we were newlyweds. I had to give it up when my son James was born. I have helped other hunters since. They come to me for a little extra insight, sometimes a blessing or cleansing spell for something particularly nasty. It’s been less since Richard died though. They’ve been giving me my space.”

“What happened to him?” he asked.

“Vampire. He and another hunter went after a nest that turned out to be much larger than they’d thought. Daniel made it out, but Richard was killed. James still hasn’t gotten over it.” She sighed. “Nor have I really. We always knew it was a risk of the life, but you never think it’ll really happen to someone you love.”

Sam remembered the absolute shock of his father’s death. John Winchester had been the ultimate hunter in Sam’s eyes. He’d thought he would be there forever. He hadn’t. He had made a deal and given his life to the demon he hated for his son’s life.
“I’m sorry,” Sam said.

“And I’m sorry for you,” she said. “You’ve lost a lot, too, haven’t you?”

“My mom and dad, and almost my brother.” Though he had technically lost Dean, he had him back now and that was a miracle. At least he’d had him back. He didn’t have him at all now. He wasn’t even born yet.

He felt a burning in his eyes, and he quickly turned away. He was breaking, and he didn’t want a witness for his weakness. It had just settled over him though. For the first time he realized that Dean really wasn’t here. They weren’t just geographically apart; they were truly separated. He couldn’t find Dean by looking. He had to master what was feeling like an impossible task to get back to him.

“Come on,” Missouri said. “Let’s get out of here.” She gestured to the waitress and asked for the bill.

Sam wiped a hand over his face, glad of the chance to escape. He reached for his stolen wallet, but when the waitress came over Missouri was already holding out bills, waving away Sam’s protests.

“That’ll be $2.20,” the waitress said.

“Keep the change,” Missouri said.

The waitress thanked her, and Missouri and Sam slid out of their booth and walked to the door.

Sam had a pretty good handle on himself by the time he got outside, and he turned to thank Missouri, but she was already speaking. “Where are you staying?”

“I’ve borrowed a place just outside town,” he said. “It’s the Campbells’ old safehouse.”

She nodded. “I know the place. It’s not really habitable.”

“I’ve got water,” Sam said. “And a gas lamp and stove.”

“But no power or hot water,” she guessed. “How long have you been there?”

“Only a few days.”

She whistled between her teeth. “Then I’m guessing you haven’t had a chance to clean up properly.” She looked Sam up and down, taking in his scruff of stubble and ungroomed hair. “Come with me. We’ll get you cleaned up.”

“You’ve already done enough,” Sam said. “Really. If I just go to the store and get what I need, I can clean up back there.”

“With a cold shower?” she asked. “I don’t think so. I have everything you need at my house, including plenty of hot water.”

“Why would you do this?” Sam asked. “I could be anyone. You have a son to protect.”

“My son is at school,” she said. “And you’re not just anyone. You’re a hunter. We take care of our own. You need help, so let me give it.”

Sam wanted to resist, to distance himself, but the lure of a hot shower was too much to deny. He wanted to be clean. He wanted to be in a real house for a little while, one without a gaping hole in
the window and paint peeling off the walls.

“Thanks, Missouri,” he said.

“You’re welcome… uh…”

“Sam.”

“Sam what?”

Sam grimaced. “It’s complicated.

“Well it’s nice to meet you, Sam Complicated. Now, let’s get you cleaned up.”

xXx

Sam drove after Missouri to her house. Even without her to follow, he would have been able to find it, as it was the same house he’d visited her in before. It looked almost the same from outside, but when he got inside he saw the massive difference. The hall furniture was a shade of medium wood veneer with an unnatural shine. The telephone on the table was a pale green rotary model. The wallpaper was a bright floral pattern in an eyewatering orange and dark green.

When they got into the living room he saw the couch and chairs were deep brown that offset the dark paneled and maroon painted walls. The television was a small model with a curved screen and a dial on the side to change channel. He hadn’t seen one like it since the cheap motels of his childhood. On the walls were photographs of Missouri and a child in various stages of development. There were none of a man that could be her husband.

“Take a seat,” Missouri said, gesturing to the deep-seated couch. “I’ll get everything ready for you.”

Sam perched on the edge of the seat and forced a smile for her as she strode out of the room. He listened to her footsteps on the stairs, only relaxing slightly when he heard a door opening on the upper level.

This was one of the most surreal things that had happened to him since he had been trapped in 1978. She had welcomed him into her home and trusted him enough to leave him alone. He couldn’t help but think how vulnerable she was leaving herself. Anyone could take advantage of her. Though could they? She was a mind reader. How vulnerable was she really?

He sat silently, looking at the photograph on the table beside him. It was Missouri embracing the small boy. Sam wasn’t a good judge of age in kids, but he thought he had to be around eight. Missouri’s face was lit with a smile brighter than he had ever seen from her in life.

Only when he heard Missouri’s tread on the stairs did he come out of his thoughts and look for her. She came into the room, smiling brightly.

“I have everything you need ready. There’s towels on the counter. I have a fresh toothbrush for you, and there’s toothpaste in the cabinet. I have left some clothes in there for you. I think they’ll fit okay.”

“Clothes?”

“My husband was a tall man, too, and you have a similar build.”
“I can’t take his clothes, Missouri,” Sam said. “They’re special.”

“They’re just sitting in a trunk,” she said. “It’s better someone is using them. I’ve kept back a few special pieces for James if he wants them one day, but this is just his hunting gear.”

It still felt a little wrong to Sam, but he didn’t argue. If this was what she wanted, it was what he would do. She was helping him more than he could ever repay just by letting him clean up and listening to him.

“Thanks,” he said, getting to his feet.

“It’s the last door along the hall,” she said. “I’ll have some coffee ready for when you’re done. We can have a talk then.”

Sam nodded and walked out of the room and up the stairs. The bathroom door was propped open and he went inside. He took a moment to get used to the avocado and brown décor that seemed shocking to him but probably was stylish for the era, and then set the shower running. It ran hot fast and he stepped into the cubicle and under the water.

The heat felt so good, and he sighed happily. There was a fresh bar of boxed soap on the shelf, and Sam unpacked it and used it to soap himself up, washing away the grime of the past few days. He hadn’t realized how gross he had felt until he was cleaning up. He shampooed his hair and worked out the tangles with his fingers.

As reluctant as he was to step out of the hot spray, Sam eventually forced himself to get out and wrap a towel around his waist. He wiped a hand over the mirror to clear the condensation and quickly averted his eyes at what he saw—a mess. He unwrapped the toothbrush and found a tube of Crest in the cabinet. He squeezed it onto the brush and began to clean his teeth, marveling at how such a simple thing could make him feel so much better. He almost felt like himself again.

When he’d finished, he examined the clothes Missouri had left for him. The style of the shirt was a little more fitted than he was used to, but it wasn’t tight. The jeans were the starkest difference. They flared out at the knee. He shook his head with a small smile as he dressed, imagining Dean’s face if he could see him wearing the dated clothes.

When he was done, he gathered his dirty clothes and checked he hadn’t left a mess before going back downstairs to the living room. He wasn’t sure where to put his pile of dirty clothes, but Missouri came along the hall with a paper sack in her hands and held it out open to him. “Put them in here and I’ll put them in the wash with my next load.”

“You don’t need to do that,” Sam said, embarrassed.

“Well, you certainly can’t wash them yourself with no hot water,” she said. “Let me do this, Sam. I will give you some more of Richard’s clothes to wear until these are ready.”

Sam hesitated. He hoped wasn’t going to need more clothes, that he would be home before he had to change again, but he didn’t want to offend her either. Also, there was a small part of him that was willing to admit getting home might take a little longer than he wanted.

“Okay. Thanks,” he said, stuffing the dirty clothes into the sack.

Missouri twisted the top and then carried it into the kitchen, calling over her shoulder, “Go sit yourself down. I won’t be a moment.”

Sam went back into the living room and sat down again. She came in after a moment with two cups
of coffee in her hand. She handed one to Sam then sat down comfortably in an armchair.

“I’ve been thinking about how I can help you,” she said.

“You’ve done a lot already,” Sam said quickly. “You don’t need to do anything else.”

“I think I do. You’re out of your time, and I’m guessing from the state you were in when I met you that you’ve got no one in this time you can go to?”

“Yeah. I’m alone.”

“You can’t go to Mary Winchester?” she asked.

“No,” Sam said firmly.

“But you know her? You know about her parents’ safe house after all.”

“I know of them,” Sam said. “But I can’t go to them. It’s complicated.”

She nodded. “Then you need to let me help you,” she said brightly. “We need to lock down the house situation at least. Mary needs to know someone is using it, even if she doesn’t know it’s you. It’s only right, and you don’t want the police called if she finds you there.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Sam admitted.

“You’ve had more important things to think about,” she said kindly. “I’ll speak to Mary and get the go-ahead for you to stay there while you’re here.”

“It won’t be long,” Sam said. “I’ll be home soon.”

“Of course you will,” she said. “That’s the next thing I wanted to talk about. If you don’t know anyone else, you have no hunter contacts. How are you planning to get home?”

“I’ve got Samuel’s library at the house. I have been reading the books, and there are still boxes more to get through. There has to be an answer in there somewhere. All the monsters and gods in the world, one of them has to be able to do something with time.”

“There probably is, but I can maybe help you out. I know a lot of hunters, and one of them might have the answer to your problem. I won’t tell them too much, but I can call around and see what’s out there.”

“That would be great,” Sam said. “Really, Missouri. I’d appreciate anything you can do.”

He would do anything if it would get him home, including bringing strangers into the problem, though Dean might not like him to do that. If Dean was there, they’d keep it private and rely on each other, but Sam didn’t have Dean. Missouri was willing to help him, and if she thought other hunters might have the answer, he’d trust her.

He just wanted to get home.

“Okay then,” Missouri said. “I’ve got the clothes packed up in a bag for you, and we’ll fix you up with some other bits. I’ve packaged some leftovers that you can heat on a gas stove, so you’ll be set for dinner. I’ll come to see you when I have fixed things with Mary and made some calls. We can make a plan from there.”

“Thank you so much,” Sam said fervently. “I appreciate this more than I can say.”
“You’re welcome,” she said cheerfully. “I’ll do whatever I can to help you get home.”

“Why?” Sam asked. “I’m grateful but why are you putting yourself out like this for a stranger?”

Missouri considered. “I have more gifts than mindreading, did you know that?” When Sam nodded she went on. “I can sense the kind of man you are, Sam, and it’s a good one. I am helping you because I believe you help others. I like to think if the situation was reversed, you’d do what you could to help me or someone else.”

Sam bit his lip. He wasn’t a good man. He was the man that started the apocalypse. Though he hadn’t meant to, and he was trying to make it right, it didn’t wash the blood from his hands.

“I would try to help you,” Sam said honestly. “And I will find a way to pay you back for what you’ve done for me.” Though what he could do he didn’t know. He seemed to do bad when he tried to do right.

“I’m sure we’ll find something,” she said. “How are you for stock tips?”

Sam chuckled. “I know a few things.”

“There you go then. You can set me and James up before you get home, and we’ll call it even. I’ve always wanted to be rich.”

“Definitely,” Sam said. “I’ll sort something out.”

“I know you will,” Missouri said. “And so will I. One way or another. Sam, we’re getting you home.”

Sam nodded confidently. With him working through the books and the combined knowledge of Missouri’s hunter friends, Sam thought he would be back with Dean soon.
Sam went home energized that day, sure that things were going to happen now that he had Missouri on his side, and he spent the rest of the afternoon and evening researching in the study with a lighter heart. He only stopped to eat, finding a battered pan in the cupboard to heat the leftover casserole she’d sent back with him. He felt almost good when he went to bed that night, and he fell asleep quickly.

In the morning he felt the usual despair upon waking up and realizing what had happened to him, but it was quashed as he reminded himself Missouri was coming that day and that she might have news.

He cleaned up in the bathroom and then went into the kitchen to get some water, skipping the c-ration crackers. He wished for a cup of coffee, but comforted himself with the fact he would soon be home where he could drink all the coffee he wanted while he told Dean and Bobby about how he’d been stuck in 1978.

It was a warm day so he took a couple chairs outside to the porch along with a stack of books. He didn’t particularly want Missouri seeing how he lived, and he thought he’d try to keep her outside if he could.

He set the books down and began to read a new volume in the bestiary set. All his unsuccessful reading wouldn’t be for nothing when he got home. He’d learned a lot that would help him and Dean in future. There were monsters that he’d never even heard of, let alone confronted before, and he knew how they all lived and died now.

He was halfway through the book when he heard a car approaching. He set it down and stood up as Missouri’s red Fiat pulled to a stop in front of the house. She climbed out and smiled at him.

“Good morning, Sam.”

“Hey, Missouri,” Sam said, walking down the steps to her.

She went to the trunk and popped it open. Sam was surprised to see it was half full of paper sacks filled with groceries.

“Grab a sack then and let get these things inside,” she said.

“This is for me?” Sam asked. “I don’t need all this.”

“It’s for you and others,” she explained. “I’ve had an idea. Now help me get it in.”

Sam picked up two of the sacks and carried them into the house, resigned to the fact that she was going to see the state of the house. He carried them through to the kitchen and set them down on the table and went back for more, passing Missouri who was coming in with two sacks of her own.

He took the last of the bags from the trunk and slammed it closed. When he carried it inside he saw Missouri standing in the kitchen, unpacking the bags onto the counters.

“I’m not sure how you want to organize it all, so I’ll just put it out and let you decide later,” she said, setting down a can of sausage and beans.

“I appreciate this, but I really don’t need it all,” he said. There was enough canned food to feed him for weeks, and he was not going to be there that long.
“I know you don’t,” she said easily, “but whoever comes next might.”

“Next?”

“Have a look in that bag,” she said, pointing. “There’s something in there I think you’ll like.”

Curious about who she thought was coming next, but sure she would say nothing else until she was ready, Sam pulled out rolls of toilet paper and a dishcloth, coming to a cloth wrapped package. He opened it and laughed as he saw it was a French press.

“Missouri, you’re awesome,” he said.

“I thought having access to something to drink other than water would be nice for you,” she said. “There’s a kettle and cups in there, too. Get some water heating and I’ll make us some coffee.”

Sam found the kettle and filled it at the tap then lit the gas stove and set it down over the flame.

Missouri folded down the last of the sacks and put them on the table. She pushed aside some cans and found a package of ground coffee. Sam watched as she spooned it into the French press and wiped around the cups with one of the cloths she’d brought with her and set them down.

“How much do I owe you for all this?” Sam asked.

“Not a cent. It’s not just for you. This is the start up for my plan.”

“And your plan is…?”

Missouri set down the cloth and said. “I met your parents yesterday, Sam.”

Sam choked on his indrawn breath. How did she know? He didn’t look particularly like either of his parents, and they’d had their memories wiped, so they couldn’t have told her anything to make her put the story together. Unless Anna had been lying. Perhaps they did still know him. Did that mean he could see them again?

He coughed to clear his throat. “How did you know?”

“I saw them.”

“No, but your energy is obvious to me.” She smiled. “People have auras, Sam, energies, and they run through a family line. You have more of your father’s energy in you. Did you know that? There’s a good portion of Mary, too, but your true nature comes from John.”

“I’ve heard that said before,” he said.

“He’s just as strong as you are,” she said. “A deep red. He’s not tapped into it much yet, but there’s real strength in him, isn’t there?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. He was pretty incredible.”

“Of course, they’d passed in your time,” she said. “I’d forgotten. That’s a shame. Did they at least pass together?”

“Over twenty years apart. My mom died first.”
“That must have been very hard on him. There’s a very strong bond connecting them.”

Sam nodded. He knew what the loss of that bond had done to his father, how it had turned him into one of the best hunters out there, even if not the greatest father.

Missouri sighed. “I’m sorry for it. Your mother is pregnant now. Is that you?”

“My older brother, Dean,” Sam said. “I won’t come around until ’83.”

“1983,” she said wonderingly. “It seems so far away, and yet here you are.”

“Here I am,” Sam agreed. “They’re why I came back. There was a threat to them because of me, so Dean and I came to take care of it. We did. They’ll be safe now, but…” He shrugged. “But I’m still here.”

“Not forever,” she said. “We’ll take care of that.”

“I know.”

Missouri smiled. “Well, I met them, and your mother and I had a talk. I told her I had a hunter friend that needed a place to lay low. She actually suggested this place. Said she doesn’t want or need it anymore, so anyone can do what they want with it. She’s done with that part of life, and I think this place holds too many memories of what she lost. She gave me the keys and contents on the proviso that I take over any costs for the place.”

Sam nodded. He didn’t have power, but someone had to be paying for the water he was using, and it wasn’t fair that it should be Mary that was stuck with the bill.

“I’m going to take the bills over,” Missouri said. “This place will be mine. While you’re here, you can stay in it as long as you need, and when we get you home, I’m going to open it to other hunters. If they’re hurt and needing a place to recover or somewhere to stay when they’re in the area for a hunt, they can come here. I’ll keep it stocked with supplies, and they can give what they can afford towards the bills when they leave.”

Sam marveled. It was a great idea. He and Dean could have used a place like this a few times growing up, and they’d crashed in more than their share of abandoned buildings when they’d maxed their credit cards and were waiting for new ones.

“That’s an awesome idea,” he said. “Really. You’ll help a lot of people.”

“That’s what I am hoping.”

The kettle began to whistle and she turned off the heat and poured the water over the coffee and put on the lid.

“So there’s things we need to do,” she said. “What happened to that window in the living room?”

“My dad was thrown through it.” Sam said. “Part of the trouble we were here for.”

“Well, we need to get that fixed up. You’re going to freeze otherwise.”

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “I don’t spend any time in there anyway. I’m either in the bedroom, kitchen or study.”

“Hmm, we’ll need to get you some firewood at least. It can get cold here at night.”
“I think there’s an ax in Samuel’s trunk of weapons. I’ll take care of it later,” he said.

Missouri pushed the plunger down on the coffee. “We’ll take care of it before I go. I’m not saying I don’t trust you, but I think once you’re in those books, you’ll forget to do anything else.”

Sam conceded her point. He probably would forget. Being warm seemed far less important than being home.

She poured coffee into the two mugs and then opened a box of sugar cubes and dropped two into one of them.

“You take it as black, don’t you?”

Sam nodded.

She handed him a cup and said, “Let’s go out again. It’s a shame to waste such a beautiful day inside.”

Sam followed her out to the porch, seeing her give the broken window a glare as she passed. When they were settled on their seats, she said, “We’ll need to patch it up at least. I’ll get glass put in when you’re home again, but we can cover it up. I’ll bring some things later.”

Not wanting to argue, Sam nodded. He told himself it wasn’t settling to fix the window; it was preparing it for whoever came next, and Sam couldn’t be angry about that. He would not do anything for himself here though. He could live uncomfortably until it was time to go home. He was not going to start making a home here.

“So, tell me about your brother,” she said apropos of nothing.

Sam frowned. “Dean?”

“That’s the baby?”

Sam nodded, thinking how strange it was to think of Dean as a baby. He’d always been the big brother.

“Dean’s… everything,” he said quietly. “He’s my best friend. He basically raised me since my mom died. He’s only four years older than me, but he did it. He took care of me right from when I was six months old to when I left for college.”

“You went to college?” she asked.

“For a while. I went back to hunting after… I lost someone.” He didn’t want to talk about Jessica. She was private. “Me and Dean started hunting together then, and we’ve fought all kinds of fuglys since. He takes care of me, even when I make it impossible.”

“Impossible is a strong word, Sam.”

He thought of demon blood and the fight that trashed a hotel room when Sam was powered by it. He thought of Lilith and the terrible consequences of her death.

“It’s not strong enough,” he said.

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

Sam shrugged. She’d find out one day, he was sure. When things went so terribly wrong in the
future, she would surely remember this conversation and know what he had been not saying.

Perhaps sensing his need, Missouri diverted. “And Dean is waiting for you in 2010?”

“Yeah. He and Cas and Bobby. Castiel is the friend that brought us back, and Bobby is like a father to us. He’s done so much for us over the years. He’s in a bad way right now, and there’s nothing we can do for him. It’s hard.”

Sam wished there was something he could do to ease Bobby’s life. He had changed since he’d been told he was stuck in the wheelchair; he was a darker man. If only Castiel hadn’t been cut off from Heaven. He could have healed him in a heartbeat. It was because of Sam that he’d ended up in the chair—the demons came because of the apocalypse—and it was ultimately because of him that Castiel fell in the first place. So much damage because of him.

It occurred to him that Bobby was out there somewhere now, living his life. Sam didn’t know when he’d started hunting. For all Sam knew, he could be with Karen still, a happy man with his mechanics business and loving wife.

Sam started and coffee slopped onto his hand and pants’ leg. “Bobby!”

“What about him? What’s wrong?” Missouri asked.

Sam drew a shaky breath. He might be able to save Bobby from that pain. If Karen was still alive, Sam could save her. It would be hard, as he didn’t know when the demon had come, but he could lay protections for them. Bobby could call when it happened and he could go exorcise it. Perhaps it wouldn’t even come if Karen was protected. He doubted he could persuade them to get tattoos, but he could find some of those protection charms Bobby had given him and Dean after Meg possessed Sam. Karen could be saved and Bobby happy. He would never be forced to kill his own wife. He would never suffer all the years of hunting. He would live with the woman he loved and be happy. Sam could do that for him. Getting stuck here could serve a purpose.

He knew it was a hell of a thing to change, but wasn’t it worth it? It had to be. Sam loved Bobby, and by doing this, he could protect him.

“Missouri, do you know someone called Bobby Singer?” he asked.

Missouri frowned. “Singer… The name is familiar. Is that the guy Rufus Turner is training?”

Sam’s heart sank. “He took him on after a possession?”

“That’s the one. I heard Rufus took out the demon and the husband persuaded Rufus to teach him. It was big news because it was so unlike Turner to do something like that. Why? Is that your Bobby?”

“Yes,” Sam said miserably. “I was hoping I could help him.”

“Oh,” she said sadly. “And it’s too late. I’m sorry, Sam.”

“Yeah, me too.”

She patted his arm as Sam wiped his hand on the side of his pants’ leg.

“You can help him when you get home,” she said.

“I don’t know how,” Sam said. “We need a miracle.” Not just for Bobby but for the world. They
needed a way to stop Lucifer.

“To me, you being here is like a miracle, Sam. I’ve never heard of anything like it. That’s one. You need to have faith that there will be more.”

Sam closed his eyes. If only he could believe so easily. For him being here was a curse, and he couldn’t wait to get back to the people that he loved. He could see no miracle in it.

“I want you to come for dinner,” Missouri said in a wild attempt at changing the subject.

Sam looked at her. “What?”

“Dinner. You can clean up again, too, but I want you to come meet James. We’re celebrating the start of summer tonight, but it’s a goodbye dinner at the same time. James will go to his grandparents’ place in Florida tomorrow for a couple weeks. You should see him before he goes.”

“Why?” Sam asked. “I’m a mess. He doesn’t need to see me, and you can’t tell him what I’m doing here.”

“I can’t yet, but one day I can tell him he met an honest to God time traveler. That would be something special for him. Please, Sam, it’s important to me.”

She was looking at him eagerly, seeming caught up in the idea. Sam wasn’t sure if her motivations were what she was saying or if it was an excuse to take care of him again, but he found he didn’t have it in him to argue. She was doing so much for him already. The least he could do was oblige her request.

“Sure, I’ll come,” he said. “I’d like to meet him.”

“That’s perfect. Come at six.”

Sam smiled. “Thanks, Missouri.”

“No, thank you. I can show James a miracle.”

Sam laughed. “I’m sure he’ll be very impressed.”

“One day he will,” she said. “One day he will appreciate what we’ll show him.”

xXx

Sam arrived at Missouri’s just before six. He was uncharacteristically nervous as he walked up the steps and knocked at the door. He had spent the afternoon trying to prepare himself for meeting Missouri’s son. He didn’t have much experience with kids. When they’d come across them on hunts, Dean had always been able to find a way to connect with them while Sam had dealt with the parents. It was Dean’s strength not his. He wanted to make it work though. Missouri was being good to him, and this was what she wanted.

Missouri opened the door and smiled widely. “Sam! Come on in.”

She stepped back and Sam entered the hall, struck once again by the anachronistic décor.

Missouri bustled past him into the living room and Sam followed. She gestured him into a seat, but Sam hesitated. He could smell cooking, and he didn’t want to leave her to it alone. “Do you need any help?”
“I’ve got it taken care of,” she said. “You sit and relax. I’ll give James a call. He’s holed up in his bedroom right now.”

Sam sat and brushed his hands down his lap. He had changed into a fresh pair of the jeans she had given him, and they were a looser fit than he was used to, with a wide flared leg. He felt a little strange, as if he was in fancy dress.

Missouri walked into the hall and called up the stairs. “James, our guest is here. Put those toys away and come say hello.”

There were footfalls on the stairs and a child came into the room. He was wearing a Star-Wars t-shirt with a picture of C-3PO and R2-D2 on, and in his hands was a Luke Skywalker action toy. Sam smiled at him while inwardly racking his brain for any lingering knowledge of Star Wars. The films hadn’t really been a big part of his and Dean’s youth. Dean had preferred old westerns that showed sometimes on their motel TV, and he’d mostly ruled the stations back then.

“James, this is my friend, Sam,” she said. “Sam, this is my son.”

James smiled shyly at him. “Hi, Sam.”

“Hey, James.”

“I’ve got to finish the dinner,” Missouri said. “James, can I leave you to take care of our guest.”

“Yes, Momma.”

Missouri left the room and James perched on the edge of the couch. He stared down at the toy in his hands for a moment, an awkward silence falling between them, which Sam felt compelled to break. “I like your shirt,” he said.

James looked down at it and a grin crept over his face. “Thanks.”

“You like Star Wars a lot?” Sam asked.

“Yes, sir. Momma took me to see the movie twice and I got this toy for my birthday.”

“Is Luke your favorite?”

He nodded eagerly. “He’s the best.”

“I always liked Chewbacca.”

“He’s neat,” James said.

“What else do you like?” Sam asked.

“Scooby-Doo. I like Shaggy.”

Sam smiled to himself as he remembered Dean’s liking for Daphne.

James seemed to take confidence from Sam’s smile and he said, “Scooby and Shaggy are always scared, but they get the bad guys, too. I think maybe they’re pretending to be scared sometimes.”

“I think you’re right,” Sam said, “although sometimes you can be scared but brave at the same time.”
“That’s what my dad said. When I got scared about getting my shots, he told me the best people are scared but do it anyway, and that’s what makes them brave.” A sad look stole over him. “He was the bravest.”

“I’m sure he was.”

“He used to catch the bad guys,” James said proudly.

Sam frowned. Did that mean James knew about the real world? He’d been the around the same age when he’d read John’s journal for the first time, and he’d been terrified. James didn’t seem scared. Had Missouri told him the truth of the world already, or was this the result of some cover story for Richard’s hunting?

“James, come set the table,” Missouri said from the doorway. Sam hadn’t noticed her joining them. James jumped to his feet. “Okay, Momma.”

Sam waited until he was out of the room and he could hear the rattle of cutlery before he turned to Missouri and asked. “Does he know?”

“No,” she sounded sad. “We told him Richard was a cop.”

Sam remembered his own introduction to the world of hunting and he nodded. “Good.”

“Were you very young,” she asked.

“Eight. It was an accident that I found out. Dean and my Dad tried to protect me from it as long as they could.”

“Your mother was already dead,” she said.

Sam nodded. “She’ll die in 1983.”

“I’m sorry, Sam. For your mother and for your childhood. I can’t imagine how that must have felt to find out so young.”

Sam shrugged. “It’s fine. I dealt.”

“Not well.”

“Dean helped.” Trying to force the thoughts of that change from his mind he said, “James is a good kid.”

She smiled widely. “The best. He takes after his father.”

“I think there’s more than a little of you in him, too. Look at what you’re doing for me. Have you heard spoken to any of your hunter friends yet?”

“Later,” she said pointedly.

A moment later Sam understood her quick refusal as James came into the room and said, “The table is ready.”

“Thank you,” Missouri said, stroking his cropped hair. “Let’s eat.”

They went into the kitchen and Sam sat down beside James as Missouri set a platter and bowls
down on the table.

“It’s meat loaf, potatoes and green beans,” she said. “I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s great,” Sam said. He was looking forward to a home cooked meal.

“Green beans,” James groaned.

“Yes,” Missouri said pointedly. “And you only get dessert if you eat all you have.”

James brightened. “Dessert?”

“Yes. Cake. I made it especially.”

James grinned and whispered conspiratorially to Sam. “We never get cake.”

Sam laughed. “Sounds like it’s your lucky day then.”

James nodded and reached for the bowl of green beans and began to spoon some onto his plate.

“Help yourself, Sam,” she said, nudging the platter of meat loaf forward.

Sam took a piece and then some potatoes. James handed him the spoon for the beans and he took them, too. It all looked delicious, and he tried to think of the last time he’d had a meal like this. It had been a while. Trying to take care of himself on the road meant he ate a lot of salad, but he always preferred real meals when he could get them.

When their plates were loaded, they settled to eat, and for a while the only sounds were the clinks of cutlery. Sam was amused to see that James ate all the green beans first with an ill-concealed grimace, clearly getting the worst part over with first.

“So, Sam, what have you been doing?” Missouri asked as Sam set down his knife and fork and leaned back in his chair.

“Researching mostly,” Sam said. “I found the old wood shed though, and I’ve built fires ready in the bedroom and study.”

She nodded approvingly. “Have you found anything in the books?”

Sam shook his head with a sigh. “Not a thing. They’re interesting, and I’m learning loads, but nothing that’s going to help me.”

“We’ll find a way,” she said confidently.

He smiled, grateful for her positivity. “I know.”

“Can I help?” James asked.

Missouri smiled fondly. “Maybe one day, honey. You concentrate on your schoolwork for now. That’s what matters.” She turned to Sam. “James is top of his class. My boy’s going to go far.”

“I’m sure he is,” Sam said.

He had sometimes been top in the schools they’d passed through over the years, but it hadn’t gotten him anywhere in the end. He’d had only a few years of college before he’d returned to hunting. He had no regret for having Dean back in his life and the lives he’d saved, but he
sometimes wondered how different his life would have been if Jessica hadn’t died. How different the world would be had he not been able to curse it.

“Tell Sam about your science fair project,” Missouri said.

James grinned, clearly comfortable sharing his point of knowledge, and began to explain his experiments with rust formation. Sam heard enough to know the kid was as bright as he’d imagined.

He’d never managed to be in school for the right length of time to compete in a science fair, though he’d wished he had at the time. He’d always wanted to make the volcano that seemed to be a rite of passage for elementary school.

When Missouri and James had finished and the plates were cleared, Missouri went to the fridge and took out an intricately decorated chocolate cake. James looked excited as he fetched plates and forks for them.

“That looks great, Missouri,” Sam said appreciatively.

He didn’t usually eat a lot of cake anymore but Jessica had been a great baker, and he had enjoyed her creations many times.

Missouri cut a slice and handed it across to Sam. James fidgeted in his seat as she cut him a piece and set it down in front of him. He picked up his fork and then hesitated as Missouri gave him a stern look. He waited for her to cut her own slice and give him a nod of permission before he dived in with an excited smile.

Sam took a bite and realized it tasted even better than it looked. He smiled to himself as James made contented noises beside him and Missouri apologized for him. “Sometimes I wonder where he gets his table manners from,” she said. “You wouldn’t believe he’d been raised by decent folk.”

Sam grinned. “I understand. This is really good, Missouri.” He made a noise of appreciation with his next bite and James laughed.

Missouri rolled her eyes but couldn’t hide her smile as her gaze flickered between the two of them.

When their plates were clear she stacked them and carried them to the counter and piled them with the other dirty dishes.

“Okay, James, as it’s a celebration, I’ll give you a day off dishes duty,” she said. “You go play while me and Sam have a talk.”

James pushed back his chair and raced from the room with a called, “Thanks, Momma,” over his shoulder.

“I’ll do the dishes,” Sam said, half rising.

“Later,” Missouri said. “We should talk first.”

Sam sat down again and said, “Sure. Whatever you need.”

“I have got my friends looking for something to help,” she said. “There has been nothing concrete yet, but we have a visitor coming tomorrow.”

“We do?”
“Yes. His name is George. He’s a hunter that might be able to help.”

“What did he say when you spoke to him?” Sam asked.

“He just said he was on his way and would be with us tomorrow afternoon. It’s not George’s way to share before he’s sure he can help.”

“But you think he can?”

“I don’t think he’d come otherwise.”

Sam’s breath rushed out of him in a whoosh. For the first time he had a solid reason to hope that someone that could save him from this. He could get home. He could be back with Dean and the others within a day. He could tell them the crazy story of how he had been trapped in 1978 for days.

He felt his lips curving into a wide smile as he thought of it. He would be able to clean up properly again and change into clothes that didn’t belong in a museum. He would go straight to Lawrence and take Missouri the biggest bouquet of flowers she’d ever seen. He would thank her and make her understand that she’d saved him.

He would be home.
Sam pulled up outside Missouri’s house and cut the engine.

As he climbed out, he wondered if he would ever drive the Lincoln again. If George had a way to get him home, it might be something instant, like a spell. He could be home by the end of the day. Even if it wasn’t as fast as that, he could wait. His days in that car and 1978 were numbered, and that knowledge made him feel like he was walking on air.

He locked the car and walked up the steps to Missouri’s door, knocking loudly. He looked around as he waited for her to answer it, taking in the sights for hopefully the last time.

She opened it with a wide smile and cheerful greeting. “I wondered how long it would take you to come.”

“I know I’m early,” Sam said apologetically. “But I couldn’t wait anymore.”

She laughed. “I’m surprised you lasted this long. Come on in. I’ve got coffee brewing and there’s cake left.”

Sam went inside and followed her instruction to go sit down in the living room. He clasped his hands in his lap and tried to force his knees to stop bouncing. He was mildly successful, but when Missouri came in, she smiled knowingly at him as she set down the tray and handed him cake and coffee.

“Enjoy,” she said brightly.

Sam drank a sip of coffee and ate a forkful of cake before setting both down on the table and leaning forward. “Tell me about George,” he said.

“There’s not much to tell,” Missouri said. “I don’t know much myself. He helped Richard and I out when we were just starting with some lore, and he stayed in touch. I hadn’t heard from him since Richard died, but I put a call in to him, and he called back yesterday just before you arrived.”

“What’s he like?”

Missouri considered. “He’s a good man and a great hunter. He has more lore in his head than you’d find in a hundred books, and he shares his knowledge.”

“He sounds like Bobby,” Sam said with a pang. “In my time he’s the go-to-guy for lore. He runs phones for us, too.”

“He sounds like a good man.”

“The best,” Sam said fervently. “I can’t wait to see him again.”

“Hopefully that will be soon,” she said.

“Yeah, soon.” He gave a little shiver of excitement. He didn’t think he had ever really appreciated the people he had in his life more than he did now he was parted from them.

He picked up his coffee and drank some more as Missouri ate dainty pieces of cake. When she’d set her empty plate down and glanced at the clock, Sam asked, “Did James get off okay?”
“Oh yeah,” she said. “He was so eager to go, he barely had time for a goodbye. It’s his first time flying alone, and I’m not sure whether he was more excited about the flight itself or being there. He’s staying with Richard’s parents, and they have a nice place on the beach in Miami. He’ll spend the next two weeks being spoiled rotten.”

“Sounds nice,” Sam said.

“It’s good for him,” she said. “He needs to see both sides of his family still. When Richard was alive, they visited more often as they were on the road. When he died, they stopped hunting.”

“They’re hunters?” Sam asked in surprise.

“They were. Richard’s father came from a long line of hunters based out of Washington. Losing their son made them realize just how much they stood to lose. They wanted to make sure they could see James grow up, so they retired to Florida. They still work a little like your friend Bobby, handing out lore and offering advice, but they don’t take hunts themselves. They didn’t know anything about time travel though. I think they thought I was joking when I asked.”

Sam’s stomach sank. “But if they were in the life for so long and they’ve never heard of anything, what are the odds that George has?”

“They’re old school hunters,” she said. “They believe in what they have seen and killed before. George is a little more open-minded. Don’t worry, Sam. He wouldn’t come to waste our time, or his. He must know something.”

Sam tried to be comforted by her words, but he felt deflated from his previous excitement. He had all of his hope pinned on George to have the answer as the alternative was more research and there was no knowing how long it would take to find an answer, if there even was one in those books. He hung his head and sighed.

“Stop!” Missouri said firmly, making his head snap up. “We’re going to find a way. Let’s hear what George has to say before we start looking at books again.”

“Okay,” Sam agreed tiredly, trying to muster up a smile for the kind woman.

“Just think of Dean,” she said. “This will be a hell of a story to tell him when you get back.”

Sam smile became more genuine. “Dean will get a kick out of it. I’m going to have to deal with a lot of disco age jokes.”

She looked satisfied at his change in mood. “And you’ll be rich, too. If you give me all your stock tips before you go, I can invest some for you, too, and you can come collect when you’re back.”

Sam laughed at the idea of being rich, never having to rely on credit card fraud again. Having plentiful money would please Dean.

“You want to buy stocks in Apple and Microsoft,” Sam said. “They’re tech companies. Buy them early and pull the lot in August ’87.”

“Pull it?”

“October 18th the market will crash. Sell the lot before then and buy again after.”

Missouri looked worried. “Will it be very bad?”
Sam nodded. “Afraid so.”

She jotted a note on a piece of paper, her lips pressed into a thin line. “Okay. I will invest for us both. You can pay me back when we meet again in thirty-two years.”

“Thirty-two years for you. I’m hoping it’ll be a lot less for me.”

“It will be,” she said confidently. “I have faith.”

Sam smiled. “Yeah, me too.”

It might not come as fast as he’d like after all, but he was going to find a way to get home somehow.

xXx

Sam had drunk two cups of coffee and had finally eaten the cake under Missouri’s instruction before there was a knock on the door.

He jerked to his feet and then froze with nerves.

“It’s okay, Sam,” Missouri said. “You sit yourself down and I’ll get it.”

Sam forced his lungs to unfreeze so he could draw a breath, but he didn’t sit as Missouri strode along the hall and opened the door.

“George,” she said. “Thank you for coming so soon.”

“No problem,” a voice replied. “You had me curious after our phone call.”

Was it only curiosity that had brought him here? Sam wondered what Missouri had told him. Was it possible this man was only here to meet a time traveler? Sam tried not to panic, but fear clutched his gut anyway.

Missouri must have seen his fraught emotions when she came back into the living room, as she touched his arm and stood close to him.

The man that followed her in was wearing brown pants and a deep red sweater vest over a brown shirt. His red hair was unruly and threaded with a few greys. He wore a neutral expression as he looked Sam up and down and then took a seat opposite. Missouri sat too and tugged on Sam’s arm to indicate that he should do the same. He unlocked his knees and sat down beside her, his back ramrod straight.

“This is Sam,” she said. “Sam, this is George.”

“So, you’re the one that wants to time travel,” George said.

“Yes,” Sam said.

“Sam is the time traveler, George,” Missouri said.

George frowned at her. “You didn’t mention that.”

Missouri waved an airy hand. “I didn’t think you’d believe me unless you spoke to him yourself.”

“You’re right,” he said, eyeing Sam. “Where are you from?”
“2010,” Sam said quietly. He was nervous now. He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting from George, but this wasn’t it. He wasn’t hostile, but he wasn’t friendly either. He had an aloof air about him.

George chuckled. “Is that right? So, you need my help to get back? What happened? Did your time machine break?”

“It wasn’t a machine,” Sam said. “It was a person. He was going to take me home, too, but someone else interfered.”

“Special kind of person that can do that.”

“He’s an angel,” Sam said.

Missouri gasped. “An angel! They’re real?”

“Yes. He’s called Castiel. He’s fallen now that he’s helping us, but there are more, and they can do things like time traveling and healing.”

“You sure about that?” George asked.

Sam stared into his faded blue eyes. “Yes.”

“You ever meet a real angel, Missouri?” George asked.

“No,” she admitted. “But that doesn’t mean it’s not true.”

George looked doubtful and Sam spoke loudly, angered by his doubt. “You won’t have seen them. They’re not on earth yet. They won’t come until 2008 when things start to go really wrong. You should be glad. My friend Castiel is a good one, but he’s the only one. Angels aren’t guardians, they’re soldiers, and that makes them dangerous. Some of them are incredibly dangerous.”

Like Michael and Lucifer, Sam thought. Irrationally, Michael seemed more dangerous to him personally now given what he had done. Lucifer just wanted Sam to be a vessel. Michael had done something far crueler.

George leaned back in his chair. “And this angel brought you back from 2010 to do what?”

“To save people I love,” Sam said. “My parents.”

“He’s telling the truth, George,” Missouri said. “I can see the family line, and his parents are here now. They’re younger than him.”

George’s eyebrows rose. He could doubt Sam, a stranger telling an incredible story, but Missouri was so obviously unfailingly honest.

“Tell me this,” George said. “If you’re from the future, what can you tell me about the Mariners.”

Sam frowned at the random question. “The Seattle Mariners? The baseball team?”

“They’ve made it that far then,” he mused. “They’re my team. Have they made it to a World Series?”

Sam frowned as he tried to think. He didn’t know much about baseball, as he’d never really been that interested in the sport. He’d followed the Stanford Cardinals games in college, but that was a social thing. “I don’t know,” he said eventually. “I’m not that big on the game. I remember that the
Yankees won last year though.” He nodded to Missouri. “That’s worth laying a bet on, too.”

Missouri smiled. “I’ll remember.”

“Hmm, maybe you’re telling the truth then,” George said.

“The fact I don’t know something makes you believe me?” Sam asked.

“The fact you admit you don’t know makes me believe. If you were blowing smoke you’d tell me
they were champions to please me.”

Sam considered. It seemed shaky logic to him, but if it got George onside, he wasn’t going to argue it.

“I am telling the truth,” Sam said. “And I need to get home. Can you help?”

“I don’t have a time machine if that’s what you’re asking,” he said.

“But do you know something?” Sam asked. “Is there any creature that can do something like this?
A god or goddess.”

“There might be one,” George said.

Sam felt a flicker of hope in his chest, and Missouri turned to beam at him.

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“A Greek god by the name of Chronos. He can move himself through time, so I guess it’s possible
that he can move others, too. He’s dangerous though.”

Sam’s heart raced and Missouri reached for his hand, gripping it tightly between her own.

“How do I find him?” Sam asked.

“Did you miss me saying he was dangerous?” George asked.

“I’ve faced worse,” Sam said easily.

George looked amused. “I doubt that.”

“Don’t,” Sam said darkly thinking of Azazel and Lilith, Lucifer and Michael. He had faced them
and two of them were dead.

“We need to know, George,” Missouri said. “Sam needs to get home. Everything we ever face is
dangerous. This time the difference is that we’re saving a life in a different kind of way.”

“There are people back there that need me,” Sam said. “And I need them. I can’t stay stuck here.
Please, help me.”

There was a long silence as Sam stared at George, his eyes beseeching, and Missouri gripped his hand.


Sam exhaled in a whoosh. “Thank you,” he said fervently. “Thank you so much.”

“It’s not going to be easy,” George said. “And we’re taking a risk summoning him. There’s only
one weapon that can kill Chronos, and I don’t have it.”

“I don’t want to kill him,” Sam said. “I need his help.”

“And if he refuses to help and decides to kill you instead?”

“He won’t,” Sam said.

“Why not?”

“Because he can’t. I’m needed in the future.” And he couldn’t be killed even by an angel blade, so he doubted Chronos had a weapon that would work. He didn’t tell George that thought as he thought an \textit{invincible} time traveler was too much to expect him to believe in.

George raised an eyebrow. “And you’re so special because…?”

“Because what’s happening in my time is worse than anything you can imagine.” He was the cause of it.

“I can imagine a lot. I have \textit{seen} a lot.”

“Trust me, it’s worse,” Sam said.

George shook his head disbelievingly. “If you say so. I’ll help you, but I’m doing this for Missouri. I owe her and Richard. I am not doing it for you and whatever future you think is so much worse than the horrors I’ve lived through.”

Sam realized that this man would have lived through a world war, perhaps even fought in it. What he said would seem arrogant to him, even though it was the truth. He could explain what was happening and why he mattered, but that would leave him and Missouri with a horror of the future. They didn’t deserve that. He would prefer to be thought of as arrogant than hurt Missouri and the man that was going to help grant his wish.

A bad opinion he could deal with. A chance to get home was worth anything.
“What do I need to do?” Sam asked.

“You’re going to need some herbs,” George said. “Missouri, you should have everything we need on hand: agrimony, eryngo, foxglove, thyme and yarrow. Just a pinch of each in a bowl. We also need an hourglass and candles, and there’s a spell. I’ll get the spell from my journal while you gather everything else.”

“We’re doing it now?” Sam asked, startled.

“I thought you were in a hurry,” George said sardonically.

“I am,” Sam said, leaping to his feet. He had just thought it was going to take some more talking and persuasion to make George really help them.

George and Missouri stood, too. George went along the hall and out of the front door while Missouri headed for the kitchen. Sam stood a moment, just taking in what was happening, and then he went after Missouri. She was at an open drawer, sorting through small bags and packages and picking some out to set on the counter.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Yarrow. In that cupboard there is a copper bowl. Can you grab that? I never can reach it without my stepstool.”

Sam easily reached into the indicated cupboard above the sink and found the bowl. He carried it into the living room, set it on the table, and then clasped his shaking hands on the edge. He was filled with nerves and excitement. He had a real chance of going home and that was incredible. The joy he felt now was only eclipsed by the way he felt the moment he realized Dean was really back from Hell. He couldn’t wait to see him again.

“Missouri…” he started. “I don’t know how to thank you for all this. I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you. You’re incredible.”

She smiled, her eyes glowing with happiness. “You’re welcome, Sam. I meant what I said before; you’re a good man. I believe you’re going back to do incredible things. Just promise me something.”

“Anything,” Sam said without hesitation.

“Make sure you come to me when you’re back. I know big things are happening for you in your time, but maybe I can help. Don’t try to protect me from it. Make me a part of it.”

Sam bit his lip. He didn’t want Missouri dragged into the apocalypse. It was bad enough that she was going to need to live through that time.

“Please, Sam,” she said. “I want to be a part of it, no matter how bad.”

“Okay,” Sam said reluctantly. “I will.”

“Thank you,” she said, then grinned. “You’ll need to find me anyway so we can share our riches. We’re going to make the stock market work for us, remember.”
“We are,” Sam said with a laugh.

The door closed in the hall and George came into the living room with a black leather journal in his hand. “You all set?” he asked.

“Just the hourglass,” Missouri said, going to the sideboard and pulled out a large wooden model. “It was a gift from my grandmother,” she explained.

“We have to smash it,” George said, eyeing the antique skeptically.

“I’ll get another,” Sam said quickly. “We can’t break that.”

“We can and will,” Missouri said. “It’s only been gathering dust for years. She’d want it to be used for something like this, something important.” She took off her scarf, letting her hair fall free, and wrapped it around the hourglass.

“Candles,” George prompted.

“Yes, yes,” Missouri said. She took four pillar candles from the mantlepiece and set them around the bowl of herbs. She lit them with a box of matches and then stepped back.

“You should do this part yourself,” George said, handing Sam his open journal. “You need to smash the hourglass, throw a match into the bowl, and then say these words.”

Sam read down the page, seeing the short Latin invocation underlined twice. He recognized some of the words and knew he wouldn’t have trouble reciting them.

He looked around for something to smash the hourglass with, and George handed him his gun. Sam thanked him and then raised it into the air. He brought the grip crashing down on the hourglass, smashing it and making tears in Missouri’s scarf.

He took the matches from Missouri’s outstretched hand and lit one and tossed it into the bowl. The herbs started to burn, filling the air with their cloying scents. Sam lifted the journal and recited the Latin. “O Khrone, parakaloumen se, thespizein hemin hronon ton mellonta.”

Nothing happened for a moment and Sam’s heart sank, but then there was a burst of red light. Sam gasped in a breath and stepped protectively in front of Missouri. A man appeared in front of them. Sam would have tagged him as in his thirties, and he was wearing a black suit with a vest and white shirt beneath. He reminded Sam of the characters in the Elliot Ness gangster movies Dean liked to watch.

“Who did that?” the man asked in a low and dangerous tone.

Sam raised a hand and swallowed down his fear. “Me. I need help.”

The man leered at him. “If you’re stupid enough to summon Chronos, I would say you do indeed need help.”

“Please,” Sam said. “I need to go home.”

“Then call a cab.”

“That’s not going to help me,” Sam said. “I’m stuck.”

Chronos moved closer to him and Sam forced himself to meet his intense stare. He looked Sam up and down and said, “You’re a man out of your time.”
“Yes.”

“When are you from?”

“2010,” Sam said. “I got trapped here by an angel.”

“An angel,” he said thoughtfully. “I heard they were flocking around in that time, making nuisances of themselves.”

Sam nodded eagerly. “They are. One of them is my friend, and he brought me here. It was a different angel that trapped me.”

“How would he do that?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “He didn’t explain.”

Chronos tilted his head to the side. “You’re telling the truth.”

“I am,” Sam said. “He left me here, and I need to get home. They need me.”

“In 2010? I imagine they do. Why would you want to go back though? That is not a pleasant time to be alive. I avoid it as much as I can.”

“Because my family need me,” Sam said. “And I need them.”

Missouri reached out and laid her hand on Sam’s arm in a gesture of comfort.

Chronos looked amused. “Why would I do anything to help you or your family? I don’t know you. I owe you nothing. I owe no human anything. You have summoned me, which is reason enough to kill you alone.”

“You don’t owe me a thing,” Sam agreed. “But if you’re a time traveler, I’m guessing you want something worth visiting to be left after 2010. I can maybe do something about that. That’s why I need to get home. You know what’s happening there.”

“And you’re so special because…”

Sam couldn’t admit the full truth of why he was needed; that would cause Missouri and George pain and fear. He abandoned pride and pleaded instead. “Please help me. I am begging you. I need to get home and you’re my only hope. I will do anything.”

“What if there is nothing I need?” he asked. “I can’t think of anything a human can offer me that I don’t already have.”

“I’ll find something,” Sam said.

“What’s your name?” Chronos asked.

“Sam Winchester.”

His eyes widened. “Sam Winchester? Really. Well, that does make things more interesting, doesn’t it?”

Sam expected him to look angry—as he surely would if he recognized the man that had doomed the world—but Chronos looked intrigued, almost hopeful.
“It would serve me to be owed a favor from a Winchester,” he said. “I know what you’re capable of.”

Sam wanted to wince away from the words, but he forced himself to meet his eyes as he asked, “Does that mean you’re going to help me?”

Chronos nodded slowly. “I think I will. I would like you to be in my debt, and your brother by extension. Between them, the Winchester brothers can do all kinds of things.”

Sam’s closed his eyes and allowed the relief to wash over him. He was going home to Dean, Bobby and Cas. He would be with them again soon.

Chronos held out a hand. “We have a deal? I will take you back to your time and when I call for you, you will serve my need?”

“I will,” Sam promised.

A part of him was aware that this was a bargain he should explore more before making a deal, but he couldn’t make himself stop now he was so close to getting home.

He reached for Chronos’ hand to shake when he heard a sound that made him curse and grab Chronos’ hand tightly, determined to make the deal before anyone could stop him.

“Sam,” Anna said, sounding irritated. “What are you doing?”

Sam spun to look at her, the angel he hated, and said, “I’m getting myself home.”

“Who…? What…? How…?” Missouri sputtered.

“This is Anna,” Sam said. “She’s an angel. She’s also leaving.”

“Angels are real,” George said in a musing voice. He had been so quiet that Sam had almost forgotten he was there, but Sam glanced at him now and saw that he looked interested as he watched Anna.

“Angels are real, I am real, and I am not leaving,” Anna said. “Why are you doing this, Sam? I told you there’s no way home.”

“And I’m proving you wrong. Now leave.” His voice became pleading as his desperation rushed over him. “Please, Anna. Just let me go home.”

“I can’t.”

Her blade dropped into her hand and Sam saw her intent a moment before she acted. He had just enough time to throw himself in front of Chronos as she pulled back her elbow and thrust her blade forward. It pierced Sam’s chest and he felt the burning pain again as it entered him and plunged right though. His eyes watered and his stomach rolled with the agony of it. Missouri screamed his name, and Sam wished he could speak to reassure her, but his teeth were clenched against a scream.

He heard a shocked cry behind him and then a wave of heat.

“Chronos!” he shouted, but there was no response. The blade jarred in him as the hilt pressed against his chest, and then Anna was pulling it out, dragging it though him, and Sam was falling to his knees.

Missouri rushed towards him, her hands coming to hold his face, but Sam was turning away and
looking behind him. He cried out at what he saw. Chronos was lying on the floor behind him, a bloody wound on his chest. His eyes were wide and staring up at the ceiling and there was a trickle of blood coming from the corner of his mouth. He was very obviously dead.

“No,” Sam moaned, falling back on his haunches.

Missouri was speaking, and touching Sam, but he could barely hear or feel it. He was consumed by horror. His chance at getting home was lost. The god was dead.

He pushed himself to his feet and advanced on Anna. She stared at him dispassionately, her bloodied blade hanging at her side. Sam wanted nothing more than to snatch it from her and drive it into her heart, but when he grabbed for it, ready to strike, it was gone. He saw no movement or exchange, but one moment it was there, and the next it had disappeared.

Sam clenched his hand into a fist, wanting to punch and pummel, but she pushed him back easily with a hand right over the bloody center of his chest, and he stumbled into Missouri’s arms. She clung to him and he could feel her shaking. He knew he should say something to reassure her, but he had no words to comfort. He was overpowered by his fury at Anna.

“I was going home,” he growled at her.

“No, you were going to try,” she said. “I know you, Sam. You would have faltered when you heard what it would cost you.”

“I would give anything!” Sam shouted.

“Really? Even one of your friends here? Is it worth someone else’s life to get you home?”

Sam’s heart skipped. “What?”

“Chronos can only travel by taking the life force of someone else. That’s what powers him. You just made a deal that would cost someone his or her life. I negated that deal before you were forced to see someone else die because of you. I helped you Sam.”

“You trapped me,” Sam said, his anger seeping away and being replaced by sadness.

“No, I saved you. There is no way for you to go home. You are going to live each of these years out and, deep down, you know it. What I did was protect you from a stupid deal that would have tormented you and ultimately killed someone else.”

“He really can’t go home?” Missouri asked.

“He can’t until it’s time. There is no changing this. Michael’s will is absolute. Sam must live through to 2010. That is the only way.”

Missouri gasped and pressed a hand to her mouth.

“Make a life, Sam,” Anna said. “It’s the only way for you now.”

Sam shook his head jerkily. “No! I can’t!”

“You have no choice.”

She sounded absolutely certain, as if there was no doubt left. Against his will, Sam believed her. And he hated it.
Anna looked on the verge of speech for a moment, but then she shook her head and disappeared with a fluttering sound.

Sam just stood staring at the place she had been in shock, not moving until Missouri guided him gently but persistently to the couch. He sat down and buried his face in his hands.

“That’s not something you see every day,” George said. “I wouldn’t mind some answers.”

“Are you okay, Sam?” Missouri asked, her fingers coming to his shirt and starting to unbutton it.

Sam brushed her hands away. “I’m fine. She didn’t hurt me.”

“She ran you through with a sword,” George said disbelievingly.

“But I’m fine. Michael did something so I can’t be hurt,” Sam said dully.

He lowered his hands and stared at Chronos’ body on the floor. He had been so sure this was it. He was getting back. Anna had ruined it. He didn’t believe her reasons. She wasn’t protecting him. She was cursing him.

“Michael the archangel?” Missouri asked.

Sam nodded. “Yeah. He’s the one that stuck me here. He needs me alive.”

“For what?” George asked.

“It doesn’t matter.” He looked up at him where he stood. “Was Chronos really the only idea you had?”

“He was,” George said. “I didn’t know about the killing thing, but I guess I should have known it was more complicated than you simply hitching a ride. I’m sorry.”

Sam looked away. He didn’t want apologies. He wanted a new way home.

“Sam,” Missouri said gently.

Sam met her searching gaze and saw the apology there. “It’s okay. I’ll find another way,” he said bracingly.

Missouri shook her head sadly. “You won’t. She was telling the truth. You know it, too, I can tell.”

“I don’t know anything,” Sam said angrily.

“You do. I couldn’t read her mind, but I could sense the truth in her words. I am sorry, but she wasn’t lying. There is no god or monster to get you home. You’re stuck here.”

“No!” Sam spat, lurching to his feet. He didn’t want to hear this.

Missouri rose beside him and reached for his cheek. He let her touch him, surprised when she wiped away the tear he hadn’t been aware of crying.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m sorry, but she was telling the truth.”

Sam bowed his head, feeling the tears sliding down before Missouri caught them and swept them away. He couldn’t bear it because he knew it was true. As little as he wanted to admit it, there was no other way for him. He was damned to live and damned to stay.
He was really trapped here.
Sam shoved open the front door hard so that it flew back and hit the wall, leaving a sizeable dent in the wall. He stamped through the hall and into the living room.

A cold breeze came through the broken window, creating a chill in the air and making the curtain sway. He looked around at the peeling paint and smashed window and cursed. It seemed a perfect summing up of his situation. This was it for him. He was stuck here in this pit of a house for good, or at least until he caught up with his own time again, and that was going to take forever.

Where else could he go though? What could he do? He had no money to start a new life, even if he could find the will. He had no identity in this time. He was truly trapped. It was going to take longer than he had even been alive to get home, and he couldn’t handle it.

He strode into the kitchen room where the tattered walls and cupboards contrasted sharply with the neatly arranged cans of food and crockery on the counter top. They were there supposedly waiting for the house’s next occupant. When Sam had organized them, he’d had no idea he was the one that was going to be living here. He had thought he would be home long before he had need of them. That was how it was supposed to have been. He should not be here. He didn’t belong.

He picked up a bowl from the stack and threw it at the wall, bellowing his anger into the still air. “This is wrong!”

The bowl smashed and the pieces rained down onto the floor. Sam felt a sense of satisfaction from the destruction. He didn’t want these things. He didn’t need them. They were needed for a life, and he wasn’t going to live here. He wasn’t going to settle. He was going to fight against it every step of the way. He couldn’t die, so he couldn’t starve to death. He couldn’t freeze. He didn’t need anything to keep going but the curse of life Michael had left him with. He would exist these coming years because he had no choice, but he wouldn’t live. He refused to.

He picked up another bowl and threw that, too. The savage action brought a grim smile to his lips. This felt good, venting his feelings. He was making what he felt inside a physical thing on the outside. He was showing the world how it felt.

He picked up another and another until there was not a single piece of china or glass left on the counter and a pile of shards on the floor. With nothing left to smash, he stood a moment, breathing hard through his nose. It wasn’t enough. He still needed more.

He walked out of the room and through to the study. The books he had been using to research were still in piles on the desk and in boxes on the floor. “Useless,” he spat.

They were no good to him now. There was no answer in them that was going to save him. The only possible answer had just been murdered by Anna.

He picked up the open book on the desk and threw it into the grate, on the ashes of his last fire. They billowed up and coated the floor. Sam grabbed at the others, flinging them into the fireplace. They piled up and began to spill out when there was no more room.

Sam stopped and gripped the edge of the desk, his head bowed and his breaths coming fast. The old Sam, the Sam that belonged in 2010, would have been appalled at the idea of burning a book, let alone dozens of them. The fact that these books held information that could save a life would have made the crime even more unimaginable. He didn’t care though. He wasn’t that man.
anymore. He was the one cursed to a life in the past.

He grabbed up the box of matches from the mantel piece and lit one. He held it between his fingers, staring down at the flame, willing himself to throw it onto the books, to shed that piece of who he had been so he could create a new layer of hardness to get him through what he was going to have to live with for the next thirty-two years.

The flame reached his fingertips and he dropped it to the floor automatically. It landed a few inches from the pages of a book. He watched the match burn to nothing and then the flame die as its fuel disappeared. He couldn’t do it. As much as he wanted to shed that layer of himself, he couldn’t. Sam Winchester, Dean’s brother, would never be able to do it. He needed to cling to that for Dean. He was going to be changed enough by the time he was with him again already. He had to hang onto what was left of him so Dean could look at him and recognize him when he saw him. It was going to be hard enough for him already.

He threw the box of matches onto the floor and strode from the room. He couldn’t burn the books, he couldn’t get home, he couldn’t live with it and yet he couldn’t die. He had nothing.

He wanted oblivion. He would sleep.

xXx

It could have been hours or days or weeks that passed. Sam had no concept of time. He lay in the darkness, his eyes closed whether he was sleeping or awake. He slept when he could and emulated it when he couldn’t.

He didn’t feel hungry; he didn’t feel thirsty. He felt empty, as if everything in him had been scooped out and replaced with darkness. There wasn’t pain anymore. There was nothing. Pain would have been easier to handle. He could have pretended he was still human with pain. He could have been the same man that had come to 1978 with his brother to save the parents he loved, so twisted by the guilt of what he had done. None of that seemed to matter anymore. He just existed. He would exist until his time caught up and he was with Dean and the others again.

The thought of what would happen then came to him sometimes, and he tried to push the ideas away as quickly as they came—he didn’t want to think of what he would be then. The thoughts didn’t always go though. Sometimes he was forced to think of what Dean was going to be met with when he returned to his own time. An old man pretending to be his brother.

Sam would be almost sixty, changed irrevocably. He wouldn’t be the young and vital man he had been when they’d parted. He wouldn’t be able to rely on himself to back Dean up on a hunt the same way. He’d be close in age to Bobby, and he doubted he could hold onto the same verve that Bobby had at that age.

How would Dean even look at him knowing how different he was? He would lose as much as Sam. He would be expecting the brother he had known before, his hunting partner and backup, but Sam would be different. There was no way he could stay the same after everything he was going to experience in the next three decades. Sam’s life was going to change and he would never be that man again. He was losing it all.

More burning than the thought of his future was the pain of his present. He missed them all: Dean, Bobby and Castiel. He wouldn’t be able to speak to any of them again for a long time. He couldn’t explain to them what was happening or ask for comfort. They couldn’t know him until it was the right time again.
That wasn’t such a problem with Dean as he wasn’t born yet—and wasn’t that a head trip in itself—but Bobby at least was out there now, living his life. Sam could get in the car now, drive to Sioux Falls and find him. Except he couldn’t. Bobby didn’t know him in this time. There was no way he could have kept it a secret all that time if he had. Missouri had only seen him for the few days it took to clear up the hunt in their old house. She could have kept the knowledge a secret easily. Bobby never would have been able to keep it up for years. That meant Sam had to stay away. He couldn’t take his comfort.

Castiel was more complicated. He was out there now, in heaven at least, but he wasn’t the man Sam knew. He wouldn’t become that man until a matter of months before Sam’s time would catch up to theirs. There was no point contacting him at the time he came into their lives as there would be nothing for Sam there. Castiel would be a soldier still, an automaton. And Dean... He didn’t know. He wouldn’t be able to keep Sam’s presence secret from the Sam of his time as they lived in each other’s pockets. And it wasn’t fair to expect him to. Sam had to face facts. He couldn’t have the people he loved. Without them, there was nothing for him. Things were never going to be the way they were when they were together again either. Sam was going to be a different man and they would all have to find their feet together again.

xXx

Sam was lying in bed one day when he heard the door open and Missouri calling to him. He didn’t stir; he remained perfectly still with his eyes closed, feigning sleep until it was time for it to return to banish awareness.

He hoped she would just come and go when she saw he wasn’t in any of the living areas of the house, but that was too much to ask for. What was worse was that she had brought company. He could hear her talking to someone through the closed door.

“That’s the one. You might need to do the whole frame as it’s pretty old.”

There was a man’s rumbling voice in return. “They could all do with replacing. It must get pretty draifty in here.”

“Maybe next time,” she said. “Just the broken one for now.”

“What happened to it?”

“Would you believe the wind broke it?” Missouri asked.

There was a long silence and then the man said, “No, I wouldn’t.”

“Never mind. That’s what happened. Can you fix it?”

“Of course. I just need to get the measurements for the glass and I’ll get you a new one in there by the end of the day.”

Sam surmised she had someone in fixing the window. He supposed he should have expected it as he house was technically hers now. She would want to fix it up. As long as she didn’t think she was going to involve him, he didn’t care. Let her have the window replaced and then leave. It didn’t matter to Sam.

He kept his breaths even and didn’t open his eyes as Missouri and the man spoke, only relaxing slightly when he heard the front door open and close and then a car coming to life. He was lulled into a false sense of security until he heard footfalls in the hall and the door opened.
There was a sigh and then Missouri spoke brightly. “Good morning, Sam. I’ve got you some lunch and a coffee here. Up you get.”

Without opening his eyes Sam said, “I’m not hungry.”

“I think you are. From the looks of the kitchen, you’ve not made yourself anything to eat at all. Come on and eat this then you can clean up.”

“No.”

“Come on, Sam, you can’t stay like this.”

She didn’t understand. This was all he could do. This existence in the dark was all he could handle. To do anything else was to open himself up to the overwhelming truth of his life.

Sam rolled over, away from her and put his arm over his head.

Perhaps the action was enough to tell her he needed her to leave, or perhaps she was reading his mind again; whatever the reason, she set something down on the bedside table and said, “I’ll come back later. Eat it all up,” and then left the room.

Sam buried his face deeper into the pillow and waited for sleep.

xXx

Sam didn’t know how long had passed since Missouri’s last visit, but the food and cold coffee was still on the bedside table when there was a click and his closed eyelids glowed red. He opened his eyes and saw the room was flooded with light from the overhead bulb. He blinked up at it for a moment and then swung his legs around to the edge of the bed and stood. His head swam and he took a moment to get his feet under him before he crossed the room and flicked the switch. The room was cast into darkness again and Sam went back to the bed. He collapsed into it and covered his head with the ratty blankets. If Missouri had the power on again, she had other plans, too, he was sure. His search for peace was surely going to be shattered again soon.

His certainty was proven when he next woke. He could hear music playing and Missouri’s voice singing along to Bob Dylan’s Changing of the Guard. He rolled over and closed his eyes again, trying to block out the noise, but he failed. Missouri became louder, seeming to know she’d succeeded in waking him.

It seemed to him that the more he tried to ignore her, the louder she got, banging around doing Sam didn’t know what. He covered his head and squeezed his eyes shut but each sound was driving through his skull like a nail until he couldn’t take it.

He lurched out of bed and stumbled to the door. He got his feet under him and marched into the living room where the noise was coming from, determined to give her an ultimatum. She would leave or he would.

She was on her knees in the middle of the living room, scrubbing at the floor with a brush. The music was coming from a radio she’d set on the chair. As Sam watched, she dipped the brush into a bucket of soapy water. As she raised it, she looked up at Sam and said. “Ah, you’re up. Come and help me out. This is a big room and it’s going to take a while to get it all clean.”

Sam tried to stamp down the anger he was feeling, but it surged in him. She was acting like nothing was wrong, like Sam hadn’t been dealt the crushing blow of living here. She didn’t seem to care that life as Sam knew it was over for him.
“Leave me alone,” he said growled.

Missouri looked unbothered by his tone or the meaning of the words. She just scrubbed at a particularly stubborn spot and hummed along to the music.

“I mean it, Missouri, leave.”

“No,” she said without looking at him. “I’ve got too much to do still. I’ll go when I’m done. It’d be much faster if you helped me though.”

Sam marched forward and snatched the brush from her hand. He threw it across the room and shouted. “Leave!”

She got to her feet and stared at him, unintimidated by him towering over her. “Mind how you speak to me, Sam Winchester.”

“Go! Leave me alone!” Sam snapped.

He didn’t want this. He couldn’t bear it. He needed to be alone. He wanted to go back to bed and ignore everything else. He wanted to get through this time until he could be with Dean again. That was all he could do to protect himself.

“No,” she said calmly. “This place needs cleaning if you’re going to be staying here.”

She walked away and picked up the brush from where it had fallen.

Sam kicked the bucket hard, sending it toppling over to spill water onto the floor, and making pain jar up his bare foot. “I don’t want this!” he shouted.

“I know. But it’s what you’ve got, so you may as well make the best of it.”

“I don’t want it!” Sam said between his teeth. “I don’t want it! I don’t…”

He broke off as a sob bubbled up his throat. He didn’t want it. He wanted to be home with his family, but he was trapped here with a lifetime stretched between then and now. He couldn’t even see them. He closed his eyes and his shoulders slumped. He wanted to go home. He just wanted to be with Dean again. He couldn’t face a lifetime of this.

“I don’t want this,” he whispered.

A hand settled on his arm and he opened his eyes to see Missouri standing close to him, her face sad. “I know you don’t, honey, and I wish I could make it all better for you, but I can’t. You’re here now.”

Sam’s legs buckled and he fell to his knees, the spilled water soaking into his pants. He bowed his head and began to cry. He couldn’t handle the feelings inside him without letting them free. He felt like he was mourning a death.

Missouri knelt beside him and cupped his face in her hands. “It’s okay, Sam,” she said gently. “It’s all going to be okay.”

“I can’t do this, Missouri,” he said through his sobs.

“You can,” she said. “You’re strong.”

“I need Dean.”
“I know, honey, but you have to wait.”

Sam shook his head, desolate. “I can’t.”

She thumbed away the tears that were falling down his cheeks and soothed him gently. “Think about Dean. What would he say if he was here?”

Dean would say do whatever it took to get home again. Sam had done that though. There were no other options available to him. He was trapped.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Okay, then what would he do if it was him? If he was trapped here like you, would he give up?”

“No,” Sam said. “He would fight.”

Dean was struggling in the present, faced with the apocalypse and what Sam had done, but he hadn’t given up. He was still fighting.

“Then you have to fight, too,” she said. “Fight for him so that, when you do see him again, he can be proud of you.”

Sam sniffed. “He won’t be proud of me. Not after what I did.”

“He would,” she said. “Anyone would. You made mistakes, and they were big, I’m sure, but you’re facing something new now and how you react to it is what matters. You can’t lie in bed from now until 2010. You need to do something, so start now. Make the life that Dean would want you to have.”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know how to do that.”

“I do. Take it in stages. I am here to help you, Sam, and I will be until you get back to your own time. It may take longer than we want, but one day time will match up again and you can be with him.”

“How am I supposed to do that?” Sam asked plaintively. “How do I live all this alone?”

“You won’t be alone,” she said. “I’ll be here, James, too, we’ll help you.”

Sam looked into her eyes and saw the sincerity there. After the way he’d spoken to her, how he’d treated her in his anger, she was going to be there for him. He could see it all stretched out ahead of him, the coming years, and they were frightening, but not so much as the thought of doing it alone.

“You’ll help?” he asked.

“I promise. I’m a part of this now, Sam, and I won’t leave you alone. We’re going to find a way for you to do this. You just have to be strong. You can do that.”

Sam nodded. “I can do it.” He was assuring himself as much as her.

He had lived without Dean before, and that had felt impossible. The choices he had made then had led to the apocalypse. He would not do that again. This time he would be stronger. He would take the comfort of Missouri the way he hadn’t Bobby then and he would carve out a life for himself. He would make Dean proud this time.
Despite having spent days in bed, Sam hadn’t ever felt properly rested, but he felt slightly more energetic when he woke the next morning.

The initial moment of waking and realizing what had happened was difficult, and he had to fight back the oppressive despair by reminding himself that he was strong enough to handle this, that he was doing it as Dean would want him to, and when he climbed out of bed and walked into the bathroom, he felt in control again.

He could do this.

He set the shower to running and held his hand under the warming water, relishing the heat and prospect of cleaning up after days of neglecting himself. He stood in front of the mirror and took in his reflection for the first time properly since he’d been stranded.

He looked terrible.

His eyes were bloodshot, and his scruff of stubble had become almost a beard. He was pale and his hair needed shampooing. The sight wasn’t reassuring, but it could be fixed with time and care.

Missouri had brought him a wash kit full of necessities, and he rooted through it for things to clean up with. There was soap and shampoo, and even more important, a razor with pack of new blades and a can of shaving foam.

He stripped down and stepped into the shower. The hot water felt good as it washed away the sweat and grime, and he just luxuriated in it for a few moments before grabbing the shampoo and lathering it in his hair. He let it rinse as he washed the rest of his body, cleaning away the days spent in bed and leaving him clean and feeling fresher. When he was done and his hair rinsed, he stepped out and wrapped a towel around his waist.

The mirror had fogged, and he wiped a hand over it before picking up the can of shaving foam and squeezing some into his hand. He lathered his face and unpackaged the razor. He took a breath, looked at his raged face in the mirror, and said, “This is going to take a while.”

He ran the blade over his face slowly, focusing on getting the worst of the hair away. It took a long time, and he was still left with thick stubble. He changed blades and started again, taking care not to scrape against the skin. It took three blades and a long time before he was clean-shaven again, and his face felt sensitive. He splashed it with cold water and wished for aftershave.

He brushed his teeth and then walked back into the bedroom and toweled off and dressed in more of Missouri’s husband’s clothes. He had decided the night before to buy more for himself so that Missouri wouldn’t be faced with reminders every time she saw him.

He had a lot to buy, and as he sat on the edge of the bed to lace his boots, he ran over some of it in his mind. He had power now, so the refrigerator and stove worked. He could get some fresh food to eat. Not only would cooking for himself give him something to do, it would make him feel better to eat real food again. He would need things to cook with and eat off of, too, since he’d smashed every breakable item in his rage, the French press included.

Despite Missouri’s efforts the day before, the house was still a mess. He would need to buy some cleaning equipment and products and get to work on it if he was going to be living here. At some point he would need to do something about the paint peeling from the walls, but that could wait a
little longer. He would do it in steps, not rushing himself.

He went into the study and got a pad and pencil then wandered into the kitchen to start making a list of what he’d need. It was a long list, and he began to worry he wasn’t going to have enough money in his stolen wallet for it all. He would need to check the prices before he started shopping.

Money was something else he was going to need to think of. He and Missouri were going to make the stock market work for them, but it wouldn’t be an instant payout. He could sell the Lincoln and buy something cheaper, but that money wouldn’t last forever either. With a sense of unreality, he realized he was going to need to get a job.

He had done bar work before, and that had been easy cash in hand so he wouldn’t need an identity for it, but perhaps that was something he would need to look into for other things. This was a head trip. For all his thoughts of having a normal life when he was younger, he never imagined he would be starting a life in 1978.

xxx

The stores in town were mostly clustered in one area, and Sam saw places to buy most everything he needed. He went into a small convenience store first and bought a newspaper and some gum. He’d lost track of time when he’d been hiding from the world, but he saw now it was early July.

He chewed a stick of gum as he went into the second store on his list—Goodwill. Having spent his life growing up on the road and then time as a scholarship student at Stanford, he had been in plenty thrift stores before. This one was bigger than most he’d visited before, though, and he thought it would probably have most of the stuff he needed.

He took cart from the door and began along the first aisle of clothes. There was certainly a wide variety of shirts, sweaters, vests and undershirts, but he struggled with the fashion choices available. He and Dean tended to stay with simple colors and basic designs, but those were hard to find among the bold prints and unusual colors. Sam knew he was going to have to blend in, but some of these styles were definite noes.

He chuckled as he imagined what Dean would say if he saw him wearing the patterned mustard vest he was looking at now, or worse, the chambray shirt and pants suit that hung beside it.

He found a few plain shirts that would do and put them in the cart. He moved onto pants, skipping past the racks of colors, and found a few pairs of Levi’s. They were a different style than he was used to but not as different as the suit pants he’d worn with their wide flared legs. He lucked out with a pair that would fit his long legs, realizing he was probably going to have to buy new to get the fit he needed otherwise. He needed underwear, too, and he’d spotted a Kmart a little along the street that he’d go to when he was done.

Clothes found, he moved on to other necessities for the house. There were stacks of blankets and other bedding against one wall, and he sorted through them for what he wanted and could afford on the limited budget he’d set himself for this part of his shopping. When he had enough bedding, he went on to homewares. He found a basic set of pots, pans and a tea kettle to replace the battered ones he’d been using which he stowed in the cart and then looked through the dinnerware. He wanted cheap and plain, but it seemed plain wasn’t a theme of the seventies. Eventually he settled on a brown patterned set. He was on his way to the register when he spotted something that made him feel the first wave of actual happiness since he’d realized he really was trapped in 1978—a French press to replace the one he’d smashed.

He rolled his cart to the register and began to pile his shopping on the counter. There was a woman
behind the register that looked to be in her early forties. She smiled at him as she began to ring up the sale. “Just starting out?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “I’ve just moved to the area.”

“Well, it looks like you’re all set.”

Sam nodded. “I think I found everything.”

She looked over his piled purchases and laughed softly. “I should think so.”

Another lady came to the counter and began to bag Sam’s items, wrapping the china in old newspapers to protect it. Sam helped and listened as the woman at the register began to expound on the attractions of the area. She only stopped when Sam handed over the money for his sale, stunned at how little it had cost. He thought it was going to take a while to get used to the difference in monetary value here.

“Would you like help getting your things to your car?” she asked.

Sam shook his head. “No, thank you. I can manage.” He hefted two of the paper sacks into his arms and made for the door. The woman that had bagged for him rushed ahead and opened it for him. He thanked her and went out to load his trunk with what he had brought.

It took a few trips to get it all stowed away, and then he thanked the people that had helped him again and went along the street to the Kmart. Finding underwear was easier than other clothes as boxer shorts were readily available in neutral colors as were socks. He also found another pair of jeans that would fit and he added them to his purchases with some plain undershirts for when the weather turned cooler than the warm Kansas summer days he was living with now.

He paid and carried his bag out to the car and stowed it on the back seat. He needed to head out of town then for the large A&P store he’d passed on the way into town.

The sense of displacement he felt when he pulled into the parking lot of the store was great. There was no fooling himself he was in his own time, as the multitude of dated car designs were out in force. The feeling was enhanced inside the store. The packaging was so different to what he was used to. He tried to look at it as an opportunity to experience something new rather than letting it overwhelm him, and he was mostly successful.

As he passed the magazine rack, he saw a large picture of Warren Beatty on the cover of Time magazine. He realized he knew nothing about the pop culture of the time he was in. He knew little about the time at all apart from the fact Jimmy Carter was president, and he doubted that would come up in conversation. He grabbed the magazine and put in in his cart followed by a National Enquirer and a copy of the New York Times. He would start bulking out his knowledge that way. He thought of how much easier it would be if he had the internet available to him, but he knew the world was still years away from the world wide web and even further away from it being a useful tool to him. He was going to need to learn to live in a world without information readily available at the touch of a button.

He carried on along through the store to the produce section. He loaded up on fresh fruit and vegetables, almost excited at the prospect of making himself a real meal in a way he hadn’t been since college. He added meat from the fridges and then found rice and pasta. He started to enjoy himself as he began to gather seasonings and herbs to cook with, and he was smiling when he pushed his cart toward the household section.
He needed things to clean with, and he found scrubbing brushes, mops and buckets along with brooms and dustpans. He took what he needed then moved along to cleaning products. He had no idea what was good in this time, so he chose from names he recognized.

With everything he needed, he wheeled the cart toward the registers. He had stopped as he passed a candy rack, just taking in some of the names of his childhood, when he saw something that made a lump form in his throat. It was a pack of candy cigarettes. When they were kids, Dean had loved them. He’d liked to pretend they were cigars the like of which his hero Clint Eastwood smoked in his westerns. Sam could still picture him with them now. He picked one up off of the rack and added it to the cart, thinking he could at least show it to Dean when he found him again, even if they would be long past the point of being edible.

The girl at the register gave him a smile but didn’t seem chatty for which Sam was grateful. He was still a little shaken by the jolt of memory of Dean. He paid with the cash in his stolen wallet and then carted his bags out to the car. He still had enough cash to get him by a little longer, and he didn’t think he’d need to do much shopping for a while, but he was going to need to get a job soon. He thought he’d spend some time the next day in town looking for work in one of the bars he’d passed.

When he got back to the house, he propped open the front door and ferried the shopping inside, setting it all in the kitchen to be organized there. The small table and floor was loaded with things, and he started with the groceries first. He moved all the c-rations into a large pantry cupboard and filled the other shelves with the dried goods and the fridge with the fresh.

He couldn’t help but think of the last time he had done this. It had been a few days before Jessica had died, after they’d been on one of their countless runs to the store. Jessica had been perched on the counter, handing him things from the bags to pack away. It stuck out in his memory as one of the last peaceful moments they’d had together.

When the groceries were put away, he unloaded the sacks of housewares he’d gotten from the Goodwill store and found places for them in cupboards and on the counters. The French press was set proudly in place beside the kettle and stove. Something so simple made him smile. Little things like this that he could control felt good.

He carried the sacks of bedding and clothes into the bedroom and set about changing the musty bedclothes for fresh. He tossed the old ones into the sack, thinking he’d be able to find a use for them at some point, even if only for cleaning rags. His new clothes were folded into the dresser and his jacket hung from a peg beside the front door. The place looked a little homier now, somewhere he could imagine himself living.

He went back into the kitchen and set some water to boiling. He wanted to make coffee and stop for a while, but at some point he was going to need to make food in the kitchen, and he didn’t want a side order of bacteria from the filthy countertops. He would dedicate himself to cleaning the kitchen that afternoon, and the next day he could start on the living room.

Sam was sitting outside that evening, having eaten his meal of pasta and meat sauce at the kitchen table alone. It had felt strange to be eating alone, let alone a proper meal he’d made for himself. It had been a good kind of strange though; he was taking care of himself properly.

He was tired from cleaning, but the kitchen and bathroom looked much better now, and he felt like he was making a difference to the house and himself, settling. Little as he wanted to be in this time, he was there now and he was making the best of it. Missouri would be pleased.
He picked up the National Enquirer from the chair beside him and began to educate himself on the culture of his new time. He read about the wedding of a country singer to her fifth husband. The salacious quality of the reporting wasn’t that different to the reporting of his time. He turned the page to another banal report on a pop singer’s new home when he heard a car approaching. He knew only one person that would visit him here, and he rose to his feet with a smile as Missouri’s Pontiac pulled up in front of the house.

She climbed out and beamed at him. “You’re looking better.”

“I’m feeling it,” Sam said. “You want a coffee?”

“I’d love one.”

Sam went into the house and set the kettle to boiling then added ground coffee to the press. Missouri came to stand with him as he waited for the water to boil.

“I saw your magazine,” she said. “You catching up on the gossip?”

“I need to,” Sam said. “I know next to nothing about this time, and if I’m going to pass as normal, I need to know more.”

“Are you thinking of going out into the world?” she asked.

“I have to,” Sam said. “I need to get a job. With the power on there’s going to be bills to pay. I know you’ve taken them over for now, but I need to pay my way. I think I’ll exchange the car for something cheaper, too.”

“You don’t need to worry about bills yet. I have some money stowed away from Richard’s insurance, and I make enough with my readings to get by. I think selling the car is a good idea though—it doesn’t really fit your new image—and getting a job. It would be good for you to start putting down roots and seeing other people. What sort of work are you thinking of?”

“All I’ve got open to me is something like bar work really,” Sam said. “I have done it before, and I can get away without papers for that.” He smiled. “I don’t even had an ID in my time let alone here. Dean and I are wanted—and believed dead—criminals.”

“That sounds exciting. Do I get to hear the story?”

“Maybe one day. It’s less exciting and more inconvenient if I’m being honest though.”

She nodded. “One day. As for work, my neighbor runs the Manpower office in town. I can set you up with a meeting.”

“That’d be great,” Sam said. The kettle boiled and he poured the water into the press. “How many sugars?”

“Two please,” she said. “I find life is better with a little sweetness. And speaking of life, I have something for you.” She rooted in the purse over her shoulder and pulled out a brown envelope which she handed to him. “When that angel said you were here for the duration, I arranged these for you.”

Sam tipped the envelope into his hand and saw a small card and sheet of white paper with a deep blue border. It was a birth certificate. Sam examined the name—Sam Taylor, born 1951. The other was a social security card with the same name.”
“Is the name okay?” she asked. “I asked my man to make it something generic. And is the age right?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “How did you do this?”

“There’s a man that makes IDs for hunters, and I asked him to arrange this. I had you born in Texas, as Lawrence would be a little difficult for people that have lived here a long time. There’s a drivers’ license in there, too.”

“Missouri… this is great,” Sam said.

“I figured you’d need them. It will make it much easier on you if you can have a bank account.”

“I haven’t had a bank account in years,” Sam said. “Not since college.”

“Then this will be a new experience for you,” she said with a smile.

Sam laughed. “I think life is going to be pretty much all new experiences for me from now on.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Thanks, Missouri,” he said. “I really appreciate everything you’re doing for me.”

“I know you do. And I appreciate what you’re doing too. You’ve brought all kinds of excitement into my life, and I am sure there will be more, too.”

“We better hope not. My sort of excitement isn’t the kind you’d want.”

“We’ll see,” she said.

Sam pressed down the plunger and poured two cups of coffee for them.

He handed Missouri hers and she raised it in a toast. “It’s not champagne but perhaps we should save that for our first big payout on the stock market.”

“What are we celebrating?” Sam asked.

“You,” she said. “We’re celebrating how far you’ve come and how far you’re going to go. Here’s to new beginnings.”

Sam raised his cup. “New beginnings.”

It wasn’t what he wanted, this beginning, but it was what he had, and he was going to make the most of it.

xXx

The bald-headed man wore a shirt that was buttoned low enough to reveal an explosion of black chest hair. Sam sat across from him on a plastic chair in the small office that smelled overpoweringly of stale cigarette smoke. Even as he looked over Sam’s filled out forms, he lit another cigarette and blew smoke at Sam.

“So you have no real trade skills,” he said.

Sam shook his head. “No, sir.”
He had plenty of skills: he could exorcise a demon with Latin from memory, dig up a grave in under an hour, and shoot a werewolf straight through the heart at a hundred meters. They wouldn’t improve his job prospects, though, so he kept silent about them.

“But you’ve done bar work,” the man said.

Sam nodded.

“I have no bar jobs. They normally advertise privately. Why don’t you ask around for something?”

“I’d rather be doing something physical,” Sam said. “I’m strong, and I’m a fast learner. I’ll work hard.”

The man nodded. “You look strong enough. Okay. I have something for you. There’s a construction firm development in Midland that’s looking for laborers. The work is tough and the hours long this time of year, but if you’re such a hard worker, that won’t be a problem, will it?”

“No problem at all,” Sam said.

The man scrawled on a piece of paper and handed it to Sam. It was an address and name of someone called Brad Gardner.

“That’s the site address and foreman’s name,” he said. “You need to be there tomorrow morning at six. I’ll tell him you’re coming. Work hard and prove yourself, and we’ll take care of you. Slack off and I’ll make sure you take no work through us again.”

“Thank you,” Sam said, tucking the paper into his pocket and standing with his hand extended. The man stayed seated but he conceded to reach across and shake Sam’s hand.

Sam turned and walked out of the office and into the thankfully fresh air.

The man hadn’t been the most friendly of people, despite Missouri’s introduction, but he’d found Sam a job, and that was all he’d needed from him. Sam would start work the next morning, and he’d make sure to prove himself as a hard worker.

With that job done, he drove across town to the car lot he’d seen on his way to Manpower. He’d decided it was best to sell the Lincoln and to buy something different to get around in with the profits. It would be good to have some more cash behind him, and it would be less conspicuous for a day laborer to be in something cheaper than the Lincoln.

There was a bright sign over the sale’s office declaring the place as Rainbow Motors, and Sam pulled up at the side. A middle-aged man came out of the office and walked over to him as he climbed out. He gave the car an appraising look and seemed pleased with what he saw. It was a little flashier than most of the cars on the lot, but Sam thought it would still sell.

“Evan Peters,” the man said loudly as he reached Sam and held out a hand. “How can I help you?”

Sam shook his hand. “I’m looking to replace this with something different.”

“It’s a beautiful car,” he said. “Why would you want to change?”

“I inherited this from my father,” Sam lied. “But it’s not really my style. I need something a little…”

“Easier on the ladies’ eyes?” He chuckled. “I understand, son. Let’s see. Mind if I take a look
“Not at all,” Sam said. He popped the hood and stood back as Evan Peters appraised the engine.

“Well it looks fine to me,” he said. “I can do you a good deal. Do you have any idea what you’re looking for?”

Sam glanced around the lot. “I’m not sure. You mind if I look around?”

“Sure thing, son. See what we have on offer and let me know if you need any help.”

Sam thanked him and walked away to the front of the lot. There was a wealth of cars on offer, but none that he thought fit his new persona as Sam Taylor the day laborer.

He was just thinking he was going to have to look elsewhere when he spotted a jewel. It was written up as a 1970 Mach 1 Mustang. Sam knew very little about mechanics but he knew what made a beautiful car, and this was it. It was electric blue with a black racing stripe. Dean would probably have turned his nose up at it compared to the Impala, but Sam knew it was perfect for him. It was also old enough in this time that it was a good fit for his new identity.

He ran a hand over the hood and gestured to Evan Peters where he stood by the sales office.

If he could make this deal, he would be almost set. He’d have a car, a job, and a place to live. He just needed to get a bank account and he would be fixed up in 1978, ready to start his new life.
The sun was beating down, and Sam was hot. He’d shed his shirt and sweat was trickling down his bare back. His hard hat made his hair stick to his head uncomfortably and he was thinking longingly of the shower back at his house, how good it would feel to step under a cold spray.

He was on the roof prepping the shingles to be laid while his workmates followed him and nailed them in place. There was no shade up there, and he wished he was back working on the ground again. It was supposed to be a step up to work on something like this, a job he’d earned by proving himself with other more menial tasks for the past month, but he would happily go back to grunt work if he was a little cooler.

“Hey, Taylor!” a voice called from below.

Sam slid down the roof frame and stood to peer over the scaffolding at his foreman Brad. “Yeah.”

“It’s time to take a break. You fellas want a drink?”

Sam didn’t bother to check with the Ray and Carl, the men he was working with. They had been complaining about the heat and the sweat was dripping down them, too. “Yeah. Please.”

Brad loaded three cans of coke into the bucket hanging from a rope and pulley, calling, “Take it up.”

Sam pulled on the rope, slowly lifting the bucket to him. There was no point in them going down to have their break as it was only a short one midday. They would wait until the day had cooled a little before taking their lunch.

When the bucket reached him, he lifted out the cans and gave a thumbs up over the rail.

“Break time, guys,” he called to the men he was teamed with.

Ray and Carl slid down to the plank flooring of the scaffolding and perched on the side of the roof. Sam handed them their drinks and sat down beside them.

“Thanks, Sam,” Carl said gratefully and Ray nodded as they popped their cans open.

Sam took a swig of his own drink and sighed as the cold coke relieved his dry throat.

Ray looked around at the half completed roof and said, “We’re doing good work. Not much longer and we’ll be back on dry land, Carl.”

Carl nodded. “Can’t come soon enough.”

Sam chuckled. “You hate working up here, but you’re a roofer.”

“I go where the money is,” Carl replied. “We can’t all be footloose like you. I have a family to support.”

Ray laughed. “Poor you. Having a pretty wife and hot meal waiting for you every night when you get home must be such a trial.”

“It wouldn’t be if she could cook worth a damn,” he countered. “I go home to something resembling charcoal most nights. Even the dog eats better than me, and he gets kibble. I’d have
been better off sticking with a girlfriend like you, Ray. You and Cindy have all the good parts without the commitment of a wedding band.”

They laughed. For all his complaints, everyone knew Carl adored his wife and two children.

In the weeks Sam had been working on the site, he’d gotten to know his workmates, and he knew they were good men with simple but interesting lives. He’d not had relationships like this since Stanford, and he liked it. There was no air of tension and underlying danger with them all the time the way there usually was with hunters. They were mostly happy with their lot and not always waiting for the next disaster and danger to present itself. They were good people to work with. The only sticky moment had been when they asked if he’d served. They had both fought in Vietnam and he was sure that saying he’d been a contentious objector would have brought trouble down on him. He openly admired that they’d served and said his number was never called.

“She is pretty though,” Carl conceded.

“Speaking of,” Ray said. “Sam, settle an argument for us. Rizzo or Sandy? I think Rizzo is the real looker, but Carl here is going for the innocent look.”

Carl laughed. “You think Sam had seen Grease? He’s single. There’s no wife or girlfriend dragging him along to chick movies.”

The truth was Sam had seen Grease more times that he cared to admit. It had been one of Jessica’s top choices when they’d had a movie night. He knew he shouldn’t have seen it though, as it didn’t fit the persona he was living right now, so he frowned and said, “That’s the new Travolta film, right?”

“Yeah,” Ray said. “But there’s this brunette in it and… damn, she’s foxy.”

“She’s pretty enough, but you can’t beat Sandy in that leather get up at the end.”

“So that’s what it is,” Ray said. “I thought you were in for the ribbons and bobby socks. Okay. We’ll call it a tie. Good girl gone bad matches up with the original bad girl.”

“Agreed,” Carl said.

They shook hands as if making a binding agreement, and Sam laughed again.

Carl took a swig of his drink and said, “So, Sam, since you’ve not been blessed with the attractions of the Grease ladies, who are you looking for?”

“Who says I’m looking for someone?” Sam asked.

“Every man that isn’t already tied down is,” he said, and Ray nodded his agreement. “So what are you looking for in a woman?”

Sam hesitated. He could have listed off a dozen things he was looking for in a woman, and they would all have described Jessica, but these weren’t the kind of men he would open up to about her. “I don’t know. I guess I’ll know it when I see it.”

“That’s sweet, man, but seriously, who do you like?”

Sam grappled for someone of the era he could say, but his mind was blank. He thought suddenly of James and his Skywalker action figure. Star Wars was an acceptable movie for a single man to see. “Carrie Fisher,” he said quickly.
“Princess Leia,” Ray said appreciatively. “That’s a good choice. You are human after all.”

Sam frowned. “Was that in question?”

“The way you are, yeah,” Carl said. “We’ve all noticed it. You dedicate yourself to what you’re doing, sure, but it’s like you’re working out a math problem while you’re doing it. The office girls think you’re getting over a bad breakup—and they’re more than willing to help you get over it in case you didn’t notice—but some of us have other theories.”

“Like?” Though he knew they could have no idea of the truth, he wondered what they’d come up with to explain the behavior he wasn’t even aware of.

“You did lose someone,” Ray said. “And it’s somehow connected to cars. Every time a Chevy Impala goes by, your head snaps up. It’s got to have something to do with that.”

He was surprised they’d noticed; he thought he’d hidden it better than that. The truth was Impalas had a distinctive sounding engine, and when he heard one, he always felt a swell of something in his gut. He knew it could never be Dean, but it could be John. Hearing the sound of his rolling home and imagining his father or brother behind the wheel caught his attention every time.

“It’s just a memory,” he said. “I knew someone that owned one, and it’s a kind of reminder.”

“The person you lost?” Carl asked.

Sam shook his head. “I haven’t lost them the way you’re thinking. They’re still out there. I just can’t see them yet.” He looked along the roof at the neatly stacked shingles waiting for him. “I better get back to work.”

“Sure,” Carl said. “We probably all should.”

Ray looked apologetic, as if he knew he’d pushed Sam too hard, but Sam didn’t mind really. They didn’t know the truth because they couldn’t. They could never understand that Sam hadn’t lost someone. It was he himself that had been lost.

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“James,” Missouri said, setting down her fork.

“Yes, Momma,” he said innocently.

“Why don’t you try eating your broccoli instead of hiding it under your potatoes? You’re going to need to clear your plate now anyway, so you might as well get it over with.”

James’ face fell, knowing he was busted. “Yes, Momma.” He unearthed his broccoli and began eating it unenthusiastically.

Sam swallowed a laugh. He loved the fact that, no matter how many times she proved she was all knowing, James still tried to get one over on his mom. It was such a great, normal relationship, and he’d never really experienced it before, even as a bystander.

He’d not had a mom growing up, and John and Dean had never enforced rules about vegetables. He wondered if that was why he had become the ‘weird kid’ that had demanded vegetables when they ate anywhere but at a fast food place. He’d see on TV that it was supposed to be like that, and he wanted that normality for himself. He hadn’t had it then, but he could watch it now with Missouri and James when he visited.
Sundays were always spent with them. He would arrive late morning and hang with them, keeping Missouri company while she cooked lunch, and then after they’d eaten, he and James would clean up. The arrangement suited them all. James had help with the dishes and Missouri could keep an eye on Sam and see how he was dealing with his situation.

The truth was that Sam was dealing with it better than he’d expected. When he resigned himself to the fact he was here for good and that no amount of angsty and raging was going to get him home, he saw that it wasn’t that bad. He was experiencing a different kind of life, the kind of life he’d once wanted. There was no apocalypse looming over him. He was able to live normally.

The six weeks since Chronos had been killed were as peaceful as he’d felt since Jessica was killed. The only thing that really hurt him now was Dean’s absence. The idea that he was going to need to spend three decades without him seemed too much to take in. He couldn’t wrap his mind around it, so he quit trying. He just fixed the fact in his mind that he would see him eventually and clung to it when it got tough. And it did get tough. He missed people and things from his time, and he felt his losses. He held onto the good and tried to let go of the bad though.

Sam finished the last of his chicken pot pie and set his knife and fork down on the plate. “That was great, Missouri, thanks,” he said.

“It was okay,” Missouri replied. “The pastry needed more butter though.”

Sam smiled, knowing it was no good arguing with her. Missouri did this with every meal she made—critiqued herself. It wasn’t her looking for compliments; it was just that Missouri was always upfront and honest, even with herself. It was refreshing for Sam who lived a life that ignored even the biggest of issues a lot of the time.

“I like it,” James said, spearing another piece of hated broccoli and sighing, which stole the conviction from his words.

Sam chuckled at him and he grinned.

His relationship with James was another positive of his new life. He had opened up to Sam over the last six weeks. Missouri said he was missing an adult male figure in his life since Richard had died, but Sam thought it was more than that. There was a lot of his mother’s energy in him, and she was a special woman. He was a good kid with a kind nature.

“Momma, can I ask him now?” James asked when he’d finally pushed his empty plate away.

Sam looked at him, curiously. “Ask me what?”

“Momma?” James prompted.

“I don’t see why not,” Missouri said.

James beamed at her and then turned to Sam. “Can I help you paint, Sam?”

Sam frowned. “That depends. What am I painting?”

“Your house,” James said. “Momma said it needs it, and I was thinking we could do it together. I’ve never done it before, and my friend Peter painted his bedroom and he said it was lots of fun.” He fixed his wide eyes on Sam. “Please…” He drew the word out pleadingly.

Sam looked at Missouri. “I’m decorating?”
“You can’t deny it needs it,” Missouri said. “And you need more furniture than you have now. The living room is spartan and it can’t be comfortable to spend time there.”

Sam didn’t really spend time in the living room because it was so bare. He had made the study comfortable and that was where he spent most of his time when he was home. He’d stacked the books on shelves and he’d moved the old chair from the living room into there so he could sit comfortably and read in the evenings while listening to the radio Missouri had left behind for him.

“I don’t really have money for furniture,” Sam said.

He had the money he’d got from selling the Lincoln but he didn’t want to use that until he had to. The site job they were on now was winding down and he couldn’t guarantee he’d get more work straight away. He needed money to pay Missouri rent for the house to cover her power bills and to buy food and gas.

Seeing James’ crestfallen expression he said, “We can paint though. It does need it.”

“And I can help?” James asked hopefully.

Sam nodded. “You can be our foreman.”

“What’s a foreman?”

“The boss,” Sam said. “You’ll be the one in charge.”

“And I can paint, too?”

“You can paint as much as you like. It’ll be up to you to decide who does what.”

James beamed. “Yeah. I’ll be foreman.”

Missouri smiled at him and then turned to Sam. “You don’t need to spend a lot on furniture. I was thinking we could have a look around the yard sales. There’s always good stuff to be found if you look, and I’m an excellent haggler.”

“I’d like that,” Sam said. It would be nice to make the house a little more homey, and it would be fun to decorate together. He hadn’t done it since he and his friends had painted the apartment in Palo Alto. “I get to choose the colors though,” he said.

“Sure,” James said. “You can do that. What color do you like?”

“Yes,” Missouri said interestedly. “What colors are popular back home?”

Sam bit his lip, trying to find a way to explain the vast difference in interior design in 2010 compared to now. “It’s more neutral colors,” Sam said. “I don’t think I’ve seen orange wallpaper since the days of my motel room childhood.”

“Mom loves orange,” James said.

“I’ve noticed,” Sam said with a smile.

Missouri threw her napkin at him and Sam caught it before it hit his face.

“It’s the height of style!” she said.

“I know. We’re just a lot less exciting where I’m from,” Sam said apologetically.
James nodded wisely. “You must be.”

Missouri winked at Sam. “Sounds boring to me, but sure, we’ll decorate your home something nice and bland.”

“It doesn’t need to be bland,” Sam said. He was just hoping for something a little less migraine inducing.

“Blue is good,” James said.

Sam knew he was proud of his bright blue bedroom and figured blue would be fine if he could tone down the shade a little. “Blue sounds great. I’ll go to the store after work one day this week and see what I can find.”

“Can I come?” James asked excitedly.

“Sure. I’ll pick you up after I get off work Friday and we can spend the weekend working on the house. Then we can go around the yard sales when it’s done.”

“That’s organized then,” Missouri said happily. “Now, who wants dessert? It’s pavlova.”

“I do! I do!” James said.

Sam nodded and got to his feet to gather the empty plates and Missouri went to the fridge and pulled out the magnificent dessert. Sam smiled to himself. He was looking forward to working on the house a little, making it more of a home. It was another step in settling down, and that didn’t feel like a bad thing anymore.

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Sam and James were side by side at the sink. Sam was washing the dishes and James was drying them and stacking them on the counter to be put away.

James seemed excited. He had chattered happily about the prospect of decorating Sam’s house and what they’d need to buy from the store for it, and how he was going to make it look ‘so good’ when they were done.

Sam was content to listen to him talking. James seemed to fill the room with his excitement, and it buoyed Sam up. He’d never had a relationship like this before. James was like a kid brother that he wanted to see safe and happy. He wondered if that was how Dean had felt about him growing up.

James took a deep breath and switched topics from how they weren’t going to need a ladder for the ceiling as Sam was so tall to telling Sam about his surfing lessons in Miami.

“I had to practice soooo much on the beach,” he said with a long-suffering sigh. “They make you get up and down and paddle on the sand for ages before they let you in the water.”

“I think I’d need to practice,” Sam said. “Surfing seems hard.”

“Have you done it?” James asked.

“No,” Sam said. “I think I’d be a danger to others on a surfboard.”

James laughed. “Poppa won’t surf either. He says he’s too old, but I think it’s just because Grams won’t let him try. She says he hurts himself enough on dry land without adding a surfboard to the mix. She didn’t really want me to do it either, but Poppa persuaded her. I had to have proper
“You liked it?” Sam guessed.

“I loved it,” he said enthusiastically. “It was scary at first, but I was brave and then it wasn’t so scary anymore. You go really fast and it’s like flying with your feet on the ground. It’s the fastest I’ve ever gone, even faster than my bike.”

“Sounds fun,” Sam said.

“You should try it again. Have lessons and do it properly. You’ll love it.”

“I might have trouble finding good waves in Kansas,” Sam joked.

“I don’t mean here,” James said, rolling his eyes. “Go somewhere special like I did. You can come with me to Florida next time.”

“I don’t know about that,” Sam said carefully.

“Why not?” James asked.

Sam couldn’t go to Florida and introduce himself to Missouri’s in-laws without them thinking there was more to their relationship than simple friendship. That’s all there would ever be, but they had no way of knowing that. It would be too much for them to think that Missouri had replaced their son.

“I think I’d like California better,” Sam said.

“Then go there,” James said. “I bet they have good waves, too.”

Sam considered his words. His automatic reaction was to say he couldn’t, that there were more important things to do, but that wasn’t true. There was no great battle looming over him for another three decades. He had time to do these things. He had a chance to have what he had wanted so much when he was younger: a normal life. He could learn to surf; he could read the books he’d always wanted to have time to read; he could make friends that weren’t just hunters; he could really live this life. It was better than being given a second chance, because he knew what was coming. He could really make something of this. Perhaps the time that he was going to spend without Dean would be worth something.

“I think you’re right, James,” he said, ruffling his hair. “I could learn.”

James pulled away and ran a hand over his hair to smooth it. “Neat. Then we can go surfing together.”

“What are you boys plotting?” Missouri asked from the doorway.

“We’re going surfing,” James said happily.

“You are? I thought we were going to be decorating next.”

“Not yet,” James said with a laugh. “Sam’s got to learn how first. He doesn’t know how. He’s dangerous.” He said it in a confiding tone, as if that would lessen Sam’s embarrassment.

Missouri laughed. “Then he better take lots of lessons before he goes with you. We don’t want him knocking out some poor swimmer because he can’t hold onto his board.”
“Yep.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “I’m right here, guys, and I’m not knocking anyone out.”

“Not if you have lessons,” James said guilelessly.

Missouri chucked. “Listen to the boy, Sam. He’s wise.”

“He is,” Sam agreed.

James grinned and picked up a dish to dry.

“Why don’t you go play a while, James” Missouri said. “I want to talk to Sam.”

“What about?” James asked.

“Grown up stuff,” Missouri said. “Very boring.”

James nodded, looking pleased at the reprieve. He handed Missouri the dish towel and allowed her to press a kiss to his hair as he passed her.

Sam listened to him going up the stairs before he turned his attention to Missouri and asked, “What do we need to talk about?”

“Hunting,” Missouri said. “I’ve heard about one that I need to take.”

Sam’s breath caught in his chest. She was hunting? She’d said she’d stopped when James was born. Why would she suddenly pick it up again now?

“Why?” he asked.

“It’s a vampire.”

Sam understood her desire to end one of the kind of creatures that had stolen her husband, but this was a huge step to take. She was risking everything, her life, her son’s last remaining parent, to kill a monster.

“What about James?” he asked.

“He’ll come with me. He can stay in a motel while I actually do the hunting.”

Sam shook his head, horrified. He remembered his own childhood, the endless motels and confusion of his father’s absence, which turned to fear when he’d come home exhausted and injured. Worse, the terror he’d felt when he’d learned the truth of what John was doing, how scared he’d been every time John left him and Dean behind so he could kill something. The relief of his safe return only lasting a matter of days, sometimes less, before John went off again.

“You can’t do that, Missouri,” he said. “It’s not fair to him. He’ll be scared.”

“I won’t tell him what I’m doing. He’ll be fine.”

“He won’t,” Sam said. “He won’t understand why you’re leaving him behind. And what if something happens to you? Who will take care of him then?”

Missouri’s lips pressed into a thin line as the truth of Sam’s words sank in. “There are people…”
“Not his mother though,” Sam interrupted. “You can’t do it to him. He’s too young. He should be here with you, doing homework and playing with his toys, not sitting in a motel waiting for you to come home.”

“It’s a vampire, Sam. People are dying.”

“Please, Missouri, don’t drag him into that life. I have lived it, and it’s not fair. Dean lived it even longer. He was so young when he found out the truth, younger than I was, and it changed him. James is such a good kid; he’s an innocent. He doesn’t deserve this.”

Missouri sighed and raked a hand over her face. “I love my son, you know I do, but other people’s children are in danger.”

“Let someone else take care of it,” Sam said. “Let me!” He hadn’t considered hunting in this time, but now he saw it was the natural choice. He could protect both Missouri and James from this, and the nameless, faceless people that the vampire could target.

“You don’t want that,” Missouri said sadly.

“I do! I should have done it sooner. I just didn’t think. I have all this knowledge and experience; I can’t let it go to waste, letting people die.”

“What about your job? I know you’re enjoying it.”

“I’ll take a few days off. I’m not talking about hitting the road again or doing this full time, but I can help people still. Let me do this for you.”

Missouri stared into his eyes. Sam was sure she was reading his mind, searching for hesitation. She wouldn’t find any. He would take this hunt from her, protecting James from his childhood ending the same way as his and Missouri from harm. It was the only way that made sense.

“Okay,” she said eventually. “You take it.”

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. “Can I use your phone? I need to call Brad and tell him I won’t be able to work.”

“Of course,” she said. “Make your call and then I’ll fill you in on the details I have.”

“Thanks,” Sam said, wiping his wet hands and going into the hall to get Brad’s number from his jacket pocket.

“No, thank you, Sam,” she said. “I appreciate you doing this for us.”

“It about time I did something to pay you back,” Sam said.

He did want to return some of the favors she had given him, and he wanted to protect James and Missouri from this, but there was another, smaller part of him that was feeling the worry of the approaching hunt.

He had a feeling hunting in 1978 was going to be more complicated that he was used to.
Sam left home around dawn and made it to the Nebraska town Missouri had said the hunt was located in by late morning.

The drive had given him time to think about how he was going to handle the hunt, and he wasn’t feeling confident. There was no Internet to help him with the research, and he couldn’t access the police records. He couldn’t even pass as a fed as he had no suit or badge. He was going back to basics for the case, and it was equal parts daunting and interesting. He was going to come at it from a completely civilian angle, something he hadn’t done in a long time.

He found a motel on the edge of town and went into the office to check in. The woman behind the desk was much younger than Sam and she was clearly not loving her job. She slapped down her magazine with a scowl when he entered, her expression only brightening slightly when she caught sight of him and his smile.

“How can I help you?”

“Hi,” Sam said. “I’m looking for a room, a king, probably for two nights.”

He hoped he would have the hunt cleared up before he’d need to come back and pay for longer, as he needed to get back to the site. The work he wasn’t there to do would have to be absorbed by Ray and Carl, and that wasn’t fair on them. He’d never had these concerns before, but he liked them in a way. It gave him a sense of belonging.

“Sure thing. Let me see…” She picked up a heavy book and ran her finger down the columns. “Here. Twelve is free, and that’s a nice room.”

“Great. How much will that be?” Sam took his wallet from his pocket and opened it. He still felt the surreal quality to paying for things with real money he’d earned rather than with stolen cash and credit cards. With the profits of selling the Lincoln and his wages, he was doing well financially, even with the costs of running a house coming out of it.

“$36 even,” she said.

Sam counted out the bills including a tip for her and handed it over. She looked startled by his generosity and beamed as she thanked him.

Sam filled out the register and signed it then took his key and left, her genuine gratitude following him.

He took his bag from the car then walked along the row of rooms to his and unlocked the door.

When she said it was nice, Sam thought she must have meant clean, as there was nothing else to endear it. The walls were a stark green and the bedding was yellow. There was no TV and no coffee maker. It didn’t matter particularly, but these were things Sam was used to from his life on the road, and the difference was glaring. He checked the bathroom and saw it was basic with a tub with shower attachment and a toilet close enough that he was going to bump his knees on the side of the tub using it.

In his duffel were enough clothes to last him a few days and beneath that the weapons he would need for the hunt. He had only brought what he would need. His time of traveling with the full trunk of the Impala was over. He had no access to dead man’s blood, unless he could break into a
morgue, so he thought he was going to be relying on speed for the kill rather than overpowering it. Seeing as he seemed to be basically invincible, he thought he would be able to handle it.

He emptied the clothes onto the bed and tied the fastenings of the duffel again. He would keep the weapons with him in the car where he could access them easier.

Before he’d left Missouri’s the day before, they’d come up with a story to cover his questioning. He hadn’t thought it would work, but Missouri said people were trusting, and that, coupled with his ‘winning smile,’ would get him through. All he had to do now was find the right people to test his story on.

He picked up the duffel and left the room again, clicking the door closed behind him and walking back along to the office. There was a man ahead of him checking out, and Sam waited for him to finish before approaching the desk and explaining his query to the clerk. “I’m looking for a library,” he said.

“Oh, sure. It’s on South Street. Go out of the lot and take a left. Drive down to the diner and then take a right. The library is halfway down the street. It’s a red brick place. Mr. Downey runs it. He’s real nice.”

“Thank you,” Sam said. “Is the diner good?”

“Yeah, real good. Me and my friends go there all the time for their burgers.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Sam said, knowing full well he wasn’t going to be indulging in Dean’s favorite snack.

He thanked her again and left the office, going to the car and stowing the duffel in the trunk. He was pretty sure he wasn’t going to need it for a while if the vampires were following lore and avoiding the painful sunlight.

Getting in behind the wheel, he brought the engine to life and smiled at the powerful roar. He wasn’t as attached to his car as Dean was to the Impala, but he did love it. There was a thrill to driving it that Sam hadn’t really felt before. This was his car in a way he’d never had before. The Impala had always been John’s and then Dean’s. Sam hadn’t even had a car when he was at Stanford as he could get most places on foot and when he couldn’t, he borrowed one from a friend or Jessica. The Mustang was his alone.

He drove out of the lot and followed the directions he had been given. The library was a small place, which Sam figured he should have expected given the size of the town. He entered through the double doors and went straight to the counter where a middle-aged man was checking out books for a college age kid. When he was done, Sam stepped up and smiled at the man.

“How may I help you?” he asked.

“I was hoping I could get a look at the local papers from the past week,” Sam said. “Do you have them?”

The man pressed his lips together. “I know we’ll have today’s on the shelf, but I’m not sure about old ones. Let me show you where today’s is and then I’ll take a look in the back. Sometimes the old ones are left in the staff lounge.”

“Thank you,” Sam said.

He followed the man to a corner of the large space where there was a display shelf of newspapers
and magazines flanked by comfortable looking chairs and small tables. Sam took the local newspaper from the shelf and sat down on one of the chairs while the man left him after assurances he would be right back.

The headline was a story about how the sheriff had apprehended two youths for the crime of breaking down a fence in hopes of going cow tipping. Sam had to laugh at that, remembering the time Dean had tried to persuade him to do it when they were staying in farm country in their teens. Sam had resisted, pointing out the absolute stupidity of the impossible task. Dean had eventually given up on the idea, thankfully.

None of the early pages of the newspaper mentioned the deaths either, which Sam found strange as Missouri said the last had only happened a few days ago. He wondered if the people of this town and time preferred light news stories to the ghoulish nature of the articles Sam was used to in his time.

The librarian came back with a handful of newspapers for him. “They were in the staff lounge,” he explained. “I’ve got the past seven days here. I think the older ones will already be in the trash.”

“This will be fine,” Sam said, taking them from him. “Thanks for finding them for me.”

“It’s no trouble. I have to wonder what you’re looking for in our news though. You’re not local are you?”

“No, I’m looking for someone and I thought maybe the newspapers would have some clue for me.”

He looked like he wanted to ask more, but there was the tinkle of a bell and they both turned to see a woman with a child sitting on her hip at the counter with a stack of children’s books.

“Excuse me,” he said, hurrying away.

Sam set the papers down on the table beside him and started with the oldest. There was no mention of the attacks on the front page, but he found a small article on the second page that said the police were still investigating the deaths.

Sam skimmed the front pages of the other newspapers, hitting the jackpot on the third. It was a headline declaring the discovery of another victim named Shirley Brookes. She had been found on the outskirts of town, and though the details were vague, the injuries were conducive to a wild animal attack. Advice was given for how to report animal sightings and the best methods of avoiding confrontation. References were made to the previous attacks, and Sam made note of the names.

Thinking he had what he needed for now, Sam stood and piled the newspapers neatly on the table then made his way to the counter where the librarian was still checking out a pile of books. He waved a hand in farewell and then left.

xXx

The diner was close enough to walk to, so when he left the library, Sam backtracked along the street and pushed open the door. It was a nice place that seemed to have stuck with a 1950s theme. Plastic booths lined the walls and there were tables filling the rest of the space. It wasn’t that busy, despite the fact it was lunchtime, and Sam had his pick of places to sit. He chose to take a stool at the counter though, hoping to engage someone there in conversation so he could attempt to gain some new knowledge of what was happening in the town.
He read the menu while he waited to be served, deciding what he wanted, until a woman came to
him wearing a pale green uniform and white apron. “What can I get you?” she asked.

“I’ll take a coffee and the chicken salad, please.”

“Sure thing.” She set down a cup and saucer and poured coffee from a pot then passed his order
through a hatch to the kitchen.

As Sam sipped his coffee, he felt her eyes on him. She was much older than him, so he didn’t think
it was attraction that was earning her scrutiny, and he hoped for curiosity as it might give him an
opening to ask his questions.

“Are you new to town?” she asked. “Place this small, I thought I knew everyone.”

“I’m just visiting,” Sam said.

“We don’t get many visitors,” she said. “Most people just stop here on the way to the city.”

Pleased by the direction of the conversation, Sam began to introduce his story. “I’m looking for
someone actually. My brother is missing, and the last postcard I got from him had a local
postmark. I was hoping I would find someone that has seen him.”

He took the small snapshot of Dean from his wallet and held it out to her. She took it and examined
it carefully.

“I’ve not seen him,” she said apologetically.

Sam sighed heavily. “Thanks for looking. Our parents are so worried.”

She clucked her tongue sympathetically. “What happened?”

“He fell into a bad crowd,” Sam said heavily. “They moved through our town and he disappeared
with them. They said they ‘lived free’, and they were known for partying when they were there.
They found an abandoned place to hole up and they only really appeared at night. They were
tearing it up in bars in the evenings, and partying till the early hours. Have you seen anyone like
that?”

She was about to answer when a voice called through the service hatch, “Order up!” She excused
herself and collected Sam’s salad and brought it to him.

Sam thanked her and waited to see if she’d answer. When she didn’t, he prompted, “Have you seen
anything?”

“Maybe,” she said carefully. “I haven’t seen them, but my husband mentioned something like that
a little while ago. There were some new men and women in Harry’s Bar when he was there one
evening, and they made an impression. They stood out as they were strangers, too, and… well,
because it was the last time she was seen.”

“She?” Sam asked interestedly.

“Mary Beth,” she said solemnly.

Sam remembered that one of the animal attack victims had been called Mary Beth Parker.

“The last time she was seen? Is she missing, too?” he asked.
“She died. There’s been some kind of wild animal attacking people lately. My husband says it’s got to be a coyote the way they’re being killed.”

“How are they being killed?” Sam asked.

She hesitated. “I shouldn’t say. I only know because Hank’s the deputy here.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” Sam said. “I don’t know anyone to tell.”

Seeming reassured she said, “It’s the necks. They’re going for the throat, leaving them to bleed out.”

Sam formed his features into a horrified expression. “That’s terrible. And your friend was killed?”

She bit her lip. “We weren’t really friends. I know you shouldn’t speak ill of the dead, but Mary Beth wasn’t a good girl. Hank said he saw her playing cute with one of the men that was causing trouble in the bar that night. When he left, she was all over him. And she comes from a good family…” She shook her head. “But she still shouldn’t have met her end like that. No one should. Hank and some of the others have been out looking for this coyote with the rangers, and we’re all being told to be careful. I won’t walk home alone anymore.”

“It’s better to be safer than sorry,” Sam said wisely.

“That’s what Hank says. He takes good care of me.”

“I’m glad,” Sam said, turning over what she had said in his mind.

“I hope someone’s taking care of your brother, too.”

“Me too,” Sam said. “He’s tough though. He made a bad choice, taking off, but he’s smart.”

“He’ll be fine,” she said bracingly. “You’ll find him, I’m sure.”

The door opened and a couple came into the diner, hand in hand.

She excused herself and Sam picked up his fork to start on his salad. He was hungry, as he hadn’t eaten since an early breakfast. He wanted a moment to think on what he’d heard, too. If there was a nest of four, it was going to be harder to take them down. He wasn’t in physical danger, but some could escape and put others in danger. He was going to need to be smart in how he handled it. If there was a way to separate them, he would have a better chance at getting them all.

He thought he would start his search in Harry’s Bar and see what he could see. He might get lucky. It was about time luck graced him after all.

xXx

Though Sam didn’t have a suit to pack, he’d brought his most ‘fashionable’ clothes in reserve, and he wore them that evening. The shirt was form fitting and the pants were definitely more flared than he had ever thought he would be wearing. He sent up thanks to the universe that Dean would never see him dressed like this. He’d rupture himself laughing.

Sam didn’t feel as stupid as he had thought he would though. It was right for the time, and this was his time now. He had to blend in as a man on a night out if he was going to be able to pass as casual.

He’d already scouted the bar and found that rather than it being a dirt cheap place where he could
have worn his usual clothes, it was a more modern with people dressed in nicer clothes than the casual jeans and shirts he was used to seeing when he was out. There was a pool table though, and he thought he would at least have an opener to talk if the potential vampires were there. He could hustle with the best, though he usually had a partner in setting the scene of him being too drunk to play well.

He drove across town just before sunset, and went into the bar, knowing the vampires wouldn’t show until later. He wanted to be there when they arrived so he could gauge people’s reactions to them. He didn’t want to spend the evening tracking locals that just happened to stand out.

The bar was reasonably busy, though Sam still stood out as a stranger. He hoped he could use that in his favor. If he didn’t look local and the type that would be missed to the vampires, he thought he would be a better target if they were feeding.

He bought a beer and sat at the bar to drink it, scouting the room. There was no one he pegged as another stranger to the town though, as people seemed relaxed as they chatted in groups. No one approached him at first until there was a lull at the bar and the man that had been serving came along to Sam.

“Another?” he asked.

Sam shook his bottle and found it was almost empty. “Yes, please.”

The man retrieved a bottle for him and exchanged it for a bill. “You’re new in town,” he said. “You the fella looking for his brother?”

Sam raised an eyebrow, surprised his story had spread so fast. “Yeah?” he formed it as a question.

“Hank said you met Carol in the diner today. She told him the story, and he told me. You want me to take a look at the picture?”

“Yeah, that’d be great,” Sam said, pulling the picture from his wallet. It was just a headshot of Dean that he carried in case they were separated and he needed help finding him. Dean carried one of Sam, too.

“Afraid I haven’t seen him,” he said. “And most people that come through town end up here or in the diner.”

“Thanks anyway,” Sam said.

He held out a hand to Sam. “I’m Harry. This here’s my place.”

Sam shook his hand and said, “Sam Taylor.”

“What are you going to do next, Sam?”

“I’m not sure,” Sam said. “Maybe stay in town another day or two and ask around some more. I am going to take tonight night off though. Tonight is just about having a good time.”

“Good idea,” he said. “You’ll find a good time here. Folks are friendly enough and they like to take care of visitors when we get them. Speaking of…”

The door had opened and two women had entered. They were around Sam’s age, maybe a little younger, and they were dressed similarly in floaty tops and flared pants. They drew attention as they walked to the bar, from men and women, and Sam sensed an atmosphere of anticipation
around them.

“More visitors?” Sam asked.

Harry nodded. “They’ve taken over the old Hillock farm, them and two men. I don’t think they’re coupled off, as they’re always extra friendly if you know what I mean.”

Sam looked at them and the way they moved, the way their eyes swept the room. There was something almost predatory about them. That, coupled with the fact they weren’t local, made him suspect they were the vampires he was looking for.

“They seem nice enough,” Sam said.

“If you’re looking for that kind of company, they are,” he said with a chuckle. “Would you like to buy them a drink?”

“Sure,” Sam said, thinking it was as good an introduction as he was going to get. He handed Harry some money and said. “Get them whatever they like.”

Harry smiled as he walked along the bar to the two women and took their orders. He spoke to them for a moment and then gestured along the bar to Sam. They smiled sweetly at him and them the taller whispered into the ear of her friend.

Sam thought that they’d taken the bait.

xXx

As the evening wore on, the suspected vampires grew more relaxed and confident. Sam played pool with them, listening to their teasing about his shots and flirting unashamedly with both of them. They reacted as Sam hoped they would, and he was confident he was tagged as their next target. He just needed them to make the last move of his plan.

Maisie, the taller and more forward of the two women pressed against Sam as he leaned over the table to take his shot, and Sam could feel eyes on him. He wondered if the other patrons were judging the woman for her brazenness or if they were jealous that he was the one she’d given her attention to.

“So, Sam,” she whispered in his ear, “do you like to party?”

Sam pretended to scratch his shot in reaction to her proximity and laughed shakily. “I love to party.” He dropped his voice. “I don’t think much partying happens in a town this small though.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she crooned. “Me and Katie have a place, and we really like to party. We’re planning on going there now, and you’re invited.”

“Really?”

She giggled. “Really. Do you want to come?”

Sam straightened up and looked her in the eyes, seeing the hunger there. “I’d really like that.”

She smiled as she plucked the cue out of his hands and set it on the table. “Let’s get out of here then.”

Sam grinned as she took his hand and led him out of the bar, with Katie sashaying ahead of them. When they got outside, they led Sam toward a rusty Pinto. Sam pulled back and said, “I think it’s
better if I follow you. I don’t want to leave my car here overnight.”

He gestured to the Mustang and they cooed.

“Wow, nice car. I’d love to take it for a ride sometime,” Maisie said.

“Maybe you will,” Sam said. “I’ll drive it over tonight and we can all take a ride in the morning.”

“I’m sure we will,” Katie said, and Sam was sure they were thinking of how they could take the car when he was dead and swap it with their Pinto which was a heap.

“Sure, you follow us,” Maisie said. “We’ll go slow so you can keep up.”

Sam grinned. “That won’t be a problem.”

He walked to his car and climbed in. The girls got into their Pinto and pulled out of the lot. Sam took a moment to quickly open his duffel and pull out the machete he had stowed there. He tucked it under his jacket sliding the hilt into his pants. It was uncomfortable, but it would be concealed there until the right moment.

He started the engine and followed them onto the road. They were driving slowly, giving him a chance to catch up, and when he did, they pulled ahead at what was probably the top speed for their crap heap. Sam laughed to himself as he put his foot down and edged closer to them.

He was actually enjoying himself. It was the thrill of the hunt and the speed he was driving. He hadn’t felt like this on a hunt in a long time. Since Lilith, everything had been hard. Before that even. He hadn’t been able to enjoy a hunt in a long time. There was always something more important hanging over them. He still had big things hanging over him, like the apocalypse he would return to, but that was so many years away it felt like another life. Lucifer was trapped in this time and Michael was ruling all the obedient angels. Sam didn’t have to worry about them in this moment.

They drove out of town and onto a quiet highway. Sam teased them as he drove, allowing them to pull ahead and then catching up with them in seconds. He didn’t snap back to attention until they turned on their blinker and pulled onto a dirt track leading to a house. Sam went after them, and pulled the car to a stop beside theirs. There were no other cars, and the place was in darkness. Sam guessed the male members of their nest weren’t home. He wondered if they were working another town or a different bar for their victims. He was glad as it meant he could take on these two alone before facing the others.

He climbed out and surreptitiously adjusted the machete.

“What do you think?” Maisie asked, gesturing expansively at the house.

“It doesn’t look much like a party house,” Sam observed.

“Wait ’til you get inside,” she replied. “It’s something really special.”

Sam grinned and allowed her to lead him by the hand into the house. Katie lit Coleman lamps, casting light over the dark space.

This was the point at which the ruse failed. The room was bare except for a small radio and mattresses on the floor. There was a scent of copper in the air that Sam guessed was blood from their previous victims.
“Really not a party place,” Sam said with a sigh, looking around. Maisie and Katie linked arms and smiled at Sam with their secondary teeth descended.

“I don’t know about that,” Katie said. “We sure enjoy ourselves here.”

“Good to know,” Sam said. “I think I’ll enjoy myself, too.” He pushed back his jacket to reveal the machete tucked there and then pulled it free with a flourish. “I’m going to have a real party.”

Maisie took a step back, looking shocked that their meal had come armed, but Katie held her ground. “Hunter,” she growled.

“Vampire,” Sam said, raising the blade over his shoulder.

Katie rushed at him, her hands clawed, and Sam kicked her in the stomach. She staggered back, but Maisie had gotten over her shock and was coming at him now. Sam adjusted his stance and allowed her into his space before swinging out with the blade and catching her on the shoulder. His aim wasn’t good enough but it served to distract her as she stumbled away from him, howling with pain.

Katie had gathered herself and she was coming for him. Sam lifted the bloody machete again and waited for her. She was almost upon him when his blade caught her in the side of the neck. It swept right through, decapitating her neatly. The pieces thudded to the ground and Maisie screamed in agony, her friend’s name ripping from her. She dropped her hand from her injured arm and stalked towards Sam. He waited for her to come close enough, but she was smarter this time. She kicked him and he stumbled back into the wall with the wind knocked out of him. He clung to the machete, knowing it was his only defense.

“I will kill you.”

Sam dragged a breath into his empty lungs and rasped, “You can try.”

He stepped away from the wall, lifting the machete ready to attack, and she kicked him in the gut again at the exact same point as before. He folded over, overplaying the blow that had healed almost as fast as it came, and breathed heavily.

“Not so strong now, are you, hunter?”

Sam snapped upright. “Strong enough for this.”

The keen blade sliced cleanly through the air, cutting off her head without effort. Sam stepped back, exhilaration rushing through him, and he laughed.

The rush of the kill still hadn’t worn off, but Sam’s attention snapped back to the mission when he heard an engine. He peered around the still open door and saw headlights approaching. The other vampires were back. He knew there was no concealing what he had done, so it was better for him to attack head-on. He would let them come to the house and then kill them.

He stood behind the door and listened carefully as the car came to a stop. He felt confident and ready until he heard the voices and doors opening and closing. There were too many. He couldn’t do anything about it. If they were more vampires, he would have to kill them, too, and if they were victims, he would save them.

“Looks like the girls are back already,” a man said. “And they brought a friend.”

A woman giggled nervously. “A real party then.”
“Sure will be,” another male voice said. “We’re all going to have a good time.”

Sam heard the creak of a foot on the wooden porch, and he yanked open the door.

“Party’s over,” he said.

The vampire looked startled for a moment, his eyes narrowing, and then he looked past Sam at the exposed body of Maisie on the floor behind him.

“No! He’s killed her! Maisie, she’s dead!”

“They’re both dead,” Sam said, using the vampire’s distress to his own advantage. He swung with the blade, but the vampire was too fast. He dodged back, grabbing Sam’s wrist as the machete dragged his arm around to complete the swing. He twisted his hand, and Sam heard a crack and pain seared up his arm, making him drop the blade.

The women screamed, and the vampire laughed at Sam’s capitulation. He could already feel the bone knitting together again, but it hurt. He played up the injury, holding it to his chest and hissing between his teeth, trying to regroup.

“Oh no you don’t;” the male furthest from him said, and Sam looked up to see he was holding the women by the arms. One of them was the woman that had checked him into the motel. She looked terrified and tears were streaming down both her cheeks and her friend’s. Sam guessed they had tried to run.

The vampire holding her seemed to think his friend was in no danger from Sam, so he stayed back while the first vampire advanced on Sam. He kicked Sam’s knee and it gave way, dropping him to a half kneeling position. It worked to Sam’s advantage though. His broken wrist was still healing, but he could reach the machete with his left. He grabbed it and straightened up. While the vampire was still reacting to the fact Sam was on his feet, Sam swung the blade and sliced through his neck.

The women screamed as the pieces fell, and the second vampire released them in favor of coming at Sam with his teeth bared. Sam tossed the blade to his dominant right, feeling it was ready for the weight and movement, and raised it. He waited for the vampire to step into range, but it caught him off guard. He lowered his head and drove its shoulder into Sam’s stomach, sending him bowling back to the floor. The blade slipped from his hand again, and the vampire caught it up.

Without a word of taunting or victory, it raised it in two hands and drove it down, plunging it into Sam’s stomach so deep Sam felt it jar against the floor beneath him. He screamed in pain, agony ripping through him, as the vampire stepped back. Sam panted through the pain, and then in one of the most macabre moments of his life, he grabbed the hilt of the blade and pulled it agonizingly out of his stomach. The wound clung to the metal, and Sam struggled to drag it all the way out.

Still in pain and shock, Sam got to his feet and advanced on the stunned vampire to make the move that would decapitate it. The head that fell to the floor still looked shocked at what he had seen.

Sam looked past him to the women that seemed frozen in horror. He wanted to comfort them, but he didn’t think the person that had just done what they had seen him do had anything to offer in comfort. He turned away from them and picked up the keys that the first vampire had dropped when it had attacked. He walked slowly to the women with his hands raised and then held out the keys. “You need to get out of here,” he said.

Neither of them took the keys and Sam set them on the hood of the car they’d arrived in.

“I’m going to take care of the bodies now,” he said. “You don’t want to see that.”
“What were they?” the motel woman asked.

Sam considered before answering. He didn’t want to change their world view by telling them that vampires were real, but he had to give them some explanation.

“They were murderers,” he said. “They have killed a lot of people. I am a part of a government task force that deals with threats like this. It’s better if you forget what you saw here.”

He had no idea if they’d believed him, but he remembered what Missouri said about people being more trusting in this time.

“You should go,” he said again, before turning away and getting to work dragging the bodies into the house.

He heard car doors opening and closing and then an engine sputtering to life. He went back for the second body, not watching them turn and drive back along the road. He didn’t think they would tell anyone, but he couldn’t be sure, so he needed to hurry and get the vampires taken care of and himself of town.

When the bodies were loosely piled inside, he went to the car for the can of spare gasoline and matches. He poured the gasoline over the bodies and then threw on the match. Flames rose up and Sam walked away from them. He climbed into his car and started the engine. He had taken care of what needed to be. Now he would get home.

xXx

Sam got home around dawn—only 24 hours after he left. He was exhausted, but there was another feeling combined with it that he hadn’t expected. It was triumph. He had killed the vampires and saved lives.

He let himself into the house and shrugged off his jacket, hanging it on the peg by the door. He carried his duffel into the study. He was going to need to burn the clothes he had been wearing as they were soaked in blood and there was a gash in the front where he’d been stabbed. More important was cleaning the machete before the blood had a chance to pit into the blade. He stopped though for a moment and just allowed himself to feel what had happened; he had been mortally wounded again, but he had lived.

He moved to set the duffel on the desk and then stopped as he saw there was something new there. Among the papers and books he’d left out was a leather journal. He picked it up and opened the clasp. It fell open and Sam saw pages of blank paper. Only the front page had been used; there was a message for him in an unfamiliar hand.

‘I thought you could maybe use this now. Make it last, Sam.’

It had to be from Missouri, and he knew what she meant. She wanted him to start his own journal, to catalog the things he was going to do and see: the things he was already planning.

He had realized on the way home from Nebraska that he needed to hunt. He had enjoyed it, but more than that, he had needed it. In a way he hadn’t ever felt before, he had found a peace in hunting. It was what was missing from his new life. He had a job and friends, but he didn’t have this outlet for his feelings and source of satisfaction that came from saving lives.

He thought Missouri had known it all along. He wondered how long she’d hung onto the journal, waiting for it to be the right time to give it to him. He didn’t think she had ever planned to take the vampire hunt at all. It had been about getting him to see what he needed. She wouldn’t risk her life
and James’ future by hunting again. She had arranged the conversation for him. He would have to thank her for giving him this.

He sat down at the desk and set the journal down in front of him. John Winchester’s journal had started at the point he learned the truth about the world. Sam needed to start at the point he learned the truth about himself.

He picked up a pen and started to write, the words forming themselves in his mind and transporting to the page without conscious instruction.

‘Hey Dean. Here’s the thing, I’m trapped in 1978…’
“It’s nearly time!” Missouri said excitedly.

Sam sat up from his place reclining on the couch and set down his bottle of beer on the end table. “We better wake him then.” He shook James’ shoulder gently and said. “C’mon buddy. It’s time to wake up.”

James stirred drowsily, his head coming up from where it lay on Sam’s lap. “It’s time?”

“It is,” Missouri said. “The ball is about to drop. You need to get up if you don’t want to miss it.”

James sat up and rubbed his eyes, seeming to become more alert with each pass of his hand. He looked at the TV where the crowd of revelers in Times Square was waving at the camera. “Neat,” he said.

Sam laughed. “It is neat. Grab your juice and get up.”

Sam stood up and picked up his beer. James scrambled up and moved so he was close to Sam. Missouri came to stand his other side, and they bracketed him between them, watching this brand new year start for him. Missouri said it was the first time she’d allowed him to be awake for the countdown, as she thought at nine he was able to see the significance of the moment.

Dick Clark announced the descent of the ball and James shivered. “This is so cool.”

“It is,” Sam agreed. “You’re watching history happen.”

“I’m doing that every day, aren’t I?” James said.

Missouri laughed.

“You are,” Sam said. “But there’s not usually something special about those days. This is 1979 starting. It’s a big year.”

“Is it?” Missouri asked curiously.

“Every year is big,” Sam replied.

Missouri nodded and then looked at her son as he began to bounce on the balls of his feet. “Look, all those people, Momma. Can we go there one time?”

“We’ll see,” Missouri said.

“That means no,” James said with a slight frown.

“We’ll go,” Sam promised. “The year you’re big enough to drive us to New York, we’ll go to Times Square for New Years.”

“Here we go,” Missouri said, as Dick Clark led the countdown to midnight.

“Five… Four… Three… Two… One… Happy New Year!” the voice crackled through the speakers on the small TV.

“Happy New Year!” they chorused in return, clinking their beer bottles and James’ glass of juice
together.

James was so excited he was almost jumping like some of the people on the TV. They were kissing and cheering, and Sam took a moment to experience history. He was seeing a year dawn that he hadn’t even been alive for before.

Sam thought of the people watching this around the country, sharing this moment. He imagined Bobby in his house, welcoming a new year with a bottle of whiskey and a dead wife. He imagined Castiel in Heaven, probably oblivious to the moment and feeling on earth. He thought of Dean, not even born yet, but already bringing the joy of anticipation to their parents. Sam imagined them in their home just a few blocks away, so close but a world away at the same time. What were they thinking of? The new life that would become a part of their family in just a matter of weeks? The people that were missing? Their parents? Did they realize just how special they were with their ordinary but precious life together?

Sam felt a warm hand curl around his and he turned to see Missouri looking into his eyes. He thought perhaps she had given into temptation and was reading his mind for once. “Happy New Year, Sam,” she said softly.

“Happy New Year, Missouri.” Sam leaned behind James who was clapping along to the tune of Auld Lang Syne and kissed her cheek. “And thank you for making 1978 good for me. I wouldn’t have been able to make it without you.”

“You would have made it just fine,” she insisted. “It would just have been different.”

Sam nodded. It would definitely have been that.

“I know being here isn’t what you want,” she went on. “But James and I are both glad you are.”

Sam smiled at her and turned back to the TV.

This moment was history and yet another sign of how far he had to go before he was really home again with the other people he loved. It was a day closer though. Every day was. With each hour, day, week and month that passed, he was closer to Dean. Until that time, he would watch history happen.

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Sam wasn’t working over the holidays, as there was a lack of projects in the area that needed outside hires. Brad was talking about having Vic—the firm’s owner—buy him out of his Manpower contract so he could work directly for them, but he wasn’t going to make a decision until they heard if the firm had won the contract for the new development they were going for. Sam had proven himself on the site as a good worker and he was developing his skillset.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to be bought out or not. With a Manpower gig, he could take the time out for hunts when needed. He would be more constrained with a contract. He liked working on the sites though. There was something satisfying about building something with your own hands. He liked the feeling he got when he went home tired at the end of the day, knowing he’d earned his paycheck and that there was something physical to show for what he had done. He hadn’t had a job like it before. When he was hunting, he was saving lives, and that was incredible, but he didn’t see anything tangible once it was over. He could imagine people going on with their lives, having families and jobs, making and losing friends, living, but he couldn’t see it.

He was using some of his time off to work through more of Samuel’s library. He was learning a lot
about what was out there, more than he’d learned in years of hunting, though it was all theory. He had only taken two more hunts since the vampires. A pair of ghouls, one of which had gotten a lucky shot in with Sam’s own gun and had tested out his invincibility once more, and a werewolf that had been passing through the state. Sam wasn’t sure if there were fewer hunts out there than in his time, or if it was just because they were harder to track without the Internet sharing the news from around the country, but either way, the hunts were few and far between.

It was mid-January when he heard from Missouri that George was in the area again and that he was going to visit her. Sam intentionally stayed away on the day George was due given the way their last meeting had gone—Sam being stabbed and surviving only to walk out in abject devastation. He knew he hadn’t made a great first impression, and George hadn’t been the friendliest person he’d ever met. In all, he’d thought it was better to give him and Missouri their space while he was there. So he was surprised when he heard a car approaching the house one morning while he was sitting in the living room with the local paper and opened the door to see George climbing out of an old truck.

“Sam,” he said in a neutral tone.

Sam had no idea what he was doing there, but he was curious to find out. “Hello, George. I wasn’t expecting to see you. Come in. I’ll get you a drink.”

“Thank you.” George walked past him into the house and then waited for Sam to lead him into the living room.

The room was markedly different to the place Sam had first moved into. He, Missouri and James had spent a weekend decorating it with the blue paint James had wanted, and they’d spent some happy mornings wandering around yard sales to get Sam furniture. He had a large couch now and two comfortable chairs, all positioned around the fireplace. He also had a bookshelf of books he had read or wanted to read. That was something that he liked, as he hadn’t ever collected books just for pleasure—not even in college; he’d mostly read what he needed to for his classes then. Now he could spend evenings after a long day at work reading a story that interested him.

The other rooms had been decorated too, even Mary’s which had been stripped of its wallpaper and painted green at James’ request. The idea had been to set up a room in case there was a hunter that needed somewhere to stay, but the only one to use it so far had been James a few times when he’d wanted the adventure of a sleepover in the old house. Sam didn’t mind, though the first time James had stayed, he’d been too worried about him waking in the wrong place and being scared to sleep. James had been fine, though, and the second night he’d stayed, Sam had been able to relax and enjoy his visit.

Sam wondered if that was what George was doing here now, if he needed somewhere to stay.

“Is coffee okay?” Sam asked.

“Coffee’s fine. I like it as it comes.”

Sam nodded. “Take a seat. I’ll be right back.”

The kettle had only just boiled a little while ago as Sam had been intending to make himself a drink when he’d gotten caught up in a description of a monster called a lamia.

He took two cups from the cupboard and prepared the coffee in the French press, and then waited as the kettle came to the boil again. When it was steaming he poured the water over the coffee and waited for it to brew. He hadn’t had any company apart from Missouri and James, and he
wondered if he was supposed to offer George more than coffee. Missouri usually offered cookies or cake when Sam visited her. He had none though, so it was a moot point. He reminded himself he was being stupid worrying about being a good host. It was George, and he hadn’t seemed to like Sam much even before he’d walked out of him; cookies weren’t going to change that.

He depressed the plunger and poured two mugs of coffee for them. Taking a breath and wondering what was coming, Sam carried them into the living room and set one down on the table at George’s elbow. He set down his coffee and stoked the fire then sat down in his usual seat.

“It’s a nice place you’ve got here,” George said. “Who’s is it?”

“Missouri’s now, but it belonged to my mom before that. She handed it over to her shortly after I arrived here.”

“Did she know it was for you?” George asked.

“No. Neither she nor my dad have any idea I’m here. They don’t even know I’m going to exist yet. I’m not born for another four years. My mom just wanted to pass on the place for hunters to use. Her family was hunters, too. This was their safe house.”

“What was their name?”

“Campbell. Samuel and Deanna.”

“I knew them. Damn good hunters. That makes Mary your mother.”

“Yes.”

“And your father was a Winchester?”

Sam was surprised he remembered his name when there was so much else happening with Chronos at the time.

“John Winchester,” Sam said. “But I’m called Sam Taylor here. It’s complicated with them living so close and the fact I’ll be… known in the future.” He couldn’t say the Winchester name would be notorious in the future for their successes and failures.

“Known? Hmm. That sounds like it could be an understatement given the fact a god wanted you on its side. Chronos said he would take you home because he wanted you in his debt. What exactly can a man offer a god?”

Sam fought the urge to squirm. “I don’t know what he wanted from me. It could have been anything.”

“What are you in 2010?” George asked, leaning forward in his seat and staring at Sam avidly.

“I am just a man,” Sam said.

“That’s not true. You said you were needed then. What do they need you for?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sam said firmly. “I am not in 2010 anymore. I am here, and this is the life I have. I’ll deal with that stuff when it comes around.”

George stared into his eyes and seemed to see the determination there. Sam wasn’t budging. They weren’t talking about it.
“Is there something you need, George?” he asked, pointedly changing the subject.

George leaned back in his seat and picked up his coffee. “Actually, there is, yes. I’ve got a hunt and I need a little help. It occurred to me that an invincible man would be a good match for a job like this.”

“What’s the hunt?” Sam asked.

“A monster called an arachne.”

“I’ve never heard of it,” Sam admitted.

“You’re not likely to. They’re very rare. I’ve never seen one before, and I don’t know anyone that has.”

“Then why do you think it’s that?”

“Webs. I was tracing some reports of missing people and I came across a place covered in huge spiders’ webs. I think that’s the base. I’m just not sure on what to do now I’ve found it.”

“Killing it seems the logical next step,” Sam said.

George glared at him. “Gee, why didn’t I think of that? I might not be a time traveler, but I do know my job. I am going to kill it, but I just don’t know how. There’s hardly any lore on these things.”

Sam considered. There were usually specific ways of killing monsters. They each had their weakness. If they didn’t know what would take out an arachne, they were going in at a disadvantage. They had no idea how strong it was either. Sam had faced some tough kills, and this arachne could be among them.

“Fire’s usually good,” he said.

“It is,” George agreed. “So is decapitation. I’m thinking maybe we should try both. If you’ll come that is. I can call around and see who else is available, but I’m not too proud to admit that I think you could be very helpful. An invincible hunter would be a good thing to have around, and I’m guessing you’re good, even if you won’t tell me the full story.”

“I’m happy to come along,” Sam said. “No problem.”

“Good,” George said. “You better get packed up then. We’ve got a long drive ahead of us.” He picked up his coffee and began to drink it quickly.

“I’ll be right back,” Sam said.

He went into the bedroom and took his duffel from under the bed. He had clothes he’d designated as hunting clothes, and he packed them and then went into the study to the weapons trunk.

As he gathered what he thought he would need, he mulled over what was happening. He had thought hunting in 1978 was different, and it had been, but he had a feeling hunting in 1979 with George was going to be even more of an experience.

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George was booked into a motel just outside of Oklahoma City, and Sam followed him there. He checked into a room of his own and then went to George’s room to talk about what they were
going to do next.

Sam was unsurprised that George’s room was set up with a wall of information for the hunt the way John’s Winchester’s often had been. Sam examined the articles and notes he had gathered on the missing persons. There was no common theme among the six victims. There were young and old, male and female, different occupations and family statuses. One was a short-order cook with a wife and child at home and another a retired widower with no children.

“So, all we know about these things is that they leave webs?” Sam said.

“Yes. I’ve seen them around the places the victims were snatched from. Locals think they’ve got some kind of spider infestation in town.”

“That’d be easier to deal with,” Sam muttered.

He’d taken some tough hunts before, but they were with Dean whom he knew and trusted. George must be good to have lived this long as a hunter, but Sam didn’t know him. They didn’t have the same connection as Sam and Dean; they wouldn’t be able to anticipate each other’s moves the same way. He was unsure about hunting with George. He knew he was in no danger, but George could be.

“Have you any ideas of a base for the arachne?” Sam asked.

“Only the very vaguest. I asked around. There are a few vacation rental places in the area that will be empty this time of year. I’m hoping we’ll find something in one of them.”

“Where are they?” Sam asked.

George spread a map out on the table, and Sam moved closer to see them. “Here, here, and here,” he said, tapping red dots on the map.

Sam saw they were grouped within a mile radius but well outside the town limits. They were isolated enough that he thought they were the most likely locations, too.

“We should check them out,” he said.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” George asked sarcastically. “Actually, I did, but I didn’t want to rush in alone and get myself killed. They’re isolated enough that if there’s someone there, they’ll know we’re coming. We need to go in ready to strike or not at all.”

Sam bit his lip. He had a question, and he knew George wasn’t going to have a positive reaction to it. He needed to ask though, as it was why he was on this hunt in the first place.

“Are you sure you want to come?” he asked.

George frowned. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“I’m thinking you asked me on this hunt for a reason, and it seems dumb to risk you if we don’t need to. Like you said, I’m invincible. I can take this thing out and not get hurt.”

“Do you have super-strength you forgot to mention? Maybe some super-speed, too?” George asked.

“No,” Sam admitted.

“Then we’re going in together. You might be invincible, but we need to take this thing out, not let it
get away and start over in a new town. I didn’t ask you in so you could steal my hunt. I asked because I thought you’d be helpful. I may be older than you, but I can handle myself.”

Sam held up his hands. “Okay. Fine. I was just checking.”

“Don’t do it again,” George said. “You might be something special in 2010, but you’re not here. I am special. I have been hunting a long time and I am good. Invincible or not, you’re still a kid to me.”

Sam swallowed his annoyance and spoke calmly. “Do you have the gear to make flamethrowers?”

“I have a lighter and there’s plenty of wood around.”

“We’ll need to make a stop on the way then. We’re going to need some more fuel.”

George shrugged. “Whatever you think we need. Have you got a machete?”

“I’ve got a couple,” Sam said.

“Unless you’re exceptionally skilled, you’re only going to need one. I have my own in the trunk.”

“Great. Do you want to have a look around now or wait till night?”

“Now,” George said decisively. “We’re not going to be able to slip past them no matter how dark it is, so we might as well go in while we can see what we’re doing. I’ll drive.”

Sam would have preferred to drive them himself, but it wasn’t a big enough issue to aggravate George any more than he already had.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll grab my stuff.”

He went out to his car and popped the trunk to get his weapons, musing on George. He’d thought hunting in 1979 with George was going to be different, but in a way it was oddly familiar. Hunting with George was a lot like hunting with his father again. That wasn’t the best feeling to have, but Sam thought he could handle it for another hunt to save some lives.

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George’s Chevy Longhorn bumped them along the track towards the second rental he’d found for them to check, and Sam stared out of the windshield at the house in the distance. They were close when he noticed the swatches of white on the roof supports over the porch.

“It’s been here,” he said.

“I see that,” George said, putting his foot down on the gas. “You got your hairspray?”

Sam raised the can of Aqua Net they’d stopped to buy on the way in.

“Don’t start blazing straight away,” George said. “We don’t know if the victims are dead already. We might be able to get someone out alive.”

“I know.”

Sam wasn’t worried about going in with only his blade for himself; he was worried about George. He had to remind himself that he and Dean had taken dozens of hunts with the stakes this high and neither of them had been unkillable. They had made it through each time mostly okay. And George
had been on the hunt a long time. If he thought he could handle this, Sam would have to trust him.

They pulled to a halt, and Sam picked up his machete from the footwell. He checked his pocket for his lighter, and then tucked the can of hairspray in there with it so he had both hands free to wield the machete. He climbed out of the car and waited for George before starting towards the house.

There was no sound that they could hear that made Sam think the place was occupied, but he wasn’t lulled into a false sense of security. He knew if there was a monster in there, it would know they were coming, and that it needed to hide itself to have the advantage.

“I’ll check the back,” Sam said quietly.

George nodded. “I’ll go through the front. Give it thirty seconds and we’ll strike together.”

“Okay.” Sam slipped away and jogged around the building to the back. He counted off the seconds in his mind as he went, looking around. The windows were too high for him to see inside, and he knew the first glimpse of this monster he was going to get would likely be the moment it attacked.

As he counted down the last five seconds, he stepped back and prepared. He reached zero and at the same moment, he kicked in the back door and rushed inside. He arrived into an empty kitchen. He heard a shout from the next room and rushed towards it, yanking open a door and running almost straight into George. He skidded to a halt and looked around. He was momentarily stunned at the sight before him.

In one corner there were web-wrapped bundles that Sam was reasonably sure from the size and shape were bodies. They looked like huge flies caught in a spider’s web. They were the only ones in the room though. The arachne wasn’t there.

“Check them,” George commanded, rushing to the closest bundle and cutting the web away with a small knife.

Sam went to one and used his machete to create a hole in the web that he could tear open.

The face that was revealed was familiar to Sam as one of the missing persons from George’s wall. He was very obviously dead. His eyes were sightless and bulging, and there was a wound on his face where it looked like someone had torn at him with teeth.

“Dead,” Sam said bitterly. “It’s been eating.”

“Here too,” George replied.

Sam cut open another web and saw another body inside. He sighed. He was fairly sure none of the victims were getting out alive. His theory was confirmed when George stepped away from the last bundle and cursed. “All dead.”

“It’s not here though,” Sam said. “Maybe it’s out hunting again. We can catch it when it comes back. We can be freer with the fire if we don’t have to worry about hurting anyone else.”

Suddenly, George’s eyes widened. Sam was going to ask what was wrong, but George pressed a finger to his lips and pointed at the ceiling. Sam hadn’t heard anything, but he trusted George’s instincts and bent to pick up his machete.

“No,” George said. “It probably heard us coming and ran. It wouldn’t leave all this meat here otherwise. We might as well go back to the motel and regroup. Maybe pull in a few more hunters to help us out.”
“Sure,” Sam said, following his lead. “That makes sense. I’ll get the webs cleared off then we can deal with the bodies. We can’t leave them here to rot. Maybe bury them?”

“Good idea,” George said.

There was a crash from overhead and then footsteps pounded down the stairs. Sam tucked his machete under his arm and pulled out his can of hairspray and lighter. He flicked the lighter to life and pressed down on the cap. A spray of flame came from the head of the can, and Sam pointed it at the woman that had appeared in front of them. She had long, dirty blonde hair, and mottled skin. Her eyes were what held Sam’s attention; with their double irises, they were narrowed with hatred.

“You will not touch them!” she hissed.

Sam lifted his makeshift flamethrower and aimed it at her face. He expected her to at least shy away from the flame, but she walked towards it.

“George!” Sam shouted.

“I’m here,” George said, rushing forward with his machete held high.

He swung at her and she dodged back with a cruel smile. As the blade whipped past her, she caught George’s arm and twisted it. There was a sickening pop and George shouted with pain as his shoulder slipped out of joint. Sam dropped his can and lighter and grabbed his machete instead. He rushed at her with it held across his body. She seemed to think he was going to aim for a head shot, but he adjusted his hands and speared it out and into her chest instead. Her eyes widened and she tried to step back, but Sam had her impaled on the long blade.

“Are you okay, George?” he asked.

“I’m fine. Don’t worry about me,” George said. “You just concentrate on holding her.”

Sam gripped the handle of the machete with both hands and held it in place with all his strength. George picked up his fallen machete with his left hand, his right hanging useless as his side. He groaned with pain as he swept the blade through the arachne’s neck, decapitating her.

Sam released his hold and she dropped to the floor with the machete still imbedded in her chest.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked.

“I’ve been worse,” George said with a wince. “I need to do something about this though.” He gestured to his injured shoulder.

“It’s dislocated,” Sam volunteered.

“It certainly is. Can you pop it back for me?”

“Sure, but it’s going to hurt.”

“I can take it. Not my first rodeo.”

Sam moved toward him and took his elbow. With his free hand on the dislocated joint, Sam pressed up and forward and it popped back into place. George groaned loudly and turned away, and Sam bent to pull his machete from the arachne to allow George a moment of privacy to react to the pain.

“Thank you,” George said.
Sam looked up and saw that he was moving his arm back and forth, testing it. He seemed to find it in working order as he nodded and said, “We need to take care of these bodies. Burn them.”

“Yes. I don’t like to leave their families without closure, but they can’t be found like this.”

“I’ve got a spare gas can in the trunk,” George said, making for the door.

Sam watched him go and looked down at the bodies on the floor. He was upset that they hadn’t been able to save any of them, but they had at least stopped more people becoming victims.

When George came back with the gas can, Sam noticed he was still favoring his right side. Sam wondered if he’d done some internal damage when he’d dislocated the shoulder. He didn’t ask though, knowing George was experienced enough to know what his body could and couldn’t take.

“Grab your lighter,” George said.

Sam picked up his lighter and the can of hairspray from the floor and watched as George uncapped the bottle. He tilted it over the closest body, and that was when it came to life. The webbing around it tore like it was made of paper and the body lurched to its feet. The face was revealed as a housewife Sam had seen in one of the missing person’s articles.

Sam dropped his lighter and can to the floor and snatched up his machete. He lunged forward, but couldn’t strike with the blade as George was too close. He kicked her in the gut and felt the solid muscle beneath. She raised her head and he saw the double-iris eyes and mottled skin. She was an arachne.

“Get back, George,” he shouted.

George fell back and Sam swung with his blade. The head was parted from the body and the pieces dropped to the floor. Sam had a moment’s relief, which became horror as the other webbed bundles of the floor began to move and come to life. Sam rushed forward and caught one before it got to its feet, slicing off the head. He turned and saw one approaching him from behind, and he thrust out his blade. He heard a thud and saw a head rolling at his feet. George had taken one out, too. That left them with three to handle.

He pulled the blade free from the creature and swung for the head. As the pieces fell, he heard a rasping voice speak his name. He looked around and saw George was pinned to the wall by the retired widower with one hand around his throat and the other on his injured shoulder. It was leaning in as if it was going to kiss him, but Sam saw the teeth and knew it was going to be a far less gentle exchange.

Sam rushed forward and slammed the blade into side of the creature’s neck. It pulled away with a roar of pain, and Sam gripped the hilt tight, using the creature’s own strength to pull the blade free. George fell away and Sam swung the blade again, removing its head.

“What’s wrong, George?” Sam demanded.


What he was supposed to worry about became clear then as he felt a burning pain between his shoulder blades. If felt as if someone had poured gasoline in a streak down his back and dropped on a match. It sucked the air out of him in a cry of pain.

“Sam!” George shouted.
Sam had no breath to reassure him. He just spun and swung out with the blade. The arachne fell in two pieces, and Sam heard a cry of anger and pain mingled behind him and saw a head rolling.

Sam shrugged off his jacket and saw the long cut in the fabric and blood where the blade had sliced into him.

“Are you okay?” George asked.

“Fine,” Sam lied. Though he was physically unharmed, the memories of the last time he’d suffered an injury similar to that were close to the surface. He had died then and it had ultimately cost Dean’s life, too. “Are you?”

George tested his shoulder again. “It hurts like hell, but it’ll heal. I think I owe you for that. That thing was trying to change me with its bite. That’s what we saw before. She wasn’t feeding from them; she was changing them. You saved me from something a lot worse than death.”

“You would have done the same,” Sam said.

“I would,” George said. “But I still owe you. I won’t forget it.”

Embarrassed by his obvious sincerity, Sam said, “We still need to deal with these bodies, and I think we should do more than just burn them. I think we need to dig a fire pit and dump them in there and bury them after. They came back to life once. I don’t want to risk them doing it again.”

“Good point,” George said. “But I’m going to be a little handicapped on the digging.”

“I’ve got it,” Sam said. “Have you got a shovel?”

“In the trunk.”

Sam nodded and walked out of the house and down the steps. His hand was on the trunk when George called out to him. “I really won’t, Sam, forget it I mean.”

Sam smiled. It was strange to have that kind of reaction from a hunter outside of his family, but he was pleased. He thought George might have moved on from mild dislike to grudging respect for him. They weren’t friends necessarily, but Sam knew he had just made another ally in 1979.

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It took hours for Sam to dig the pit and then for them to burn the bodies enough that they were satisfied, so it was well into the night by the time they got back to the motel.

Sam had driven as George’s arm was still tender, and he parked outside George’s room and cut the engine. George climbed out with difficulty.

“Do you need some painkillers?” Sam asked. “I’ve got the basics.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said.

“Okay. I’ll clean up the weapons and drop yours by in the morning,” Sam said.

“Come have a drink with me, Sam. I think we’ve both earned it.”

Sam hesitated a moment and then smiled. “That’d be great.”

George unlocked the door and Sam followed him inside. The faces of the pictures on the wall
seemed to find Sam as he took a seat at the table under the window. He avoided looking at them. He didn’t need to see the people he had spent the better part of the afternoon and evening burning and burying.

George took a bottle of whiskey from a duffel and two tin mugs. He poured two measures and handed one to Sam.

“Here’s to us,” he said.

Sam clinked his mug against George’s and took a sip of the whiskey.

George relaxed back in his seat and sighed. “That’s better.”

“Are you going to be okay?” Sam asked. “We can get you checked out at the hospital if you like.”

“No, I’ll see how it goes,” George said. “I have nothing lined up at the moment so I’ll stay here a little while and rest it. If there’s a need for a hospital, I’ll go, but I don’t think I’ll have to.”

“Good,” Sam said. It was refreshing to have someone willing to accept medical help if it was needed. He was used to Dean refusing everything unless he was unconscious and unable to argue. Not that Sam was much better. They’d learned to treat themselves on the fly.

George took a sip of his whiskey and said. “It’s midnight. You must be exhausted after that dig.”

“Midnight already?” Sam asked. “Wow. That came around fast.”

If it was midnight, it meant that it was January 24th. The day Dean was born. Sam had been very aware of the day approaching. His brother would be alive in the world today. Though he was a baby and Sam couldn’t see him, it felt important to him that he was there. It was a step towards them being together again.

“Something special happening today?” George asked.

“My older brother will be born,” Sam said.

George shook his head wonderingly. “Well, that’s got to be strange to think about for you. How long till you come along?”

“Not till May ‘83,” Sam said. “Dean’s going to have himself a good life for a while.”

He felt suddenly sad as he thought of what was coming. Dean would have less than five years of peace and happiness before it all went wrong. Overnight, his mother would be gone and his father changed. Within days of Mary’s death, John would find out about the real world, and they’d all hit the road together. The journey would follow many twists and turns, deaths and resurrections, and would ultimately end at the place Sam had left: the apocalypse.

Dean would only be born today but Sam could see his life mapped out ahead of him and it meant pain.

“What’s wrong?” George asked.

“Just thinking,” Sam said. He took a sip of his whiskey and lowered his mug. “There’s a lot coming for him is all.”

“Is your brother a hunter, too?” he asked.
Sam nodded. “We were both in the life since childhood. I took some time out to go to college for a few years, but I was pulled back in. It got real serious real fast for us both.”

“Is this something to do with why Chronos was willing to deal with you? Is it why you’re important?”

“Important,” Sam huffed a laugh. “That’s one word for it.” He supposed being the man that started the apocalypse and was the devil’s true vessel meant that he was important. It wasn’t the world he’d use though. He thought cursed was more appropriate.

“Are you saying you’re not?” George asked.

“I guess I am, but it’s not in a good way. Because of me, a lot of people have been hurt. Some died. Dean has suffered more than anyone. I really screwed up.”

“What did you do?”

Sam looked into his eyes. “I can’t tell you. It’s bad though.”

George looked thoughtful. “And was it all your fault?”

Sam considered. Lilith and Lucifer had been his fault, but he’d thought he was doing the right thing. He hadn’t known what his vendetta was going to do. Dean going to Hell had been his fault in the sense that it was avoidable had he not hesitated to kill Jake. If he’d done that when he’d had the chance, he wouldn’t have died and Dean wouldn’t have needed to make a deal. If Sam had killed Azazel when John had told him to he wouldn’t have been in Cold Oak at all. However he came at it, it was his failure but those failures came from a certain place—demon blood. Had Azazel not fed it to him as a baby, he would never have been in a position to do any of those things.

“Not all of it,” he said. “A demon had a big part in it. He did something to me that set the whole thing in motion.”

“But you’re not born yet, so it’s not happened,” George said.

“Yeah. It will happen the night I turn six months old.”

George drained his mug and set it down hard on the table. “Then do something about it. You’ve got four years to plan what to do, so start planning.”

Sam just stared at him.

“Am I wrong?” George asked. “Is there some time travel rule that says you can’t?”

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted. “I didn’t exactly get a copy of the rule book when they stuck me here. But even if there is, what does it matter? Believe me, the things that are coming can’t get any worse for us, for Dean.”

And there was a chance he could save more than Dean’s and the world’s future. If he could do this right, he could save his mother, too. If he could kill Azazel before she went into his nursery, it would all be over. She’d get to live her life. Everything would change. John would never become a hunter. Sam would never be cursed. They could live out their normal lives. Sam wouldn’t even be in a position to be back here in 1979 now. He would surely be taken home: home to a different world.

A smile spread over his face. “I can do this.”
“You can,” George agreed. “If you’re as special as Chronos seemed to think, there’s probably little you can’t do.” He picked up the bottle and topped up Sam’s drink and his own. “Are you doing this?”

“I am,” Sam said with a wide smile. “At least…” His smile faltered.

“What?” George asked.

“I can do it, but I’m going to have to wait. There’s nothing I can do until I am six months old. I have no idea where the demon will be before then. It’s a one-time opportunity I’ll have to get him.”

“Then I suggest you don’t miss,” George said.

“It’s four more years though. I’ll have to live them all.”

“So? Seems to me that four years is a whole lot better than over thirty. Use the time to prepare yourself. You’re going to need something big if you’re going up against a demon.”

That wasn’t a problem. Sam already knew what weapon he would need and where he would find it. He just had to wait though. He couldn’t take it yet without Daniel Elkins having a chance to get it back. He was going to need to be patient. When the time was right, he would get the colt and kill Azazel. Until then he was going to keep living.

“You’re right,” Sam said. “I can do this.”

“Good.” George raised his mug in a toast. “To new opportunities.”

Sam clinked his mug against George’s and said. “To new opportunities and taking out old enemies.”

“To Dean?” George asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“Definitely,” Sam said, raising his mug again. “To Dean.”

To Dean and the life he was going to be able to live when Sam had killed Azazel.
Jenjoremy has needed to take a step back from this particular story — she’s still working on The Things We Left Behind for me — and so I went in search of another beta. KToon has offered to take on this mammoth project. I never thought I would luck out again as big as I did with Jenjoremy, but with KToon I have. She’s awesome. Thank you so much Jenjoremy for all you’ve done for me and this story so far, thank you KToon for all you’re doing now.

Sam was making dinner for James and Missouri. James was leaving in the morning for vacation at his grandparents’ house in Florida, and Sam had offered to make his farewell meal.

He hadn’t had Missouri and James over for a meal together before. They’d come separately—Missouri coming when James was at school and James when he had spent the night—but Sam wanted to make this night special for them.

If he was honest, he was more worried about it being special for James than for Missouri. He knew she wouldn’t be overjoyed with his choice of menu. He was setting aside his own tastes for a change and making hamburgers. He figured James ate plenty of healthy meals with vegetables at home, and it was good to just indulge occasionally.

This was his first time hosting like this. When he was at Stanford, a night with friends coming over meant chips and dip and the game on the TV. He hadn’t even cooked for Jessica before she’d moved in. Despite the fact it was only Missouri and James coming over, he was nervous. He wanted to make it good for them. He owed both of them a lot. Missouri had done so much for him, and James had given him something good and innocent on the days he felt overwhelmed by the wait until 1983 when he could put things right.

He had baked the buns in advance and was waiting until Missouri and James arrived before cooking the burgers. The table was set, and he had lemonade in the fridge that he’d made himself. All in all, he was feeling good about what he was doing.

There was a knock on the door and he rushed to open it. Missouri and James stood on the porch; in Missouri’s hands was a cake box. Sam had barely got the door all the way open before James rushed past Sam and inside. Sam laughed but Missouri called after him, “Manners, James.”

“It’s fine,” Sam said easily.

He liked that James felt relaxed enough to behave like that with him. He seemed to like coming to Sam’s house; he treated it like an adventure. It had been the source of some good memories for them together. Sam had bought a TV especially for James’ visits and James had really had a good time decorating and furnishing the house. He’d been a good if a little demanding foreman when they’d decorated, and he’d been a part of the selection process when they scoured the yard sales for furniture for the house.

Missouri scowled but her eyes twinkled. “You spoil him.”
“I’m allowed,” Sam said. “Time traveler’s prerogative.”

“How do you figure that?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said with a laugh. “But it sounded good.”

Missouri handed Sam the cake box in her hands and said. “It’s carrot cake. I had a feeling we weren’t going to be having a healthy dinner tonight, so I have to get some vegetables into my son somehow.”

Sam grinned. He loved Missouri’s carrot cake. She had a family recipe that she refused to hand over to anyone.

“I’m not sure carrot cake counts as a vegetable,” he said. “But it will be good either way.”

“Don’t ruin it for me. I’m sending James to Florida tomorrow and his grandparents spoil him even more than you do.”

“That’s a grandparents’ prerogative.”

“There’s a lot of prerogatives flying about today,” Missouri observed. “Seems like a shaky excuse to me.”

Sam was saved from answering by James rushing back to them. “Momma! Sam made hamburgers!”

Missouri cast Sam a knowing look and said, “Of course he did.”

“Are we grilling them outside? Can I help?” James asked, fixing beseeching eyes on Sam.

Sam eyed Missouri and she nodded surreptitiously.

“Sure. The burgers need to be seasoned and then we can cook them. The grill should be ready. Shall we check?”

James nodded excitedly and Sam followed him into the kitchen. He put the cake in the fridge then handed James the pepper mill and said, “Just a little.”

James ground the pepper over the burgers and then shook on some salt. Sam picked up the tray and carried it out of the open back door to where he’d set the grill up on the porch.

“I’ll put them on and you can keep an eye on them,” Sam said.

James nodded.

“You be careful, James,” Missouri warned.

“I will, Momma.”

Sam placed the burgers on the hot grill and handed James the spatula.

With a serious expression, James fixed his eyes on the grill. Sam liked this side of him, the contentious young man. James had changed in the year Sam had known him. He would be ten in August, and he was proud of his approaching status as a fourth grader. He seemed to be growing in leaps and bounds. Sam was impressed by the kind of conversations they sometimes had. James seemed older than his years intellectually, and at other times he was still a child. Sam appreciated
his maturity but still relished the childish moments when James was just another kid living a happy and peaceful life. It was a stark difference to the life Sam had at that age, and he wanted to protect it.

Missouri came out with a chair from the table and sat down the other side of the door, away from the path of the smoke.

“How’s work?” she asked Sam.

“It’s good,” Sam said. “We’re winding down on the latest project, but I think we’re in with a good chance of getting the mall job—at least a part of it. It’s going to take more crews than ours, but Vic seems hopeful. It’ll be a big job that will take a while to complete. If we get it, Vic will buy me out of the Manpower gig and so I can go full time with them.”

“How do you feel about that?” she asked.

“It’ll be good to have some security. I like the people I’m working with, and wouldn’t want to have to change jobs again, but it does restrict my time slightly. I want to be free to…take on other jobs.”

He was referring to hunting. He had only taken one hunt since the job with George, and that had been a ghost across state. There were probably more jobs out there, but he didn’t hear about them. Without the internet to search for strange stories, he was limited to newspapers and word of mouth. He only really heard about them from George and he hadn’t needed backup.

Sam had stayed in touch with George after the arachne hunt. George only called once a month or so, but Sam liked to speak to him. He liked George and respected him as a man as well as a hunter. He was hoping he’d come across a hunt in the area so Sam would have an excuse to hunt with him again.

“You haven’t had many other jobs though,” Missouri said. “Will it really make a difference?”

“Probably not,” Sam admitted.

“Speaking of work, I have someone that’s looking for some information you might have,” Missouri said. “How are you doing with Samuel’s library?”

“I’m still not through it all, but I’ve learned a bunch,” Sam said. “What’s the problem?”

Missouri glanced at James pointedly. “We’ll talk about it after dinner,” she said.

Sam frowned. “Okay. Sure.”

He wondered what it was she was looking for and if he’d know about it. He had learned a lot from the books, and it would be good to share the knowledge. That was something he could do without getting his face out there. He would do what he could. Just because he wasn’t taking so many hunts anymore, it didn’t mean he didn’t want to. He was balancing what he could and couldn’t do given his tenuous nature in the past and new life.

If he could help someone though, he would. He was still a hunter.

**xXx**

As was traditional on special occasions, James was excused from dishes and allowed to do what he wanted instead. That evening it was to watch Mork and Mindy on Sam’s small TV.
Sam slid closed the kitchen doors so James couldn’t overhear them and started the water running for the dishes. When he had the plates in the sudsy water, he asked, “What’s the lore needed?”

“It’s three deaths in a town in Arkansas,” she said. “They said that it started with a man that drowned in a bird bath.”

“Seriously?” Sam asked.

“Yes. He was a pastor with an interesting past. Apparently, he had a history of overeager baptisms. One person was nearly drowned. He seemed to have a habit of it though, and his sermons were particularly violent. He was excommunicated by the Pentecostals after the last incident, but he didn’t stop there. He set up his own church and developed a small congregation.”

“Sounds like no great loss,” Sam said.

“I think so, too. It’s a strange way to go though, you can’t deny that.”

“I don’t,” Sam said. “What else do you have?”

“Two more. One was a woman that was killed in a car wreck on an empty road. The passenger that survived said they had just been driving on the straight and they hit something invisible. The doctors are calling it concussion confusion, but she’s vocal about what happened. Said it wasn’t the first accident they’d had, either, though the first was on public record. She and her friend that was killed were involved in an accident when they were in college. A high school kid was killed. It would have been a hit and run if the cops weren’t close enough to see. They were given community orders and it went on their records, but they didn’t get detention time.”

Sam nodded slowly. The pieces were starting to come together for him.

“And the last?”

“Alcohol poisoning in a teetotaler. The wife said she went to bed and left her husband watching TV after an evening together. She went back downstairs fifteen minutes later to fetch a glass of water for her daughter and he was dead. There was no alcohol in the house and no sign of any near the body.”

“Even if there was, it’s a fast death from something like that,” Sam said. “Did he have a history that was…interesting?”

“Nothing I heard, so I’m guessing they haven’t found it yet. This has all happened in one town though. Population of a few thousand and three weird deaths in two weeks. It’s definitely not natural”

“It’s not,” Sam said. “I’ve seen something like this before.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t exactly the same, but I’d say at least two of these people are getting their just desserts, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes. Do you know what’s doing it?”

“It’s something called a trickster. It’s a demi-god and it’s dangerous.”

“Do you know how to kill it?”
“Yeah, but it’s not easy. It needs to be a wooden stake to the heart.”

Missouri considered. “Okay. Do you want me to pass on the information or do you want to do it yourself?”

“I don’t mind,” Sam said. “It might be good to talk to them direct. There’s a couple more things to check, and I can go over the lore with them.”

“Okay,” Missouri said slowly. “But there’s something I need to tell you. You know the hunter that called in for the help.”

Sam frowned. “Who?”

“Bobby Singer. He’s still teamed with Rufus.”

Sam felt like the air had been sucked out of the room. He dropped the plate he was washing into the sink and water splashed up at his shirt.

“Sorry,” Missouri said quietly.

Sam shook his head, unable to find words.

He hadn’t gone a day since he was trapped in 1978 without thinking of the people left behind in 2010. Sometimes it had been good thoughts of things that had happened and moments they’d shared, other times it was sadness at their absence. He had wished to see them again many times, but it was impossible. Now he had this amazing opportunity to speak to one of them. He could hear Bobby’s voice, help him even. That would be the next best thing to seeing him. The possibility burgeoned in him, making his chest expand with excitement. This was something he hadn’t imagined.

“I have to speak to him,” he said. “I need to speak to Bobby.”

He would have to do something to hide his identity, alter his voice. Bobby couldn’t know it was him when time caught up and he saw Sam as an adult again. That wouldn’t be a problem though. It would be easy. It would be nothing if it meant he could speak to Bobby again.

Missouri stared into his eyes and nodded. “I’ll pass along your number.”

“Thank you, Missouri,” Sam said fervently. “Really. This is…”

“Everything?” she guessed.

“More even,” Sam said. “It’s the next best thing to being able to talk to him and Dean properly.”
He felt a burning behind his eyes, and he turned away.

“Speaking of Dean,” Missouri said in a loud voice, clearly allowing Sam a moment to get himself under control. “I saw him yesterday.”

“You did?”

“Yes. Your mother was taking him for a walk in his pram when I was working in the yard. She stopped and spoke for a minute. She’s well,” she added, forestalling Sam’s question. “Incredibly happy. She was telling me a little about Dean. She said he’s a fussy baby. You could tell she didn’t mind it though. She was just about bursting with pride as she looked at him.”

Sam grinned. The idea of Dean being a fussy baby didn’t surprise him. He imagined the world
Dean was living in now—happily cosseted in the love of his mom and dad. He would be adored and protected for the next four years. More than that. He would be protected by them as long as he needed once Sam killed Azazel. Sam would be too. When he did this, when Azazel was dead, Sam was going to return to a completely different world.

He wondered if Jess would be there.

“So, you’ve taken on a trickster before?” Missouri asked, breaking into his thoughts.

“What? Oh. Yeah, me and Dean took one back in…” He trailed off, horror settling over him.

“What?” Missouri questioned. “What’s wrong, Sam?

He realized he was clinging to the counter. He forced his fingers to unclench and he flexed them to bring back the blood flow.

He couldn’t believe he hadn’t thought of him before. In the days he’d been trying desperately to find a way home, when he’d been researching all hours, he’d forgotten there was someone else that could help him. Gabriel. Sam had forgotten all about him. He could have snapped Sam back to 2010 without a problem. He could have saved him.

He could take him home now.

“Sit down, Sam,” Missouri instructed, taking his elbow. “You look like you’re going to fall.”

Sam allowed her to lead him to the table and he took a seat, wiping his wet hands on his pants. He drew a shaky breath and exhaled slowly, trying to calm his racing heart. He felt like he had come to a screeching halt after a marathon. He had been so stupid.

“Tell me about the trickster, Sam,” Missouri said.

“We took it on for the first time in 2007. It was targeting a college town, taking out people that he thought deserved it. That’s what he does—punishes people. He was doing it all kinds of crazy ways, using urban legends. We tracked it and killed it, or at least we thought we did. He tricked us. He came back a year later, and…” He fought back a shudder. “He did something terrible to us. I let him get away then as he gave Dean back to me, but I never forgot him. He was one of the worst monsters I ever faced because of what he did to me those endless days.”

Missouri clearly had questions, but she didn’t ask them. She just put her hand on his and squeezed.

“We found him again in 2009, or he found us, and by then things were really bad. I thought we could use him, so we tried to track him down. He screwed with us again, but we managed to trap him and talk. He wasn’t just the trickster, Missouri. He was an angel living in hiding from his family. The archangel Gabriel.”

Missouri gasped.

“We needed him badly. There was a lot of bad happening then, and he could have really helped us, but he refused to. He wouldn’t have anything to do with it. He abandoned the world, Missouri, and it had never needed him more.”

Missouri looked shocked, and Sam realized he had probably said too much. He had been careful to not reveal too much about his time, and she rarely read his mind anymore. He had protected her from it until now. He quickly changed the subject.
“I didn’t even think of him. He could fix it. He could take me home, Missouri. He could have saved me.”

“Do you think he would?” Missouri asked.

“I think so. He didn’t come down on either side in what’s happening in the future, and he wouldn’t care about interfering with Michael, I am sure. He just wants me there so I can do what I am supposed to do.”

“Are you going to ask him?”

Sam shook his head. “I can’t. I need to be here in ’83 to stop what’s coming for my family. I have to save us all.”

Missouri looked relieved. Sam thought that she was as loath to lose him as he would be her. Missouri and James were special to him. He didn’t want to leave them behind now, even though it wasn’t an option anymore.

“You think he’s the one in Maine now?” she asked.

“I don’t know for sure, but I think so. It’s his MO.”

“What are you going to do? What will you tell Bobby and Rufus?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “I can’t tell them the truth. I think I’ll give them enough information that they can kill it if it really is a trickster, and if it is Gabriel, he can fake it for them like he did me.”

“He won’t kill them instead?” she asked.

“No,” Sam with certainty. “Bobby and Rufus are alive in my time. They’ll be okay.”

“Okay then,” Missouri said. “I better get your number to them then. If you’re sure you want to do this?”

“I want to talk to Bobby,” Sam said. “I need to.”

She nodded. “I’ll make it happen then. Only…I can see how much you want this, but don’t forget he won’t know you, Sam. You’ll be a stranger to him.”

“I’ll be Taylor,” Sam said. “I can handle that. Talking to Bobby and him not knowing who I am is nothing compared to what’s happened before.”

It would be nothing compared to having to see Bobby’s face as he told him the truth about Lilith and Lucifer. Even though it was a demon, it was Bobby’s eyes that had held such disappointment in him. It had been Bobby’s voice that told him to lose his number.

Talking to him without letting him know how much he meant to him would be easy. He was going to be happy just to hear his voice.
After Missouri and James left, Sam took the lore book from the study and settled down in the living room to read while waiting for the call.

He was trying to concentrate on the book to distract himself, but the words slipped through his mind without leaving meaning. All he could think about was the phone call that should be coming soon. He wanted it to come so much it was like an ache in his chest.

He’d never imagined he would be in a position that a phone call from Bobby would mean this much to him, especially as he was going to have to play the part of a stranger for him. It had been over a year since he’d heard his voice though, and he had thought of him a lot, knowing he was out there somewhere but being unable to see him. It was different with Dean as, although he was closer, he was a baby. Bobby was almost the man he’d left behind, just minus some memories. Sam would be able to talk to him.

He eventually gave up his attempt to read and slammed his book shut. He couldn’t take in a word of it anyway. He set it down on the table and stared at the telephone on the table instead, willing it to ring.

It took another thirty minutes before it did, and Sam jumped up and grabbed it from the cradle. “Hello,” he said, deepening his voice and adding a drawl he didn’t usually have.

“Is that Taylor?”

Sam just closed his eyes a moment and absorbed Bobby’s voice, heart pounding in his chest. Bobby was there. Somewhere in Maine right now, Bobby was living, needing help, and Sam would be able to give it.

“It is,” Sam said.

“I’m Bobby Singer, and I’m hunting with Rufus Turner. I was given your number by Missouri Mosely. She thought you might be able to help us with a hunt we’re on.”

“Yes, she told me a little about it,” Sam said. “You have some strange deaths happening.”

“We do. A pastor that drowned in crazy circumstances. A pair that had a head on collision with thin air and a man that drank himself to death with no sign of alcohol in the vicinity. One of the women survived the head on, but we think something’s happened to her, too. She’s disappeared.”

“And these people had something in common,” Sam said.

“We’re not sure about the alcohol poisoning guy as we’re still looking into that, but the others had less than stellar histories. Do you think that’s got something to do with it?”

“I do,” Sam said, inwardly marveling at the fact it was him helping Bobby with lore for a change. It was a complete reversal of roles. It felt good, too. He was returning the favor Bobby had extended his family so many times over the years. “There’s something called a trickster working the town you’re in. They like dealing out what amounts to revenge on people that it feels are deserving.”

“Sounds like a real treat,” Bobby said.
“They’re nasty, for sure. They have a twisted sense of humor, and if you’ve got a missing person with a dark history, you can assume they’re dead or soon to be dying.”

“Balls.”

Sam’s breath caught at the familiar exclamation. He had been so happy at the thought of speaking to Bobby, but the moment was fast becoming painful. He wanted to see him desperately.

“You kill it with a wooden stake to the heart,” he said. “Be careful though. They’re smart and they’re not going to stand still and let you stab them. You’re going to have to outsmart it.”

“You sure that’s what it is?” Bobby asked. “It can’t be something else?”

“It could,” Sam said. “I haven’t heard of anything else with the same MO though. Have you noticed anything else about the scenes? Has there been candy wrappers or anything left lying around?”

“Yeah, we found a bunch of Pay Day wrappers at the side of the road where the car wreck happened.”

“Then it’s a trickster. They have a high metabolism and burn through sugar fast.”

“That’s something, I guess. At least we know what we’re going after. Thanks for the tip.”

“You’re welcome,” Sam said. “Is there anything else you need?”

“No, I think that’s all. We’ll get this taken care of.”

“Okay,” Sam said, a hint of sadness in his voice now. He wasn’t ready for Bobby to go. There was so much he wanted to ask him, though he knew he couldn’t. He just wanted to listen to him talk a little longer. “Take care of yourselves out there.”

“Always do,” Bobby said. “See ya.”

“Bye, Bobby,” Sam said quietly.

The call clicked off and Sam set the receiver gently back in the cradle. He drew a shaky breath and buried his face in his hands.

He had wanted the call so much because he had thought only of hearing Bobby’s voice. He hadn’t considered how it would feel when it was done. The things he’d wanted to say had been trapped in his throat as he kept himself businesslike, but it had still been Bobby he was talking to. That had meant everything. Now he was gone, and it was brought home to Sam just how lost he was to his family. He couldn’t see Bobby. He would be living in the same world as him for another three decades, but he couldn’t see him at all. He would only have his voice if he was lucky. Though he hoped he would hear from him again, he was aware that it would be a blessing and a curse. He could talk to him, maybe help out on a hunt, but Bobby could never know the truth. Until it was time to see him again, Sam would remain just another hunter out there, handing out lore.

It had felt good to speak to him, but stopping hurt.

xXx

Sam eventually pulled himself out of his funk and decided he would go to bed and get on the site early the next day. He checked the grill was cool, then closed the lid and went inside to the living
room. He picked up the book he’d been attempting to read and carried it into the study to put away, and was starting back into the living room to collect his coffee cup and wash it when he heard a throat being cleared behind him.

He spun around to look into the face of a man he had never seen before. He was blonde and almost as tall as Sam. His eyes were blue, and he had a light tan. He radiated no immediate menace and he was unarmed, but the fact he was here put Sam on his guard. He wished he was armed. Most his weapons were in the trunk in the study, and his gun was in a drawer on the other side of the room, with the man between Sam and it. He couldn’t tell if the man was human or supernatural. He hadn’t heard him come in, but he hadn’t locked the doors, so he could have gotten in easily enough.

The man looked him up and down with a frown. “Well, aren’t you something special.”

“What do you want?” Sam asked.

“Well, I came to seek some revenge for what you did, but now I want an explanation. What are you?”

“You first,” Sam said. “What are you?” He was leaning toward him not being human now that he had asked Sam what he was rather than who.

The man tapped his chin. “I suppose it can’t help to tell you that much. It’s not like you’re going to be in a position to tell anyone, after all. My name is Loki.”

Sam’s eyes widened. “You’re Loki?”

It was Gabriel. He was in a different vessel, but now that Sam really looked at him, he could see the truth. The eyes held the same mischief they had when he’d been posing as the trickster. There was also something about the smile. It was knowing and cruel as Sam had seen before. He clearly didn’t know everything though, as he asked, “And who are you?”

Sam considered. He could give an honest answer or a lie. There was little to serve him in either choice, as Gabriel had obviously come here for a good reason—to kill him. He wouldn’t succeed, but Sam would rather avoid the pain of him trying.

“My name is Taylor,” he said.

“Yes, I got that much eavesdropping on the conversation between those two hunters. But that’s not the whole story, is it?”

“What makes you say that?”

“First of all, I can’t sense you, which means you’re something other than human, and I can see you don’t belong here. And there’s the fact you’re spilling over with something special.”

“Where do I belong?” Sam asked, ignoring his second statement.

“Not in this time.”

Sam feigned calm he didn’t feel and walked past Gabriel to his usual armchair and sat down. He rested his ankle on his knee and leaned back, the picture of relaxation. He wanted to show Gabriel he wasn’t scared of him. Even before he’d found out he was really an archangel, the trickster had scared him because of what he had done to Dean in the time loop, but now he felt no fear. Gabriel couldn’t kill him. In fact, this was the first time Sam had the upper hand. He knew everything
while Gabriel knew nothing.

Gabriel scowled at him. “Comfortable?”

“Very,” Sam said. “Feel free to sit down. The couch is pretty comfy, too.”

Gabriel shook his head. “I’m fine, thanks. I would like some answers though. What are you doing here?”

“I live here.”

“Here in this time?” he amended.

“I was brought back by a friend. I was trapped by an enemy.”

“How do you know the kind of friend that can time travel?” He hesitated. “Are you talking about Chronos?”

“Chronos is dead,” Sam said. “He was killed by another enemy.”

Gabriel whistled between his teeth. “Those are some interesting enemies you’ve got; killing a god and sticking you here. Who are they? I’d like to speak to them. Anyone powerful enough to take out a fellow god is worth knowing.”

Sam smirked, enjoying himself and the secret he held. “You probably know them already. It was an angel.”

He could that the news hadn’t shocked Gabriel. Whatever it was he had seen in Sam—surely Michael’s influence—had tipped him off, but he said, “Angels aren’t real,” with a convincing scoff.

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Coming from you that’s pretty funny. You know as well as I do that they’re real, since you are, you know, an archangel.”

This time Gabriel couldn’t hide his shock. His eyes widened and he started to take a step back before he gained control and laughed falsely. “Wow. You’re even more nuts that most I’ve met.”

“Cut the crap, Gabriel,” Sam said. “I know exactly who you are.”

“My name is Loki.”

“It is now,” Sam agreed. “But before that it was Gabriel. Loki was the story that developed around you after what you did. You’re a trickster now, but before that you were an archangel.”

A long blade slipped into Gabriel’s hand and he took a step towards Sam. Sam stared back at him impassively. He knew Gabriel couldn’t kill him; he probably wouldn’t even try since Sam had so much knowledge and he would want to know where it came from. Sam had the upper hand and he was going to use it.

“Put it away and sit down, Gabriel,” he said.

Gabriel pressed the tip of his blade to Sam’s throat, a satisfied look in his eyes. “How about I kill you instead?”

“You can try,” Sam said. “But your brother did something that would make the attempt kinda pointless. Besides, you’d make two brothers pissed if you did. Maybe three. I’m not sure how Raphael would feel about it. Lucifer definitely wouldn’t be happy.”
Gabriel paled. “What do you know about Lucifer?”

“I know plenty,” Sam said. “Sit down and I’ll tell you about it.”

“I don’t think I will,” Gabriel said. “I think I’ll just kill you.”

Sam sighed. “Fine. I guess I’ll have to show you.”

He pressed forward slightly, onto the blade, and felt it nick the skin at the base of his throat. He felt a warm trickle down his neck and then a twinge as the skin knitted closed again. He sat back and eyed Gabriel’s shocked face.

“See? Really no point trying. I’ve had plenty worse, and they’ve all healed, too. You can’t kill me.”

Gabriel stepped back and sat down on the couch. He laid the blade across his lap and fixed his gaze on Sam. “You’re human.”

“I am,” Sam agreed. “I just had a boost from your big brother. Michael didn’t want the hassle of following me around and healing me, so he did something that makes me invincible.”

“*Michael* did that to you?”

“Yes.”

“Did he make you untraceable, too?”

“No, that was a friend. Michael comes down firmly on the enemy camp.”

“Why would he do it then?” Gabriel asked, still unable to mask his shock.

“He has his reasons.”

“Which are?”

“Not your business,” Sam said. “I don’t owe you anything.”

“What is Michael doing on earth?”

Sam considered. He wasn’t sure whether to tell him the whole truth. If he was being honest, he was enjoying having the knowledge as opposed to Gabriel’s ignorance. For once, the archangel was the one wrongfooted. After everything he had done to Sam, he deserved to be kept in the dark. What he actually deserved was death, but Sam couldn’t deliver on that even now. Gabriel was alive in the future, which meant he couldn’t die now.

“I can make you tell me,” Gabriel said.

“How?” Sam asked.

“I can make you hurt, even with Michael’s protection. It might even be easier since you won’t die.”

Sam shrugged. “There’s stuff happening where I’m from. Things Michael will want to be there for. He’s not there yet, as he hadn’t got his vessel. He’s *never* getting his vessel, but he’s trying. He made a visit back to last year when I was first here, and he trapped me.”

“Why would he?”
“In 2008 Lilith and the demons will start breaking the seals,” Sam said, seeing Gabriel’s surprise and relishing it. “In 2009 she’s killed, breaking the last seal.”

Gabriel pulled back from his words, and Sam knew he was realizing the gravity of the story. If Lilith had been killed, Lucifer was free.

“He’s out?” he asked.

“Yes, he’s out and full of fun apocalyptic plans.”

Gabriel shook his head. “How do you know about this?”

“Apart from the fact the world is going to hell and I’m a hunter?” Sam asked. “I’m not really called Taylor. I’m Sam Winchester.”

“You’re the vessel!”

“I’m supposed to be,” Sam said. “It’s never going to happen though.”

“It’s foretold.”

“It’s wrong,” Sam said. “I will never say yes to him. Nothing can make me do that.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Sam.”

“I will,” Sam said evenly. “And I will live and die by it.”

He would never say yes to Lucifer, no more than Dean would say yes to Michael. He had made his mistake, and they had set the world on a path to burn, but he would never make that mistake again. He had found a way to deal with Lucifer. Michael trapping him here was somehow supposed to make him prey for the devil, though Sam didn’t understand how. He knew it wouldn’t work though. He was going to fix it so there was never a reason for him to come back. He would kill Azazel and save them all. He would take the curse Michael had set upon him and he would make it work for him. He was going to save the world.

“You shouldn’t be here,” Gabriel said. “If 2010 is where it’s happening, you belong there.”

“Maybe I do, but I’m staying here,” Sam said. “There is something for me to do.”

“Don’t you want to go home? I would have thought you would want to be with your brother again. I’ve heard about the other vessel, too.”

“I do,” Sam said. “I wanted to get home more than anything, but I have learned I can’t. There is work for me here, and I am going to finish it. I’ll go home after.”

“What are you planning?” Gabriel asked.

“Nothing that you need to know about.” He knew Gabriel would never ally himself with Sam’s side, so he didn’t need him.

“Whatever you’re planning, it won’t work,” Gabriel said. “There are rules with time.”

“I’m used to breaking the rules. I will do this.”

Gabriel narrowed his eyes. “Then I think we’re done here.” He raised his hand and brought his fingers together to snap them.
“Wait!” Sam said. “There’s something else you need to know. Those hunters that are after you, you can’t kill them.”

“Says who?”

“The rules. They’re both alive in 2010. Set up a fake if you need to. Disappear if not. But you can’t hurt them. They’re important. You might want to change up your vessel after, too.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I know you in my time, and you don’t look like this.”

“Do you know how hard it would be to get a vessel from the correct bloodline after all this time?”

“I’m sure it’ll be a challenge,” Sam said. “But I also know you’ll do it.”

“You know a lot.”

“Exactly,” Sam said. “I’m the one with the knowledge here. You’re playing catch up.”

Gabriel scowled at him. “Good luck, Sam Winchester. You’re going to need it.”

“So are you,” Sam said. “I know what’s going to happen to you.”

He was bluffing. He knew some of what was coming for Gabriel, but it wasn’t bad for him. He liked the thought of Gabriel living on his guard though. It was small payback for what he had done to him.

Gabriel gave him a look of loathing, then snapped his fingers and disappeared. Sam looked at the place he had been and sighed. He hadn’t thought he would make an ally of Gabriel, but he perhaps shouldn’t have made an enemy already.

It felt like it was worth it though. Sam owed the archangel for what he had done to Dean. A hundred deaths were nothing compared to Gabriel living with fear for a few years.

He deserved it.
Sam felt like he was being baked by the sun. Kansas was in the clutches of the biggest heatwave in decades, and everyone was suffering. Working on the site was like being in an oven. The scaffolding burned to the touch, and cold cans of coke became tepid almost as soon as they left the cooler. Most times you couldn’t even drink them in time to get any relief. Working on the roof was the worst, and they had to do it in shifts so people didn’t overheat. Even bare-chested, Sam felt the sweat slicking him down and making him fumble his tools. He wasn’t getting sick the way some people were—he hadn’t even caught a cold since he was trapped in 1978 with Michael’s protection—but he was as fatigued as everyone else.

He was nailing down the shingles of the roof when he heard someone call up to him. He straightened up and leaned over the scaffolding, making sure not to touch it.

“We’re closing down early, Taylor,” Brad shouted up to him. “It’s gone over 100, so it’s not safe to be out here anymore. Come down and get yourself home.”

Sam gave him the thumbs up and called to Ray and Carl who were working a little further along the roof with a small team from a different crew. “We’re closing down,” he said.

With a look of relief, they all tucked their tools away in their belts and followed Sam down to the ground where Brad was waiting for them.

“Forecasts say the weekend is going to be a scorcher, too, so we’re not putting on any overtime shifts. Come back Monday and we’ll get back to work then.”

“Thanks, Brad,” Sam said gratefully, and Carl and Ray nodded.

Brad nodded to them and went to speak to the next team.

Sam took off his hard hat and set it down on the rack beside the site office, then walked toward the parking lot with Ray and Carl.

“Plans for the weekend?” Carl asked.

“None,” Sam said. “You?”

“The kids are probably going to spend it in the paddle pool, so I’ll be watching them and hoping Fran doesn’t want to barbeque.”

“In this heat?” Sam said incredulously.

“She thinks it’s seasonal,” Carl explained. “She’s not the one working the grill, so she can think that. Personally, I’d be happier with a cold beer and the game.”

“Cold beer,” Ray said wistfully. “That sounds good right now.”

“Brew and Cue?” Sam said.

“Perfect,” Carl said, clapping him on the back. “And since it’s your idea, you’re buying the first round.”

Sam laughed. “No problem.”
“See you there,” Sam said, walking to the car and taking his shirt from the trunk. He slipped it on and regretted it at once. It stuck to his skin, making him feel slick and gross. The Brew and Cue had the no shirt no service rule, though, so he had to suck it up. Besides, they had air conditioning, so he’d cool down soon enough.

He passed people on the streets that were suffering as much under the heat as he was. He wished he knew when it was going to break. The pressure in the air felt like a thunderstorm was imminent, but there was no other sign of one. They needed rain. Not only would it cool things down, but it would help the lakes and farmland that were drying right in front of them. Farmers were losing entire fields of crops, causing financial crisis. There was nothing they could do though. There were strict water restrictions in place. Everyone was expected to ration what they used for the good of all, leaving lawns that were usually lush and green dried brown from the lack of sprinklers.

He parked up outside the Brew and Cue and went inside, feeling the immediate relief of the aircon washing over him. It was busier than usual for the time of day, people coming in for the cool air and cold beer. Sam went to the bar and waited for Miguel to finish serving a man further down and come to him. He toyed with a napkin as he waited, turning it over in his hand.

“Sam!” Miguel said happily as he reached him. “You’re in early.”

“Brad shut down the site,” Sam said. “It’s too damn hot out here. I think he was worried about us getting heatstroke and pitching off the roof.”

“I bet. I don’t know how you guys manage it when it’s like this out. If I wasn’t here, I’d be lying in an ice bath.”

Sam chuckled. “It wouldn’t stay an ice bath for long.”

Miguel nodded. “But it would be good while it lasted. Anyway, you want a beer?”

“Three, please. Carl and Ray are coming in, too.”

Miguel retrieved three beers from the fridge and set them on the bar. Sam unpocketed his wallet and handed over a bill. He took his change and drank some of his beer. It was frigid, feeling blissful on his parched throat.

The door opened and Carl and Ray came in. Sam picked up the bottles and carried them to a table. Carl and Ray sank down into the seats and took their drinks with words of thanks.

Sam took another draw on his beer and said, “Do you think these early shutdowns are going to slow the site down much?”

“Nah,” Ray said easily. “We’re ahead of schedule, so it should be good. I don’t mind if we’re slowed though. I don’t think the boss has a new job lined up when we’re done.”

Sam hoped it would last. He knew from an economics class at Stanford that the recession was coming, and there were a lot of people that were going to be unemployed and on the breadline because of it. It wouldn’t be so bad for him, as he had money set aside, but he worried for the people he worked with. They all worked hard for the firm and they would be lost without their jobs.

“It better,” Ray said. “I’ve got some big bills coming up.”

“You have?” Sam asked.
“Yeah,” Ray said slowly, looking uncomfortable. “I’ve gone and got myself engaged.”

Sam clapped him on the shoulder and Carl laughed.

“Good for you,” Sam said enthusiastically. “When did that happen?”

“Last weekend. Cindy and I went out to dinner at Café Provencal and I asked.”

“Did you get down on one knee?” Carl asked with a grin. “Or did you hide the ring in her dessert?”

Ray blushed. “I asked her. She said yes. That’s all you need to know.”

“You put it in the dessert!” Carl crowed.

“Ignore him, Ray” Sam said. “However you did it, it’s good news.”

“Thanks, Sam. It felt like it was about time. And she’s happy, so I am.”

“Listen to you two,” Carl mocked. “You’re like a pair of women. Are you going to pick out your dresses together?”

Sam punched Carl’s arm. “I’m sure you proposed in a suitably manly way, Carl. Feel like telling us about it?”

Carl rubbed the spot and said. “It was manly. Very manly.”

“Then tell us about it.”

Ray laughed. “If he won’t, I will. Fran told Cindy and she told me. You took her to a lookout spot and got down on one knee.”

Sam snorted. “Sounds very manly.”

“Fine, it wasn’t manly, it was romantic.” Carl said. “She loved it though, and she deserved something special.”

“She did,” Sam agreed. “She’s a good woman. And you only do it once in your life if you’re doing it right. It sounds to me like you are.”

“Listen to him!” Carl said, getting his grounding again now the embarrassment had passed. “You never married Sam?”

“No,” Sam said.

“Never found the right woman?” Ray asked.

“I found her,” Sam said seriously. “But I lost her. Came close, I was ready to propose, but she was killed.”

“Aw, man, I’m sorry. I didn’t know,” Ray said, as Carl averted his eyes.

“No reason you would,” Sam said. “I don’t talk about Jess much.”

“Is that why you are the way you are?” Ray asked.

Sam frowned. “What way am I?”
“Lost,” Ray supplied. “You’re better than you were, but you’re still looking for something.”

“Is that the Impala connection?” Carl asked.

“No. That’s something else.”

“Is Jess why you never really settled down with someone else?” Ray asked. “We’ve known you a couple years now, and unless you’re really good at hiding it, you’ve never had anyone else. Not even a one-nighter.”

Sam looked away. It was true he hadn’t had another woman since he’d been stuck in the past, but it hadn’t felt important. He’d had bigger things to deal with than finding someone whose company he could enjoy. He hadn’t given it much thought, but now he did. He didn’t need to isolate himself so completely. It might be good for him to find someone to spend some time with.

“No, Jess would want me to move on,” he said.

“Then why not?”

Sam shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe it’ll happen in time.”

“It’d be good for you,” Ray said.

“Okay, that’s enough,” Carl said loudly. “Sam needs a woman. We can help with that. But I am going to put a stop to this conversation before you two start sharing makeup tips.”

Sam shook his head, grinning. “Okay, manly man. We’ll stop and you can tell us all about your proposal again. Maybe share some homemaker tips for Ray. I’m sure he could use your expertise.”

Carl swigged back his beer and set the bottle down on the table. “You’re assholes. You know that, right?”

Sam laughed. “Oh, we know.”

Carl went to the bar to fetch a fresh beer and Sam took a draw on his own. He was thinking though. It wasn’t Jessica that held him back, or Dean and the things he’d left behind, so maybe he needed to let whatever it was go. He had a life to live here for the next three years, and he might as well enjoy it.

xXx

Sam was in the kitchen clearing up after breakfast when the phone rang. He set down the cloth then walked into the living room to answer. “Hello.”

“Hey, Sam,” Missouri said. “How are you?”

“Hot. But otherwise good. You?”

“We’re okay. I tried calling last night but you weren’t home. Were you doing anything fun?”

“I went to the Brew and Cue with Ray and Carl and got caught up in a pool tournament with some kids from the college.”

“Sounds fun.”

“It was. What did you do?”
“The accounts,” she said. “We got the dividend checks from IBM, so I was sorting them. I’ll give you yours when I see you.”

“Great. Thanks, Missouri. I’ll pick them up tomorrow when I come by.”

“You can get them earlier if you’d like. James is crowing about going to the lake, and he wants you to come. Are you free?”

“Is there even a lake left?” Sam asked.

“It’s low but it’s there. A bunch of James’ friends are going to be there. Do you want to come?”

“Yeah, that’d be great. You want me to bring anything?”

“Just yourself and some swim shorts. I’ll take care of the picnic and towels.”

“Okay. I’ll see you there,” Sam said.

“Actually, do you think you can give us a ride? James asked specifically. I think he wants to arrive in style for his friends.”

Sam chuckled. “Sure, no problem. I’ll change and come right over.”

“Thanks, Sam.”

They exchanged goodbyes and Sam set the phone down on the cradle. He was looking forward to spending some time with James and Missouri, and cooling off in the lake sounded good, too.

He went into the bedroom and changed into his swim shorts, then pulled on a pair of jeans over them. He didn’t bother with a shirt, just deciding on a tank top that would be more comfortable. He grabbed his keys from the table by the door and headed out to the car.

It wasn’t a long drive from his place to Missouri’s, but they were already waiting on the front porch when he arrived. James raced toward the car and climbed into the backseat before Missouri had even got down the steps. Sam helped her load her bags into the trunk and then got in again. When Missouri was settled and James bouncing on the seat, eager to go, he started the engine and pulled away from the sidewalk.

They parked in the public beach lot at Clinton lake and got out to unload the trunk. There were two other cars unloading passengers and belongings with children that looked to be James’ age. He leaned against the side of the car, calling a greeting to them, obviously proud to show off ‘his ride’. Sam and Missouri exchanged knowing glances then tugged him away from the car and down to the beach.

There were a lot of people on the beach, dressed in swimsuits and shorts. A group of girls that looked to be college age were grouped around a small record player from which the sounds of Kool and the Gang were emanating. There was a holiday atmosphere and a lot of the kids were playing in the water, jumping around and throwing a beachball back and forth.

James quickly stripped down to his swim shorts and ran into the water, Missouri’s cautious calls to be careful following him.

Sam helped her lay out the blankets and rolled towels and shaded the picnic cooler with an umbrella. Missouri took off her skirt and top, exposing a red swimsuit. Sam undressed down to his shorts, hearing giggling behind him. He turned and saw the girls with the record player watching
“I think you’ve got admirers,” Missouri said with a laugh.

“Great,” Sam sighed. He might be thinking of exploring life a little more thoroughly, but he wasn’t dipping into the college pool. He was 29 now, and he had sense and standards.

“Don’t worry,” Missouri said. “I’ll protect you. I can play the jealous girlfriend better than anyone.”

“That would be great if you weren’t wearing a wedding ring, Missouri.”

She looked down at her ring. “Good point. I’ll just have to scare them away with glares.”

“Knew I could rely on you.”

“You always can,” Missouri said seriously.

Sam nodded. He knew just how much Missouri did for him, and he would never be able to repay her for it.

Missouri lay down and tucked a towel under her head. “Any special jobs coming up?” she asked.

“None,” Sam said. “It’s quiet as far as I can tell. Even George said he’s taking a little time off last time I saw him.”

He had taken out a lone vampire a few weeks ago and met with George after since they were in the same area. It had been George that came to Sam with the information for the hunt as he had seen the clues when he was in the area for something else.

“That’s good,” Missouri said, closing her eyes. “It’s always better when it’s quiet. Less people getting hurt.”

“Yeah.”

Sam stared out at the water, watching James play with his friends. He was laughing, and it made Sam smile to see him so happy. James was a special kid, important to Sam, and he wanted him to have this peaceful life.

“Any inside information on when this heatwave will break?” Missouri asked.

“No,” Sam said. “It’s not like I studied these years before I came back. Unless it made big headlines or a college syllabus, I probably don’t know about it.”

“Shame,” Missouri said. “It would be good to have an end in sight. This heat is too much.”

“I know. Stanford didn’t really make time for historic weather patterns in the Midwest though.”

Missouri opened her eyes and looked up at him. “Do you ever miss college?”

“No,” Sam said, surprised by the question. “I mean, I did at first, when I first set out with Dean again, but there was so much other stuff going on that it didn’t last. I enjoyed it while I was there, but it was a different life.”

“You could do it again,” Missouri said. “Have a do over. You have a lot of years to fill and you’re not going to need a job much longer with the dividends that are coming in for us.”
Sam looked around to make sure they weren’t being overheard. Though the beach was busy, there was enough space and noise around them to make their conversation go unnoticed.

“I don’t have enough time,” Sam said. “Not really. Azazel is coming in three years.”

“But after?”

Sam looked at her with surprise. He thought she would have figured that part out. It was true that when he’d explained he was going to save his family that he hadn’t told her much about what they were saving them from. He thought she’d know though he wouldn’t be staying after.

“I won’t be here, Missouri,” he said quietly, quickly looking away from her stunned face.

“Why not?”

“Because it all starts there. What happens with Azazel sets my family on the path that leads me to that version of 2010 and the reason I came back. If I fix in in ’83, I’ll never need to come back. My life will be completely different. I won’t be a hunter.”

He chanced a glance at her and saw her lips were parted with shock.

“You won’t be here?”

“Not if it works,” Sam said quietly. “I won’t need to be. There will be no reason for us to come.”

“No reason?” Her eyes drifted to James in the water and then to Sam’s face. She looked almost accusing.

“It’s not like that,” he said. “If I could do both, be here with you and save them, I would, but it won’t work like that. We’ll never meet Castiel if things are changed, so he won’t bring me back. I won’t have a chance.”

“But you have to do it?”

“I do. The things that will come will be bad. Not just for me and my friends and family, but for the world. I can stop that. I can go back and have a normal life, Missouri. I can have people I’ve lost, maybe. College could be a real path for me—not just something to pass the time. There are people I’ve lost that I can have again.”

She nodded and formed her expression into one of peace for him. He knew she wasn’t feeling it though. He didn’t want to leave her and James behind, but it was the only way. He had to make things right not just for him and Dean, but for the world. He could save it. After what he had done to curse it, he had to do what he could, even if it cost him the presence of people he loved.

“Who did you lose?” she asked.

“Too many,” Sam said. “And none of them deserved it.”

“And you really think you’ll get them back?”

“I hope I will. Some of them will be alive but I’ll never see them, as our paths won’t cross, but I am hoping some do.”

“So, you think if you kill this Azazel you’ll go back to a different life?”

Sam nodded. “That’s what I am hoping.”
“Do you think you’ll remember us? What we have now?”

Sam looked into her eyes, seeing they were wet. “I don’t know. I hope so. I don’t want to forget you. I don’t want to lose you, but I have no choice, really. If I remember, I’ll find you again. If not, well, your life will be better, too.”

Missouri wiped a hand over her face. “I understand why you have to do this, I do, but I wish there was another way. You mean a lot to me, Sam, and to James. He won’t understand. He will… Oh.” She looked past Sam and her mouth dropped open.

Concerned by her reaction, Sam turned, too, and his heart caught in his throat. There was a new family joining the crowd on the beach, and Sam knew them. John Winchester was picking his way over the sand with his hands full of a cooler and straw bag, and Mary carried Dean behind him.

Sam just stared. He hadn’t seen Mary or John since he’d been trapped, and he’d never seen Dean like this. It was the most incredible thing to see them like this, as a family. He drank them in with his eyes. Dean was dressed in a pair of blue shirts and a yellow t-shirt. His feet were bare and his legs kicked excitedly. His hair was light blonde and lay in curls around his face. Mary was wearing a swimsuit under a long flowing shirt and her long blonde hair was pulled back from her face in a ponytail. John wore shorts and a t-shirt—he was already tanned.

“Sam,” Missouri cautioned.

He dragged his eyes away from his family and looked at her. He knew the way he was looking at them wasn’t appropriate for a stranger. He didn’t want to draw attention to himself, or worse, scare them off.

“I know,” he said quietly.

Sam saw the small family walk past in his peripheral vision and stop just ahead of them. With the pretense of watching the people in the lake, Sam saw John lay out a blanket and Mary sit Dean down in the middle of it. He clapped pudgy hands together and immediately rolled and pushed himself to his feet and began to walk away. Mary laughed as she scooped him up and sat down with him in her lap. John sat opposite and chucked Dean under the chin, saying something Sam couldn’t hear.

He looked away and caught Missouri’s sad smile. “Are you okay?” she asked. “Do you want to leave?”

“No,” Sam said fervently. “I can be careful.”

“It doesn’t hurt you?”

“No, it’s incredible. Look at them. They’re so happy and alive. They’re together.”

“I see them, and I understand now. I was thinking of me and James, what we stand to lose; I didn’t see what there was for you to gain properly. You will be a part of that family.”

“I will,” Sam said. “And I can’t think of anything better.”

“Neither can I.”

Sam’s eyes drifted to his family again as Dean gave a delighted laugh. The fact Sam was looking at his brother for the first time in two years felt good, even though it was him as a baby. He was seeing his life as it had been before Sam was born and Azazel came, and it was a happy one. It was
what any person would want for someone they loved.

James cut into his view and Sam looked at him. He was smiling excitedly, and he came to a stop in front of Sam and spoke in a rush. “We’re going to play chicken fight, Sam! Come play with us. We’ll kick their asses.”

“James,” Missouri scolded.

“Sorry, Momma. I mean we’ll win. Will you come play?”

“Of course,” Sam said, standing up.

James grinned and bounded away toward the depleted lake again. Sam followed him, picking his way through the other groups sitting on their blankets and towels. As he passed his family, he heard Mary said, “Look at Daddy, Dean. He’s going to get your photo.”

There was the click of a camera and then a delighted baby’s laugh.

Sam smiled to himself, just absorbing his peripheral presence in this perfect moment of his family’s life.

He got to the shore and hefted James on to his shoulders then walked out to where a group of children sat on their father’s shoulders, ready to play.

“Oh, James,” Sam said. “Let’s kick some ass.”

James laughed and Sam absorbed the sound as much as he had Dean’s laughter. He had two families now. One he had found in the past and one he wanted to return to in the future. He had to leave one behind to find the other, and that was going to hurt him, but the world would be a better place if he did.

All good things in life cost something, and Missouri and James were the price he had to pay for peace for himself and others. It wasn’t going to be immediate. He had three years to wait still, but he wouldn’t waste the time he had in anticipation. He was going to enjoy being with Missouri and James as much as he could until it was time to leave them behind.
There was tension in the air on the site that morning. The company owner, Vic, was there and he’d been seen having serious discussions with Brad in the site office. Sam thought he knew what was coming, and the rumors running around were on the same track. The economy was tanking, and they all knew it. People all over were being made unemployed, and businesses were folding.

Sam didn’t think the firm was going down completely, as they were still working on a big project, but he expected layoffs. Ray and Carl were nervous. Ray was married now and he and Cindy were expecting a baby. Carl already had a wife and two children to support. It was the same for a lot of the crew; they all had someone or something to work for.

Sam understood their fear, but he didn’t share it. With dividends from their investments and some sales of shares recently, Sam and Missouri were doing well financially. Neither of them was going to struggle for the next few years, no matter what happened. That didn’t alleviate Sam’s guilt though. He would happily share his money with Carl and Ray to soften times for them, but they would never accept it. They were proud men. Sam understood that, but he wished he could do more. He felt almost guilty for using his foreknowledge to improve his situation when other people couldn’t.

The tension racked up even higher when they were called down to clock off early and Brad and Vic were waiting for them with a crowd of the ground crew. A meeting had been called.

Brad and Vic stood on a stack of bricks so they were visible, and Brad started to speak while Vic stood stony-faced.

“I know you’ve probably already guessed what this is about,” he started. “Times are hard.”

“Damn right,” Carl grumbled beside Sam.

“We all need to make adjustments. For some of you that’s going to be tough, for others it will be worse.”

“Get to it!” a frustrated voice called out of the crowd.

Brad nodded. “I’ll get to it. We have to make changes for the good of the many.”

“What about the few?” Ray shouted.

“We’re doing this the fairest way we can come up with. There will be layoffs, and there will be wage cuts.”

A huge groan went up from the crowd and people muttered among themselves.

“Let me finish,” Brad called, and they quietened. “It’s not going to be last in first out. We’re doing this by merit and skillset. We’re going to be looking at each case individually and finding the people we need to keep to finish the job we’ve got going. None of you are destined for layoff because you’re new, but none of you are safe either.”

“That’s not fair!” a man called Frankie shouted. “I’ve been slogging for you for twelve years, Vic Rafferty. Why don’t that count?”

Vic looked uncomfortable but he didn’t answer.
“We think it’s fairer for you all and us to do it this way,” Brad said. “We need to keep the best crew possible so we can finish this job on time. We need to keep our reputation so we can get new jobs after; you know they’re going to be hard to find with the way things are. If there’s no new job after this, there’s no work for anyone here at all.”

There was no ignoring the sense of his statement, though it looked like people wanted to. They were worried, and that was transporting itself into anger. Sam understood it, but he had expected it. He had already decided what he was going to do long ago.

“We’ll be assessing over the next couple days,” Brad said. “We’ll have answers about who’s staying and who’s going by the end of the week. I’m sorry to be doing this to you all, I really am. I am one of you.”

“But you’re keeping your damn job,” Ray muttered.

Carl nodded.

“Get yourselves home,” Brad said. “I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

People tossed their hardhats onto the racks and walked off the site to the parking lot with matching expressions of anger and frustration.

Sam didn’t follow them. He walked over to Vic and Brad who had climbed down from their makeshift stage and were talking quietly.

“Taylor,” Brad said loudly when he approached, cutting off Vic’s words. “You okay?”

“Is anyone?” Sam asked in return. “That wasn’t the best news to hear.”

“No,” Brad said seriously. “And I’m sorry for it. I can’t tell you more than I already have though. We’ll have no answers till the end of the week. Get yourself off home.”

“I have an answer for you,” Sam said. He took off his hardhat and held it out to Brad. “I’m quitting.”

Vic narrowed his eyes and Brad looked stunned. “What? Why?” He glanced at Vic and then said in a whisper, “Look, Taylor, I shouldn’t be telling you this, but you guys are safe. We need the roofing team to stay on because you’re the only ones that know the way things work up there. You’ve got skills we need.”

Sam was pleased that it meant Carl and Ray were safe, but he wasn’t changing his mind. He was still going.

“You can find someone else with the skills,” Sam said. “Or train someone. I started here knowing nothing and I learned.”

“Why are you doing this?” Vic asked suspiciously.

“Because I can,” Sam said. “I don’t need this job as much as the others. I have no family to support and I have enough savings to get me by. Let someone that needs it take my spot.”

Vic and Brad exchanged a look and Brad asked, “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Sam said, holding out his hat again.

Brad took it from him and turned it over in his hands. “Thank you, Taylor. We appreciate you
doing this.”

“No problem,” Sam said.

“You can come back,” Brad said. “When we’re back on an even keel, I’ll make sure there’s a job for you.” He turned to Vic. “Right?”

Vic nodded. “We’ll find you when it’s time.”

“Thanks,” Sam said. He opened his mouth and then hesitated.

“What?” Vic asked.

“Doing it by merit is fine,” Sam said. “But everyone here is a good worker already. They all have merit. Pay attention to the person they are, too. Some need the money more than others. They have people relying on them.”

“I will,” Brad said seriously. Sam remembered that he had a wife and three sons at home.

“Okay,” Sam said.

He turned to go, but Vic called his name and he turned to see Vic extending a hand to him. Sam shook it. “You’re making a good choice,” Vic said. “A good man’s choice.”

“Thanks,” Sam said. “Make sure you do, too.”

Vic released his hand and nodded. “I will.”

Sam stuffed his hands into his pockets and walked away. He thought he would get himself a beer and maybe shoot some pool and then start to think of what he was going to do with his life now that he was unemployed.

xXx

Sam walked into the Brew and Cue and went straight to the bar. It was busy. A lot of the people from the site were in there, talking in small groups. Sam saw Carl and Ray sitting at a table in the corner, faces dour. Carl looked up and caught sight of Sam. He waved him over, and Sam nodded then gestured to the bar, indicating he wanted to get a drink first. Carl nodded and said something to Ray.

He couldn’t imagine how Carl and Ray were feeling. He’d never had a family relying on him to bring money in, and he’d never been on the cusp of losing his job. He’d just quit the only real job he’d ever had. He didn’t regret his choice. It was what he had to do for his friends, but he did feel sad that he wasn’t going to be there anymore. He enjoyed his work, and he liked the people he worked with. Not spending his days with them would be strange after so long.

“Sam, what can I get you?” Miguel asked.

“Michelob, please,” Sam said.

Miguel retrieved a bottle from the fridge and handed it to him, exchanging it for a bill. “I heard what’s happening,” he said. “It’s hard times, bud.”

“It is,” Sam agreed. “All over.”

“I feel bad for you guys.”
Sam nodded. “Me too, man. Me too.”

He picked up his change and carried his beer over to the corner table, taking a seat between Ray and Carl.

“You took a while,” Ray said. “We figured you’d gone home.”

“I needed to talk to Brad and Vic.”

Ray shook his head dolefully. “There’s no point, Sam. They’re going to do what they’re going to do. Nothing we say is going to make a difference.”

“That’s not why I spoke to them,” Sam said. “I quit.”

Carl choked on his beer and Sam smacked him on the back. “You did what?” he rasped when he had cleared his throat.

Sam took a swig of his beer, uncomfortable under Carl and Ray’s incredulous looks.

“Sam?” Ray prompted.

“I quit,” Sam said. “I don’t need the money the way some people do. It seemed unfair for me to take a spot from someone else.”

Carl frowned. “You don’t need the money?”

Sam understood. He didn’t live like he had money. Neither he nor Missouri were big spenders. They only bought what they needed, using the money they’d made as a bolster for what they didn’t earn on the site and with Missouri’s readings.

“My folks had some money,” Sam lied. “I inherited it and invested. I’m going to be okay without a job for a little while.”

“Must be nice,” Ray said.

Sam had no good answer so he stayed silent.

“What are you going to do?” Carl asked.

“I don’t know yet. Vic said that when things pick back up I’ll have a job with them, so I’ve just got to get through this.”

“You think they’ll ever improve?” Ray asked. “Things don’t look good.”

“It will get better,” Sam said confidently. “We’ve had hard times before.”

“Think it’ll happen soon?” Carl asked. “Because if I lose my job, we’ve only got maybe a months’ worth of savings to scrape by on.”

Sam glanced around and lowered his voice. “You’re not losing your job. Brad said they need our team still. They’re going to train someone to take my place, but you two are safe.”

Carl sucked in a breath. “You sure?”

“It’s what he said to me. I believe him. Wages are going to cut, but you’ll have something at least.”
Ray downed his beer and set the bottle hard down onto the table with a sigh. “That’s about the best news I’ve had all year.”

Carl nodded his agreement though he still looked guarded. “Wage cuts though.”

“It’s better than no wage at all,” Ray said. “This is as good as it’s going to get for us. We’ll at least have something coming in. I know that’s what I’m telling Cindy when I break the news to her.” He glanced at his watch. “Which is what I’m doing now.” He stood and picked up his jacket from the back of the chair. “Thanks for this, Sam.”

Sam shrugged. “Don’t thank me. I’m not even supposed to have told you.”

“I’m glad you did,” Ray said and Carl nodded. “That’s not what I meant though. You’re doing a good thing for someone else, stepping down.”

Sam ducked his head. It didn’t feel like a big thing. He was just doing it because it was fair. He didn’t need the money but someone else did. What kind of man would he be that took that away from them?

“You take care of yourself, Sam,” Ray said.

“You too,” Sam said. “I’ll see you around.”

Ray patted his back and then walked away to the door.

Carl took one last draw on his beer and set the bottle down. “I should go, too. If someone calls and tells Fran before I get a chance, she’s going to be mad. I don’t want to deal with that.” He stood up and held out a hand to Sam. “Don’t be a stranger, Sam.”

“I won’t,” Sam said, shaking his hand.

Sam watched him walk out of the bar and he took a swig of his beer. He had at least given his friends good news. There were a lot of people in the bar that he couldn’t help, but he had done what he could for them. He just wished he could do more.

xXx

Sam slipped off his jacket when he got inside his front door and hung it on a peg on the wall. He dropped his keys in the bowl on the table, noticing a sheet of folded paper tucked underneath. He opened it and recognized Missouri’s handwriting.

Sam, Rufus Turner called. He and Bobby need lore for a hunt. I said you’d call them.

There was a number written, and beneath it, one more line of message.

P.S. 25 minutes in a medium heat oven.

Sam smiled at the postscript. Missouri often came over when he wasn’t home for one reason or another, but she never came emptyhanded, so knew there was something tasty waiting in the fridge for him. He had told her she didn’t need to do it, she could come and go whenever she liked, but he never complained about the gifts she left. Missouri was an amazing cook.

He walked through to the kitchen and opened the fridge. As expected, there was dish on the shelf covered with foil. He unpeeled it and saw it contained a large serving of lasagna.

“Thank you, Missouri,” he said happily.
He turned the oven on to preheat and then went back into the living room to make the call. He dialed the number from Missouri’s note and sat down in the armchair, thinking how much easier things were going to be when he had a cell phone.

He felt a thrill of nerves as the line rang through. He was hoping he would be able to speak to Bobby again. He knew he couldn’t say any of the things he really wanted to, but to speak to him at all would be a gift.

It rang a long time before a familiar voice—but not the one he longed for—answered. “Hello.”

“Hi, is this Rufus?” Sam asked.

“It is. Who’s this?”

“Sam Taylor. I got a message saying you needed to speak to me.”

“Ah, Taylor. Thanks for getting back. Yeah. We need a little help and we figured you might be able to come through for us again like you did with the trickster.”

“How did that work out for you?” Sam asked.

“We nailed that asshole with a stake to the heart thanks to you,” Rufus said. “It wasn’t easy, but we caught it off guard.”

“I’m glad,” Sam said honestly. He was pleased Gabriel had come through and let them believe they’d killed him and that he hadn’t hurt them.

“Yeah, but we’ve got a new mystery this time. Something’s dropping bodies and we don’t know what it is.”

“What does it look like so far?” Sam asked.

“Vamp kills,” Rufus said. “The bodies are drained and there are bites on the neck, but something isn’t adding up. The bites don’t look right. The teeth are larger and spaced together differently.”

“What about the victims?” Sam asked. “Are they being killed quick or is there a gap between them disappearing and being killed?”

“Definitely a gap. They’re snatched and show up a week later as a fresh kill. We think whatever has them is keeping them alive for a reason.”

Sam was pretty sure he knew what it was. He had read about them only a few months ago in the bestiary. “They’re being drained over time,” he said. “It sounds like a vetala. They spread their feeding out over days, using venom to incapacitate their victims.”

“Vetala. That’s a new one on me. How do we take it out?”

“You need a silver knife. You have to destroy the heart completely, so get the knife in deep and give it a good twist.”

“Silver to the heart,” Rufus said. “Okay then. That we can do.”

“Be careful though,” Sam said. “They hunt in pairs and they’re strong.”

“That’s not a problem. We hunt as a pair, too.”
“How’s that going?” Sam asked.

“Hunting with Bobby? He’s an ornery old bastard but so am I, so it works out. He’s coming up a damn good hunter now. How about you, Taylor? You hunt alone? I’d never heard of you before Missouri Mosely set us up with your number last time. What’s your story?”

“I work alone,” Sam said. “I was raised in the life by my dad, and I have made a point of spending the last few years researching the lore.”

“Never heard of a hunter called Taylor before.”

“We worked the fringes,” Sam said. “My dad wasn’t big on crowds.”

“He still in the life?”

“No, he died,” Sam said. “It’s just me now.”

There was a voice in the background of the call and Sam’s heart leapt. It was Bobby. Though it was muffled, Sam could hear what he was saying. “You two done chatting? I thought we had something to kill.”

“Screw you, Singer,” Rufus said good-naturedly. “He’s got a point though. We’ve got to find these vetala things. Any clues on where they’ll be lurking?”

“Afraid not,” Sam said. “You’ll have to track them down the old-fashioned way.”

“Figured it wouldn’t be that easy,” Rufus said. “We’ll get to it. Thanks, Taylor. We’ll be in touch again, I’m sure.”

“Call anytime,” Sam said.

“We will. See ya.”

The call clicked off and Sam set the receiver back on the cradle then relaxed back in his chair and sighed. It hadn’t been the same as talking to Bobby, but it was still good to be able to speak to Rufus. It was a touch of home.

He knew now what he had to do next, too. He had money and time on his hands, so he was going to use that to go back to his legacy and hunt.

Like Bobby and Rufus, that was how he could make a difference.
After he’d spoken to Rufus, Sam had put in a call to a bar in Colorado that George was known to frequent. It was the only way to get hold of him if you needed to. The rest of the time you had to wait for him to contact you. He hadn’t been in the bar when Sam had called, but Sam had left a message and he’d called back the next day. They’d arranged to meet in the town George used as his base when he wasn’t on the case, and Sam set out.

It was dinnertime by the time Sam found the diner at the address George had given him. It was set on a busy street filled with stores and restaurants. He looked up and down the street for a sign of George’s car as he fed the meter. He couldn’t see it, but it was a crowded street and Sam had been lucky to get a spot so close to his destination. He figured George could have needed to park somewhere else.

When he opened the diner door, he was met with the familiar sounds and smells from a lifetime of eating in diners. He didn’t eat in them very often anymore as he had his own kitchen to cook in, but sometimes he would collect James from Missouri’s and take him out to breakfast at Daisy’s on weekends as a treat.

It was busy, most of the tables were filled, but Sam spotted a free one in the corner and he quickly weaved through the other tables and waitresses to it. He sat down and shrugged off his jacket, hanging it over the back of the chair beside him.

A waitress came to him, a smiling woman with big hair and a pale pink uniform. “What can I get you?” she asked.

“Coffee please,” Sam said.

“Nothing to eat?”

She was clearly disappointed. Sam understood. If one of her tables was taken by someone only ordering coffee, she wasn’t going to get as good a tip as she would if he was eating. Even if George didn’t want to stop and eat, Sam would leave her a decent tip. Times were hard and she probably needed it.

“I’m waiting on someone,” Sam explained.

“Ah. Okay, hon, I’ll catch you when they arrive.”

“Thank you,” Sam said.

She disappeared and came back a moment later with a coffee pot and cup. She filled the cup and hurried away to collect the check from another table.

Sam sipped his coffee and looked around. People of varying ages were occupying the surrounding tables. Two middle-aged women were chatting amicably over pieces of pie. An elderly man was slowly working his way through a plate of meatloaf, and a kid that looked high school age was demolishing a burger and fries while nodding his head to the music playing on his Walkman.

A few minutes later, the door opened again and George came in. Sam raised a hand to him and he nodded and then made his way through the tables to sit down opposite Sam.

“Hello, Sam,” he said, shrugging off his jacket and picking up the menu to examine.
“Hey,” Sam said. “How are you?”

“Fine, fine.” He ran a finger down the menu and nodded to himself. “Have you ordered?”

“I was waiting for you.”

George handed over the menu and caught the eye of the waitress. She looked relieved that they were ready to go—to eat and clear the table faster to get a new setting in after them—and she came over to their table and stood with her pencil poised over her pad.

“I would like the blue plate special and a coffee, please,” George said.

“One meatloaf. Sure thing. And you?” she asked, looking at Sam.

Sam quickly skimmed down the menu. “A club sandwich, please, fruit cup instead of fries,” he said.

“Okay then. I’ll be right back with your coffee.”

George thanked her again and watched as she crossed to the counter and retrieved a cup and the coffee pot. She brought it to them and filled a cup for George and gave Sam’s a top up.

They waited until she was gone and then George fixed his gaze on Sam. “How are you?”

“I’m good,” Sam said.

“Are you sure?” George asked.

“Yeah. Don’t I look it?”

“You look like Sam. But you’re here on a Thursday and that makes me wonder why you’re not at work.”

“Oh. Well, I’m not working right now,” Sam said. “They were making layoffs, so I quit.”

“Why?” George asked. “Were you too proud to accept them doing it to you?”

“No,” Sam said, stung. “I can make out okay on my savings for a while. There were people there that would have nothing without the job and lots of them have families to support. I thought it was unfair to take a spot they could use.”

George nodded slowly. “I see. You did a good thing. How much savings do you have?”

“Enough,” Sam said. “Missouri and I make out okay on the stock market.”

George laughed softly. “I imagine you do. Inside information. Not that I blame you. If I had your advantages, I would use them to their fullest.”

“Exactly,” Sam said. “It’s not like I’m making a name for myself. Missouri takes care of it all for us both. I just bank the checks.”

“Wise,” George said. “You don’t want to draw attention to yourself. It might complicate things for you later.”

Sam nodded. It was the fact he couldn’t complicate things that stopped him being able to see Bobby. He could talk to him on the phone and hear scant details about him from Rufus, but he
couldn’t see him face to face. He couldn’t be with him, no matter how much he wanted to be.

“What are you going to do now?” George asked. “I am assuming since you contacted me that it involves hunting.”

Sam looked around to make sure they weren’t being overheard. The people at the neighboring tables were absorbed in their own conversation and meals though, and Sam decided it was safe.

“I want to hunt properly again. I still have two years until I can deal with the threat to my family, and I want to use this time to do good.”

“I can help with that,” George said. “I actually have a hunt myself that I could use you for.”

“What is it?” Sam asked eagerly.

George shook his head and looked up as the waitress came to their table loaded with plates. She set them down and said, “Enjoy!” before moving on to another table.

“We eat first,” George said. “Then we drive.”

“Where are we going?” Sam asked.

“Chicago.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “I came all the way to Colorado to meet you just to go in the other direction for the case?”

“Yes,” George said with no apology. “I wanted to know what you needed me for sooner rather than later, and I thought you should experience a Ricky’s meal. This place should be world famous it’s so good. Eat your sandwich, Sam. You won’t regret it.”

Sam picked up the triple-decker sandwich and took a bite. “Oh, wow,” he said. “That’s good.”

George smiled smugly. “I know. Now let me eat in peace. This should be savored as the treasure it is, not ruined with conversation.”

Sam shook his head and laughed. “Sure, George.”

He took another bite and relished the taste. He didn’t mind silence to eat, and truthfully, he wouldn’t mind a drive across the country. He had developed even more appreciation for the road now that he had a car of his own that he loved. A couple of days on the road sounded good even. And at the end of it, there would be a hunt.

He was looking forward to it.

xXx

They drove for several hours after dinner before stopping for the night and arrived in Englewood, Chicago the following afternoon. George led Sam along the streets to a hotel called The Melrose. They parked in the lot out back and then went inside to book in. It was a moderately priced, clean place, and they were given adjoining rooms on the third floor. Sam went up to dump his bag and clean up and then he met George in his room.

George had wasted no time unpacking his weapons and laying them out on the bed. His journal was open on the table when Sam went in, making Sam think he had been reading when he’d knocked.
“Are you going to tell me what we’re doing here now?” he asked.

“We’re hunting,” George said.

“Yes,” Sam said patiently. “But I usually like a little more to go on than that. Like what’s led you here in the first place.”

George smiled. “So eager, Sam. Relax. I’m only teasing. I’ve been drawn in by another hunter that heard about a strange death while he was passing through the area tracking a vampire. He needed to stay on the vampire’s trail, so he called me. A young woman was killed inside her locked apartment. There was no sign of an intruder, but the death was violent.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully. “Ghost, you think?”

“That or a demon. Something that could get in and out without breaking the door. I’m hoping for a ghost.”

“Easier to deal with,” Sam agreed. A ghost they could take out with a salt and burn whereas all they could do for a demon was exorcise it. Sam hadn’t come back with Ruby’s knife and the Colt was still in Daniel Elkins’ possession where it would have to stay until it was time to kill Yellow-Eyes.

George nodded. “I hope you brought salt.”

“I’ve got plenty of salt rounds,” Sam said.

George frowned at him. “Salt rounds?”

“Yeah. You load a shotgun with salt rounds; it takes out a ghost for a while.”

“I know what salt does,” he said. “I’ve just never heard of loading a shotgun with rounds of salt. It makes sense though. Instead of a spread pellet shot you get a good spray of salt right at the target. Was it your idea?”

“No, it’s something my dad and brother came up with. Clever, huh?”

“Very clever. You can share and we’ll both load up before we go investigate.”

“How are we doing that?” Sam asked. “Cops, reporters, FBI?”

George shook his head. “We’re private investigators hired by the family to find the cause of death. I have already fixed a letter from the family.”

“That’ll work?” Sam asked.

“I hope so. It has in the past. Do you really pose as a federal agent on hunts?”

“I used to all the time,” Sam said. “Me and Dean have used all kinds of things as cover before. Feds is the easiest though. People don’t tend to question us, and cops share information we couldn’t get otherwise.”

George looked amused. “And people believe that?”

“Yeah. A fake ID and a suit usually sets us up pretty good.”

“The future must be a lot more stupid than now. How do you get away with that with your hippy
“The future is a lot more accepting, I guess,” Sam said. “And there’s nothing wrong with my hair.”

“If you say so. We’re going in as PIs this time though. You won’t necessarily need a suit, but you will need something other than the plaid you seem to live in.”

“I’ve got something,” Sam said.

He had no problem wearing plaid and denim back home as that was standard for people with his lifestyle, but he had a few more time appropriate outfits for when he needed them. He didn’t mind wearing current fashions the way he had before. This was his time now, and he had to fit into it. That said, he hoped Dean would never know what he had worn.

“Go change then,” George said. “I would like to see the apartment today.”

Sam went back to his room and emptied his duffel onto the bed. He had a time appropriate suit, but he wanted to go with something a little more casual for the case. He unloaded some grey pants and a blue sweater and stripped down to change. The finishing touch to his outfit was a brown leather blazer that had set him back a hundred dollars. He didn’t wear it in the Brew and Cue as he would have stood out among the other men from the site, but when he needed to look smarter for something, like a meal out with Missouri, he wore it.

He put away his old clothes and then transferred his sawn-off and salt rounds into a smaller leather bag that looked more cover appropriate. He checked himself in the mirror, seeing a man that would fit in with the world of 1981, and then went back to George’s room.

George looked him up and down and nodded approvingly. “That will do.” He was wearing a pair of brown slacks and a black sweater that would fit their cover well, too.

Sam took out some salt rounds and laid them on the bed. George picked one up and examined it then loaded it into his sawn-off.

“Ready?” he asked, and when Sam nodded, he added, “I’m driving.”

Sam accepted that as George’s quirk. Like Dean, he seemed to prefer to be in control of the vehicle.

They left the room, George locking it behind him, and then went down to the first floor and outside to the parking lot. Sam climbed in shotgun and waited for George to get in and start the engine.

They drove a short distance across the town to a street lined with apartment blocks. They stopped in front of a brownstone building and got out. Sam looked up and counted thirteen floors. It looked like it had once been an expensive residence that had gone to seed in the years between its construction and now. The stairs were flanked by statues of lions, one of which had a missing paw. Sam wondered what kinds of people had lived here in its heyday.

George went inside and knocked on the door on the first floor. There were the sounds of multiple bolts disengaging and a small woman in her mid-fifties opened the door.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Hello,” George said. “We’re investigating the death of Deborah Briars and we wondered if we could speak to you. Did you know her?”

“I did. I am Mildred Flannagan. I own this building. What do you want?”
George pulled out a folded sheet of paper and held it out to the woman. “I am George Collins, and this is my associate Sam Taylor. We’re here on behalf of the Briars family. We’re undertaking a private investigation into Deborah’s death.”

“I thought the cops were working on that,” she said.

“They are, but they’re overstretched at the moment, and the family thought some independent help would be useful. If you’ll read the letter, you’ll see that they have asked you to offer assistance to us.”

Mildred read the letter, her lips pressed into a thin line. “I see. I am not sure what assistance I can give you.”

“We have some questions for you, and we would like you to give us access to the apartment,” George said. “Can we come in?”

“I don’t think that would be appropriate,” she said. “I can answer any questions you have out here. What do you want to know?”

George gave Sam a small nod and he took over. “Did you know Deborah well?” he asked.

“No more than I knew anyone else here,” she said. “I let in tradesmen for her a couple times recently, and we spoke sometimes. Nothing very significant. Just small talk among neighbors.”

“What kind of service people?” Sam asked.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “How is that relevant?”

“Whoever killed Deborah had access to her home,” Sam said. “It’s possible that it was someone that had been there before.”

She paled slightly, looking disconcerted. “I had access to the apartment with my keys. Do you think I had something to do with it? Is that what the cops think?”

“No, we don’t think that,” George said.

“Good. Because I had nothing to do with it. I am not a murderer.”

“The tradesmen?” Sam prompted.

“Yes. Deborah was complaining about her apartment being cold. She thought there was a problem with the heating. We had people come out, and while they found no problems, they went ahead and did a tune up on her system. Still didn’t seem to fix the problem though. She still complained.” She shook her head. “I think if she’d worn better clothes, she would have been warmer. She didn’t dress as a young lady should.”

Sam bit his lip to hide a smile. Mildred was dressed in a twin set over a skirt that reached her calves and thick tights. He supposed anyone that subscribed to modern fashions would look underdressed to her, even in this era.

“She wasn’t a good girl,” she went on.

“Not a good girl?” George asked.

“You know just what I mean!” she snapped. “I saw her inviting men home. Not gentlemen either. *They stayed the night.* It wasn’t right.”
Sam considered. If she was having men over, they could have gained access to a spare key. They might even have been there unreported at the time of her death. They could be chasing shadows here.

“I think we’ve heard enough,” George said. “Would you mind showing us the apartment now?”

Mildred eyed the letter once more before handing it back to George. “I’ll just get the keys,” she said then slammed the door closed in their faces.

“Friendly,” Sam said.

George nodded. “She has added a new dimension to the case. If Deborah was having strange men over…”

“I was thinking the same,” Sam said. “But the fact she was complaining about being cold could mean ghost. We still need to look into it.”

“We do,” George agreed. “I think we…” He fell silent as the door opened and Mildred came out with a large ring of keys in her hand.

“Come on then,” she said, bypassing the elevator and making for the stairs.

Sam and George followed her up to the second floor, coming to a stop outside a brown door. Mildred fiddled with the keys and extracted one. She put it into the lock and turned. The door clicked open and she pushed it open and then stepped back.

“There you go.”

“Don’t you want to come in with us?” Sam asked.

“No, thank you. I have seen it once. I don’t need to see it again. Just make sure you lock up when you leave and bring the keys back to me.”

“We will,” George said, taking the key from the lock and nodding to her as she turned on her heel and trotted down the stairs again.

Sam pushed open the door and went inside to a narrow hallway. The walls were decorated with black and white photographs of a young woman with various other people. Sam assumed she was Deborah. She was pretty, with dark hair and a wide smile. The pictures of the woman living her life gave her an identity in Sam’s mind. She was just a girl whose life had come to a brutal end. It shouldn’t have happened.

Sam walked through a living room that was decorated in red wallpaper and wicker furniture. There were more photographs in here, too. More signs of Deborah’s life well lived.

“Where was she killed?” Sam asked.

“The bedroom,” George said. “She was found on the bed.”

“What was the actual cause of death?”

“I don’t know officially,” George said. “But they’re fixed on it being a murder, so it can’t have been a gentle end.”

Sam pushed open and door and gasped at what he saw. The room was painted in pale blue and the paint was spattered with blood. There was what looked like arterial spray on one wall. The mattress
was gone from the bed, but the fabric covered box frame was bloodied as if it had soaked through. She must have lost a massive amount of blood.

“Oh dear,” George said solemnly.

“This is awful,” Sam said.

“It is,” George agreed. “I haven’t seen a ghost do something like this before.”

“But a demon would,” Sam said.

“The cold spots?”

“Could just have been the heating,” Sam said. “Or it could be a particularly nasty ghost. We have to find out. Have you got an EMF detector?” Sam asked.

“A what?”

“Electromagnetic frequency,” Sam said. “Maybe it’s too soon. It detects a ghost’s presence with the EMF they put out.” He shook his head. “My brother put one together out of an old Walkman, but I have no idea how he did it. I guess we’ll have to do without.”

“We will,” George said. “I don’t feel cold spots, but I don’t smell sulfur either. It could be either still. Or a human killing.”

“We could get a Dictaphone,” Sam said. “Maybe we’ll pick up some EVP.”

“I’m assuming that is more space age technology,” George said.

“2010 isn’t space age. But I guess it’s not around yet either. We can get a Dictaphone though, right?”

“We can,” George said slowly. “How will it help to record ourselves though?”

“They can sometimes pick up the interference EVP creates on the recording,” Sam said. “It might give us a head’s up for a ghost.”

“We need to find an electronics store then,” George said. “I’d like to check for sulfur first, though. We will be wasting time if it was a demon. They will be long gone by now.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “You want to take the living room?”

He didn’t particularly want to spend any more time in this blood soaked room than he had to, but it wasn’t fair to dump the macabre task on George either.

“Yes,” George said. “Let me know if you find anything.”

“Sure,” Sam said, though he didn’t know what they would find other than potential sulfur remains from a demon. He hoped for a ghost, as then they would have something to do to avenge Deborah. If it was just another demon, they would be helpless. There was no way to find a single demon in the country without the technology Sam used to have access to. And he wanted to avenge her. The bedroom showed evidence of what had to be a terrible end for someone to suffer. He wanted to do something about it.

He scoured the room but found no sign of sulfur, just more signs of a life lived, like the hairbrush on the dresser and the book on the bedside table.
He walked back into the living room in time to see George wiping a finger over the decorative fireplace tools.

“Sulfur?” Sam asked.

“Just dust. I don’t think we’re going to find sulfur here.”

Sam nodded. “That’s better. We might have something to take out. If it was a demon, we’d be helpless to do anything for her.”

“We’re already helpless,” George said. “She’s dead.”

“I know,” Sam said, running a hand over his face. “It doesn’t mean we can’t take out what killed her though.”

“Unless it was a human. Are you making this personal, Sam?”

“Of course I am. Look around, George. She was a young girl living her life here, and now she’s dead because some fugly came and did something awful to her. She was massacred.”

George shook his head. “That’s no way to go into a hunt. You have to be detached.”

“I can’t be with this. It’s not going to hurt the case; I am going to be better than ever because I am doing this for a reason. She deserved better, and I am going to end the thing that did this to her.”

George stayed silent a moment, just staring at him, and then he nodded. “I suppose you are. We should go. I don’t think there’s anything left to find here.”

“Okay.”

Sam followed George to the door and out of the apartment. George was locking the door behind them when Sam heard footsteps coming down the stairs towards them. A moment later a woman stepped into view. She was probably a few years younger than Sam. Her red hair was braided over her shoulder and her eyes were heavily made up with green eyeshadow.

“Uh, hey,” she said. “What are you doing at Deborah’s? Are you cops?”

“We’re private investigators,” George said. “Her family hired us to investigate her death.”

“They have? Wow.”

“Were you friends with Deborah?” George asked.

She pulled a face. “I guess.”

“Do you live here?” George asked, and she nodded. “Would you mind if we asked you some questions? We’d like to know a little more about the building.”

“You should ask Miss Mildred,” she said with a wry smile. “She knows everything, and she’d be happy to narc.”

“We’ve already spoken to her,” Sam said, drawing her eyes to him. “But she wasn’t an ideal informant. If you could tell us anything else, that would help…” He allowed the question to trail away.

She looked Sam up and down and smiled. “Sure. I’ll answer your questions. How about the Blue
Bar tonight at eight? It’s on Sixth and Main.”

“We have time now,” George said.

Her eyes drifted back to him and she looked disappointed to see him still there. “I think it would better to talk in a relaxed environment,” she said. “I can tell your partner anything you need to know.”

George’s eyes widened and then he turned to Sam with a look of dawning realization. Sam winked in return.

“That would be great,” Sam said. “I’ll see you there at eight.” He thought there was no harm in meeting her, and it might even be a fun evening. His insular life at home meant he hadn’t had real female contact other than Missouri and his friends’ wives at barbeques for a while. It might be fun to spend some time with her. “I’m Sam by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Sam. I’m Diana. I’ll see you at eight for questioning.” She winked at him and then carried on down the stairs.

Sam watched her go, thinking of the evening he was going to spend with her. He was drawn from his thoughts when George snorted. “Questioning?”

“You were the one that wanted to talk to her,” Sam pointed out. “I can ask her if she’s had any ghostly encounters living here.”

“That’s probably the shakiest excuse I’ve ever heard for a date,” George said.

“It’s not a date,” Sam said, though he wasn’t entirely sure if he was being honest.

George looked him in the eyes. “It most certainly is, Sam. And you need to be careful.”

“Of what?” Sam asked.

“Diana takes her name from the goddess of the hunt, and I think she has set her sights on you.”

Sam laughed. “I can handle it.”

“I hope so,” George said seriously, though his eyes twinkled. “I sincerely hope so. Personally. I think she’ll eat you alive.”
Sam pulled on his blazer and checked himself in the mirror. He thought he was appropriately
dressed for casual drinks with a woman.

He ran a hand through his hair to smooth it. He needed to get it trimmed; it was creeping down in
length again. Dean would have commented long before now about the state of it. He smiled at the
thought of his brother. He wondered what he would make of him going to a bar to talk to a witness.
It was the kind of excuse Dean would have used to spend time with a woman. Sam thought it
would probably have made him laugh. He might even be proud of his little brother for loosening up
a little.

There was a knock on the door and Sam went to open it. George stood on the threshold, smiling
widely.

“Look at you all dressed up,” he said. “The mating ritual of a young hunter.”

“I’m interviewing a possible witness,” Sam said, stepping back to let George into the room.

“Of course you are. If you do find time to ask her about the case, please remember we’re looking
for clues of ghosts as well as demons. Also human involvement. If she knew anything about
Deborah’s history, like past boyfriends, it might help us come to a conclusion.”

“Do you think it was human?” Sam asked.

“What do you think?” George countered.

Sam sighed. “I don’t want it to be a human. Or a demon. I want something we can take out to
avenge her. I don’t like to think of another person doing that to her either. I know humans are the
most dangerous predators, but…”

“Ghosts and demons are easier to accept?”

“Yeah.”

“Then find out what you can and we will see what we can do.”

“I will,” Sam said. He adjusted his collar and checked his watch. “I should go.”

“You should,” George agreed. “It’s rude to keep a lady waiting.”

Sam smiled and made for the door with George following. They stepped into the hall and Sam
locked his door behind him. George went back to his room and stopped with the key in the lock.

“Enjoy yourself, Sam. Don’t get completely bogged down by the case. Find time for yourself, too.”

Sam nodded and made his way along the hall and down the stairs. As he walked along the street
toward the bar he’d arranged to meet Diana in, he mulled over what George had said. He had
enjoyed his life the past few years, something that had seemed impossible when he’d realized he
was trapped. Not a day went by without him thinking of Dean and the others, missing them, but he
found joy in other places. Missouri and James, work, his friends, they all gave him something he
hadn’t had in a long time. He appreciated it, and it made him think of the future he would have
when he’d killed Azazel. Perhaps life would always be good. Perhaps he would be able to have
things that were impossible to him now—love, all of his family, college, a normal life.

The bar’s sign was blue neon that cast a strange light over the doormen waiting outside. Sam eyed
the people entering ahead of him. They were dressed in a similar style to him, and he felt he fit in
among them. He passed the doormen and went inside, taking in the décor. There was an abundance
of chrome and black, and the lighting over the bar had a blue cast like the sign outside.

He couldn’t see Diana and he was early, so he decided it was best to wait at the bar for her, as she
would surely head there straight away. He ordered an expensive beer and took a stool, angling
himself so he could see the entrance.

He only had to wait a few minutes before she arrived. Sam stood to greet her, taking in her
appearance. She was wearing a short black sequin dress, and as she came closer, Sam saw her eyes
were heavily outlined with kohl. The effect was striking, especially under the blue lights.

“Sam,” she said happily, presenting her cheek.

Sam gave her a chaste kiss and said, “You look great.”

“This old thing?” she said with a laugh. “It actually cost me so much I was late with rent, but I
think it was worth it.”

“Definitely,” Sam said. “What would you like to drink?”

“I’ll take a Long Island iced tea, please.”

Sam placed the order and watched the bartender mix her drink. When he slid it across the bar, Sam
paid and gestured to a table the other side of the small dancefloor. “Shall we sit down?”

“Sure.”

They crossed the room, skirting the people that were already dancing, and slid into seats at a table
beside a mirrored wall. Diana sat sideways on her chair and crossed her long legs. Sam looked at
her appreciatively as he took a swig of his beer.

“So, you’re interviewing me,” she said, looking pleased by his scrutiny. “How’s that going to
work?”

“I do have a few questions,” Sam said. “Did you know Deborah well?”

“Not really. We were neighbors, obviously, but we didn’t really mix. I saw her in here sometimes,
but we were never together.”

“You don’t know anything about her private life then?” Sam asked.

“I know she had a lot of friends,” she said. “She was a fun girl. She wasn’t one of those stuck up
women that look down on the rest of us. She liked a good time and she was friendly.”

Sam coupled that with what Mildred had told them and thought she meant she wasn’t short of
boyfriends. She had been a beautiful woman, and it made sense she was popular.

“Did she seem happy?” Sam asked.

She nodded eagerly. “Yeah. Like I said, she was fun.”

“And did you ever notice anything about the people she was with? Did they ever seem… hostile?”

“You mean did I see the person that killed her?”

Sam nodded.

“No, I saw nothing like that. I would say if I did. What happened to her was terrible, but there never seemed anything suspicious about the people she was with. Do you think she knew her killer then?”

“It’s a possibility,” Sam said.

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“I have a few questions about the building you live in, too,” Sam said. “Have you ever noticed anything strange there?”

“You mean like people hanging around?”

“Yes, that or anything that strikes you as strange—smells or cold spots.”

She frowned. “That’s a weird question.”

“It is,” Sam agreed. “Have you noticed anything like that?”

“The only strange smell is Mrs. Benito’s cooking. I guess it gets cold in the halls sometimes, but it’s an old building. I’ve never thought of any of it as being weird though.”

Sam considered. The halls could just be draughty, or it could be a sign of a ghost. He wished he could check for EMF.

“What else do you want to know?” she asked, leaning forward and resting her chin on her clasped hands.

Sam didn’t think there was anything else to gain about the hunt from her, but he didn’t want the evening to end either. He leaned forward slightly and said, “I want to know more about you.”

She took a sip of her drink and looked at him from under her lashes. “What about me?”

“Tell me everything,” Sam said.

She smiled and started to speak, “Well, I’m working as a secretary right now, but what I really want is to be a dancer…”

xXx

Since Sam had been trapped in 1978, he’d grown used to waking in the familiar space of his own bedroom. He felt the sense of wrongness when he opened his eyes on a soft bed with a thin sheet covering him. The next thing to reach him was the realization he wasn’t alone. There was a warm body in the bed beside him. He looked to the side and saw Diana’s red hair spread across the
pillow and her pale, bare shoulders above the sheet.

He hadn’t woken in a bed with another woman in a long time. Not since Jessica. He’d spent the night with other women, the most significant being Madison, but he’d not woken with them as Madison been loose on the street as a werewolf at the time and other women had been about fun and release that hadn’t extended to the morning. He found he liked it though. For a moment he just watched her soft breaths moving her as she slept. It felt comfortable and good.

He sat up and looked around the room. Diana’s love for dancing was evident in the room with a picture of a flamenco dancer on the wall. Hanging from the back of the door were a pair of tap shoes and ballet slippers. Sam had his own space but it wasn’t as personal as this. His home was comfortable but not really decorated like this. He’d never thought about it before. Perhaps he should add some personal touches.

Diana stirred and turned her face toward Sam. “Sam?” she asked, her eyes barely open.

“I’m here,” Sam said.

Her eyes opened fully and she beamed at him. “You stayed.”

“I’m guessing you don’t mind,” Sam said.

“I like that you did,” she said with feeling. “Do you want some breakfast?”

“I’ll get it. What would you like?”

Her lips curved into a smile. “Okay, breakfast might be a stretch. I have juice and coffee, but no real food. I was supposed to shop yesterday, but I decided a night out with you would be better.”

Sam laughed. “I’ll go get us something. Is there anywhere close?”

“There’s the diner down the street, but it’s not great. There’s a deli a couple blocks north that makes the best Danish pastries.”

“That’s decided then,” Sam said. “I’ll go there.”

He pulled back the sheet and sat on the edge of the bed. He felt her fingers run down his bare back from his shoulder, leaving a streak of warmth in their place. It made something curl in Sam’s stomach. Reluctantly, he reached for his shorts and pulled them on then stood and retrieved his pants from the spot they’d been thrown the night before.

He felt Diana’s eyes on him as he dressed, and he turned and smiled at her. “What are you thinking?” he asked.

“I’m torn,” she admitted. “I’m hungry, but I don’t want you to go.”

“I’ll come back,” Sam promised.

She still didn’t look convinced, so he walked back to the bed and leaned over to her. Her lips met his and she smiled against them as she pressed back hard against him.

“Be quick,” she said, pulling back eventually.

“I will,” Sam said. “Don’t move from that spot.”

She lay back in the bed and stretched her arms above her. “I won’t,” she said.
Sam gave her one last searching look, then he grabbed his shirt and pulled it on as he walked into the living room. He heard her sigh as he left, and he sighed, too. He was feeling good, peaceful, and he was glad he’d stayed. He didn’t think there was a future for them with his life the way it was, but this moment was worthy of embracing. He was happy.

xXx

Sam jangled the keys as he walked up the stairs to Diana’s apartment, a bag of warm pastries in his hand and a wide smile on his face. He unlocked the door and went in to the hall, calling, “Room service.”

He was expecting a laugh in return, but the only sound he heard was the loud bang of a door slamming closed. Confused and wondering what had changed in the short time he’d been out, he walked to the bedroom and tried to open the door, calling Diana’s name. It wouldn’t open though, and worry curled in his gut. Why would she have shut him out?

“Diana, what’s wrong?” he asked, pushing on the door again.

“No!” The word was muffled as if her mouth was covered, and it was also filled with terror. Sam dropped the bag in his hand and leaned back and shoved his shoulder into the door. It didn’t budge, so he stepped back and kicked just to the left of the lock. The door sprang open and Sam rushed inside only to stop dead.

There was a woman standing over Diana. She looked familiar, but Sam only had a split second to ponder it before he was rushing forward with a cry as the woman pressed a long knife to Diana’s throat. “Bad girl!” she snarled.

“No!” Sam shouted, but it was too late. With a swift movement she had drawn the blade across Diana’s throat, sending a spurt of blood into the air. Diana bucked and her breath gurgled and then she stilled completely with her green eyes staring blindly at the ceiling.

The woman turned her attention from Diana to Sam and he stood frozen in shock and anger. “Dirty boy,” she snarled. Her form flickered and suddenly she was standing directly in front of Sam with the knife held aloft.

Sam turned and ran into the living room. He snatched up a poker from beside the fireplace, praying it was more than decorative, and swiped it through the air. The ghost flickered away before the iron could reach her, and Sam spun on his heel, waiting for the next attack.

He felt a chill on the back of his neck and he spun around to see the woman behind him, her lips curled back from her teeth and her eyes blazing with hatred.

She lifted the blade as if she was about to cleave it into his skull, and Sam swung the poker at her. It dispersed her like smoke, and Sam stood panting hard.

It took a minute for reason to catch up with him and he turned back to the door. He knew it was too late for Diana, he had seen her last breath, but he felt he should do something. He couldn’t leave her like that.

“You have to get out of there!” The voice was shocking as, not only did it come from within his own mind, he hadn’t heard it in three years. It was Dean, and he sounded furious. “Go, Sam!”

Sam obeyed it as easily as he would have had Dean been standing right beside him. He couldn’t be found there with a dead body. He had to run.
He grabbed the bag of pastries from the floor outside the bedroom, making a point of not looking through the open door at the poor girl’s body on the bed. He had left fingerprints all over the room, but he couldn’t clean them. All he could do was wipe the keys he’d used to let himself in and drop them into a bowl by the door and then close the door behind him as he left.

He wanted to run, to put some distance between himself and the horror he’d seen, but he couldn’t draw attention to himself. He walked down the stairs and out on to the street quickly but calmly. He tried to look like any other person on the street while internally his emotions were roiling at what had just happened. Diana was dead, her throat slit by a ghost. He was used to ghosts using their bare hands to kill, but he remembered the ghost of Jonah Greely had used a knife to torture Molly. The weapon and means didn’t matter in the end. Diana was dead.

When he got back to the hotel, he rushed inside and to George’s room. He knocked hard on the door, and it was opened after a moment. George looked as though he’d been interrupted in the process of dressing. His shirt was half buttoned and his suspenders were hanging at his sides.

He grinned at Sam as he saw the bag in his hand. “I would have expected you to deliver breakfast to your lady friend, not to me,” he teased.

“Diana’s dead,” Sam said curtly, pushing past him into the room. He dropped the bag of pastries down onto the bed and began to pace.

“What happened?” George asked.

“It’s a ghost. I saw it. A woman. She cut Diana’s throat.”

George looked horrified. “I am sorry, Sam.”

“Dead,” Sam said bitterly.

George buttoned his shirt and pulled up his suspenders. “Tell me everything you saw,” he said.

Sam forced his mind to return to the moment of Diana’s terrible death and examined the image of the ghost. “It was Mildred Flannagan, except it wasn’t. She was older and had different hair.”

“A relation?”

“Mother maybe,” Sam said. “I’m not sure. She called Diana a bad girl and me a dirty boy.”

“She’s targeting based on morality,” George said, pulling on a sweater over his shirt. “Deborah was a friendly girl, too.”

“She’s a bitch,” Sam snapped. “We need to end her.”

“Yes,” George said gently. “But we have to find her first. Sit down.”

Sam turned with his hands fisted. “Sit down? Did you hear what I just said? Diana is dead!”

“I know, and I can’t imagine how that feels for you, but you need to keep your head if we’re going to do anything to avenge her and save other lives. Did anyone see you leaving?”

“No one that would have remember me. There was no one in the halls, and the street was busy but people weren’t paying attention. I didn’t call the cops. I couldn’t.”

“Good,” George said. “I will take care of that after.”
“After what?” Sam asked.

“After we’ve found the ghost. I need to interview Mildred Flanagan again.”

“What are you going to say?” Sam asked. “Just out of curiosity, where’s your mother buried?”

“No,” George said patiently. “I am going to find out enough that we can discover that ourselves. You go back to your room. Clean up and calm down. I will get back as soon as I can.”

“I can’t stay here,” Sam said.

“But you can go back to that place?” George asked. “Knowing what is above you?”

“No,” Sam admitted.

“Stay,” George said. “I will be back soon and then we can take care of this together.”

Sam nodded stiffly. He knew George was right: they needed information, and he couldn’t go back to that place, but staying here and knowing Diana was lying dead in her bed was abhorrent. He needed to be doing something to avenge her.

George took his keys from the table and opened the door. He hesitated on the threshold and looked back at Sam.

“Will you be okay?”

“I’ll be fine,” Sam said automatically. He would be fine as he had no choice. He wasn’t the one that had just been murdered. He was the one that had watched.

xXx

Sam had moved past shock and he was firmly entrenched in anger. The manner of Diana’s death as much as the fact of it upset him. She had been a good person, with hopes and dreams of becoming a dancer, and her life had been snuffed out prematurely by the monster he was there to hunt.

If he had done better, been faster, she would have lived. She hadn’t deserved that end. No one did. Just because of some woman’s skewed ideas of morality, she’d been killed. There was no harm in what they had done, but, like the woman he assumed was her daughter, the ghost had killed because Diana hadn’t been a ‘good girl’ to her eyes. In every way that really mattered, she had been good. Sam had liked her.

He wanted to sate his need for violence. He wanted to find the ghost and end it, but he couldn’t do a thing without the information George was getting for them. With nothing else to do, he went back to his room to shower and change and then intermittently sat with his head in his hands and paced. When there was a knock on his door, he leapt to his feet and yanked it open.

George looked grave as he came into Sam’s room and slipped his jacket off.

“Well?” Sam said impatiently. “Did you find out who it is?”

“I did. I believe it is Mildred’s mother. I spoke to her again and was able to steer the conversation in the direction of the history of the building. Her parents owned it and upon her mother’s death, it passed on to her.”

“Where’s her mother buried?” Sam asked.
George raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t manage to ask that. I know when she died though, so we can perhaps find a funeral announcement in a newspaper archive at the library.”

Sam nodded. He knew it would have been impossible for George to get the information without arousing suspicion, but he wanted to act now. He wanted the ghost dealt with before it could hurt someone else.

“I’ll go to the library now and we can act after dark. We can’t salt and burn in broad daylight.”

Sam cursed. He’d been so keen to act that he hadn’t thought things completely through. “Okay. Yeah. We’ll wait.”

“Do you want to come to the library with me? Or would you prefer to be alone?”

“I’m coming,” Sam said firmly.

“Very well.” He picked up his jacket and made for the door.

“Did you call the police?” Sam asked.

“I did when I left. I told them I’d heard screams upstairs. They will be reporting now. She will be found, Sam.”

“Too late,” Sam said bitterly.

George pressed his lips into a thin line and considered Sam. “If you had been armed, would you have been able to save Diana?” he asked.

“No,” Sam admitted. “It happened too fast.”

George nodded. “Then you did all you could. We’re going to save future lives by finding the grave and taking care of this ghost. Don’t let this overpower you, Sam. You’re better than to lose yourself to anger over this.”

“Diana is dead,” Sam bit out.

“I know. And that is tragic. But it was not your fault. It was a ghost that killed her, not you.”

Sam grabbed his jacket and said, “Are you ready to go?” He didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“I am,” George said, sounding disappointed at Sam’s curt end to the conversation. “Let’s go.”

xXx

Impatient as Sam was to get the ghost dealt with, he accepted they had to wait till midnight when the streets were quiet before going to the cemetery they’d discovered as the burial place of Agatha Flannagan, Mildred’s mother. They were both armed with salt round loaded shotguns and iron bars for if they ran out of ammunition, and each had a shovel.

Sam led them through the gates of the cemetery and stopped as he took in the sheer number of graves; it was not going to be quick or easy to find the right one.

George seemed to have the same realization at the same moment as he sighed and said, “I’ll take the left.”

“Okay,” Sam said, going right and beginning to check the names on the gravestones.
He was halfway up the third row when he heard George calling to him from the other side of the cemetery. Relieved their search was over, Sam jogged over to him. George wasn’t by a grave though. He was standing beside a small mausoleum.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked.

“I think I’ve found her,” George said, pointing to the name carved over the door. It was etched in flowing script: Flannagan.”

“Perfect,” Sam said. “No digging.”

George tested the door, but Sam was already pulling his lock picking tools out of his pocket. He knew with his luck there was no way it would be unlocked. He was right. George stepped back and said, “Do you think you can break it?”

“I can pick it,” Sam said, holding up the tools and then bending to get to work on the lock. It took a little work as the lock was old and stiff, but eventually he had it open and he stood to gesture George in ahead of him.

He followed him in and looked around. It was obviously old and there were many individual graves set into the walls. At the center there was a newer, large tomb with the names Agatha and Charles on the stone.

“They thought more of themselves than their ancestors,” George noted.

“All the better for us,” Sam said. “Can you help me get it open?”

“I may be older than you, but I am not decrepit,” George said irritably.

They stood side by side and pushed at the stone lid to open it. The stone made a grating sound as it moved aside, revealing the two bodies. One, the person Sam assumed to be Charles, was a skeleton, but Agatha hadn’t been dead as long, and the stone crypt had preserved her so she looked more shrunken than skeletal. She would still burn though, Sam knew from experience.

He pulled his salt out of his bag and began to shake it over the bodies while George uncapped the gas can he’d brought with him. He tipped it over the grave and then his eyes widened as he looked at something past Sam’s shoulder.

“Sam!” he shouted as something shoved Sam’s forward so his head hit the edge of the tomb. Pain exploded in his head and spots danced in his vision. Gripping the tomb, he dragged himself upright and shook his head to clear it. He was mildly successful, though he still felt dazed. He knew the blow would have been enough to render him unconscious had he not had Michael’s protection. He turned to look behind him and saw the ghost he had seen kill Diana standing behind him, teeth bared.

“Dirty boy!”

“Monster,” Sam snarled.

“Down, Sam!” George commanded.

Sam dropped and heard the bang of a shotgun being fired. Salt fell over him and he straightened.

“She’s gone,” George said. “Hurry!”
Sam grabbed the box of salt from where he had dropped it onto Agatha’s body and tore open the top so he could shake it out faster. When it was empty, he threw it behind him and reached for his matchbook as George splashed over the gasoline.

He was on the point of lighting the matches when a hand fell onto the back of his neck and shoved him forward again. He hit the tomb and stumbled as the pain flashed though him again. He was disoriented and when his mind cleared, he was pinned against the wall with hands around his throat. He looked into the clouded eyes of Agatha and felt a surge of anger toward her. She was a murderer. She had killed Sam’s friend and Deborah, another girl that had surely been as innocent as Diana.

He couldn’t draw and air and he knew he would be unconscious if he was anyone else, but she couldn’t kill him. All he had to do was wait for George to finish and burn the bones. He stared into her eyes and tried to communicate his hatred for her. Perhaps she saw it, as her fingers tightened impossibly and she leaned closer to him. “Dirty boy,” she whispered.

“Hold on, Sam,” George shouted, and then there was a rush of heat as the gasoline was ignited. The hands holding him fell away and Agatha’s face twisted with horror as the fire ate at her. Her eyes widened as the fire reached her torso, and she reached for Sam again, determined to wreak one last act of vengeance on him for his perceived crimes, but she was gone before she could reach him.

Sam massaged his throat as he stepped away from the wall. “Thanks,” he said.

“I should have been quicker,” George said irritably. “You would have died if you were anyone else.”

“I’m not though, and I didn’t.” He bent to pick up his bag, shotgun and shovel and made for the door.

George followed him out, his own tools in his hand, and they walked together toward the gate. “Are you okay, Sam?” he asked.

“Fine,” Sam said. “She couldn’t hurt me.”

“Not physically, perhaps, but otherwise?”

Sam shrugged. “I was lucky. It was Diana and Deborah that were killed.”

Diana, a sweet girl that had only wanted to dance and Deborah, who’d had hopes and dreams of her own, were dead and though their murderer was dead, Sam still felt guilt for not being able to protect them. He had foreknowledge and the protection of Michael over him, but he couldn’t save everyone, and that was a bitter pill to swallow.

Chapter End Notes

I need opinions: I am working on a story right now that will become part of a series, and I am trying to decide on the lengths and where to split them. Would you prefer a series of stories of the length of Brotherhood – around 100k each – with fewer overall stories or more stories of shorter length that have defined endings but not necessarily a canon-style finale as my stories usually have?
Steam clouded up around Missouri’s face as she dumped the pasta into a colander to drain the water. “You want to go where?” she asked.

“The World’s Fair,” Sam said from his spot leaning against the counter. “It’s in Tennessee. It’s got all these exhibits from around the world and there’s some great technology being showcased there.”

“I know where it is; I read the newspapers, too. But if you think you’re getting me on an airplane after what happened to those poor people on the Pan Am flight, you’re nuts.”

Sam sighed. Pan Am Flight 759 crashed in Louisiana a month ago, and Missouri had developed a deep distrust of airplanes since. Sam had told her it was an anomaly, she was safer in a plane than she was in a car on the road, but she wasn’t budging. When planes flew over, she would glance up at them and look worried.

Sam hadn’t known the crash was coming. Though he’d known there had been a Pan Am flight that crashed before he was born, he didn’t know the details. It had been tragic, and Sam had watched the news reports like the rest of the country with a feeling of horror, but it hadn’t scared him the way it had her. If James had not already returned from his annual vacation to Florida when it happened, she would have driven there to bring him home.

He really wanted to go to the fair though, and he wanted to share it with them. James especially would get a lot out of it. Sam really wanted to see the technology they would be showcasing, as it would be interesting from his point of view as a man out of his time.

“We can drive,” he suggested.

“To Tennessee! It’s got to be a day’s drive away.”

“Yes, it’s a long drive,” Sam agreed, knowing his idea of a long drive was very different to Missouri’s. “We can spread it over two days though. I’ve driven further for an Ozzy show with Dean.”

“Ozzy Osbourne is still around in your time?” she asked doubtfully.

“Ozzy will last forever,” Sam said with a laugh.

“And you like him?”

“Dean likes him more, but yeah. We drove a thousand miles for Ozzfest a couple years before I got stuck. Anyway, that’s not the point. We’re talking about the fair. C’mon, Missouri, it’ll be great. James will learn a lot, and you know he won’t mind the long journey if I drive us. We can make a real road trip of it. I haven’t done that in a long time.”

Though he’d been traveling across the country for hunts, he hadn’t been on an actual road trip with anyone else the way he used to with Dean since he’d arrived in 1978. He missed having companionship on the road and someone to share the things he was seeing with. Though he did the same things, motels, diners, nights under the stars, it wasn’t the same without Dean with him. He wanted to share that with James and Missouri.

“Shall we ask James what he wants to do?” Sam asked slyly.
Missouri threw a cloth at him. “You know exactly what he’ll say, Sam, and so do I. He won’t pass up the chance of a road trip in your car and a few days spent with you.”

“So, what do you say? Are we going? It’ll be educational.”

Missouri rolled her eyes. “Fine. We’ll go. I will suffer days on the road so you and James can play with future toys.”

Sam grinned. He could tell she wasn’t really upset by the idea. She knew as well as he did what James stood to gain from the trip. He was twelve now and growing up fast. Soon he wouldn’t want to come on trips with them, and Sam wanted to have time with him while it was still wanted rather than it being a chore. And while he was still there to have it; it wasn’t much longer to wait until he was home again.

Missouri went to the stove to stir the spaghetti sauce and looked over her shoulder. “You can go tell him to stop hovering behind the door now, too. You both win. We’re going.”

Sam laughed as he opened the kitchen door and saw James darting back into the living room. Sam followed him in, seeing James throwing himself onto the couch and picking up his comic, trying to look as though he had been there all the time.

“Did you hear all of that?” Sam asked him.

He looked abashed. “I was just coming to get a drink and I heard you and my mom talking. I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“Yeah, sure,” Sam said. “So, do you want to come to the World’s Fair?”

“Definitely,” James said, nodding eagerly. “That’d be neat. Thanks, Sam.”

“No problem,” Sam said, turning to go back to the kitchen.

“Sam,” James called after him.

Sam stopped and peered around the door. “Yeah?”

James looked a little embarrassed. “What’s a World’s Fair?”

xXx

They stopped for the night near the northern border of Tennessee. James had slept some of the ride, and so he was awake and full of energy when they got to the motel. Though it was late, Sam thought Missouri was going to have a hard time settling him, so after they ate dinner at a local steak restaurant, Sam drove them out of town and to a small park he’d spotted on the way to the motel, away from the light pollution of the town.

“Parking, Sam?” Missouri teased with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, I always bring my dates’ kids with me,” Sam said. “It makes the evening so much more comfortable.”


“Not really,” Sam reassured him. “We both know you’re the only man in your mom’s life, and I am in love with my car.”
“Me too,” James said, stroking a hand over the upholstery.

“What are we doing here then?” Missouri asked.

“Star gazing,” Sam said, opening the door and climbing out.

James and Missouri got out and met him at the front of the car. Sam gave James a boost up onto the hood and instructed him to lie down. James adjusted himself and then looked up at the star strewn sky, the moonlight reflecting in his brown eyes. “Wow,” he breathed.

Sam sat down beside him and looked up. “Yeah. Wow. Look at them all.”

“Did you know some of those stars are already burned out?” James asked. “It takes so long for their light to reach us that they’ve died before we see their light.”

“Some of them, yes,” Sam said.

“That’s sad,” Missouri said. “They’re so beautiful.”

“But there are more being born,” James said. “All the time. Like people. We’re never going to run out.”

Missouri smiled. “Good. They’re so nice to look at. I never do this, you know, just stop and look up. There’s always something else to do.”

“I do it,” Sam said. “I used to do it much more often, being out at night more often, but I still do it when I’m on the road.”

“There are pictures up there,” James said. “We did a project on it at school.”

“Show me,” Missouri said, leaning close to James as he pointed at the sky.

“Those three there, and the four in a funny rectangle at the end, are called the Big Dipper. And if you look below it, you’ll see Ursa Major. That’s the Great Bear.”

Missouri nodded. “I see.”

“I always like Cassiopeia,” Sam said, pointing to the formation. “Dean called her the hot chick.”

“Who’s Dean?” James asked.

“My brother.”

“Where is he?” James asked.

“A long way away,” Sam said a little sadly. “I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

“Why don’t you go see him?” James asked.

“Because I can’t yet,” Sam said. “As soon as I can, I will though. It won’t take much longer.”

Missouri sighed, and Sam knew it was the mention of their limited time together that had drawn the reaction. It was always a sensitive subject for her. Sam didn’t want to leave her either, but he wanted the life he would have after Azazel was killed, too.

“Do you miss him?” James asked.
“Every single day,” Sam said honestly. “But sometimes you have to be patient to get the things you want.”

Missouri chuckled. “That’s a lesson you should learn, James. Patience is a virtue.”

“Patience takes too long,” James said earnestly.

Sam laughed. “You’re going to have to be patient for the fair. We won’t get to Knoxville until tomorrow afternoon so we can’t go to the fair until Wednesday.”

“It’s worth waiting for though, right?” James asked.

“Definitely,” Sam said. “It’s going to be great.”

“Then I’ll try to be patient,” he said.

Sam smiled as he looked up at the sky. He was going to need to be patient, too. He wanted to be back with Dean more than anything, but he had to wait. He was going to enjoy his time with Missouri and James until that moment because he thought they were going to be the price of his happiness. He hoped he would remember them, be able to find them in the future and have a relationship again, but he might not, so he had to appreciate what he had while he still had it.

xXx

“Wow! What’s that?” James asked, his wide eyes fixed on the imposing tower.

“It’s called the Sunsphere,” Sam said. “They built it especially for the fair. Pretty cool, right?”

“Very cool,” James said. “How tall is it?”

“266 feet,” Missouri said, checking the program they’d brought on the way into the fair. “It has a restaurant and observation deck.”

“Can we go up there?” James asked excitedly.

“Sure,” Sam said easily. “You’ll be able to see for miles.”

“Now?” James asked.

“We’ll go there for lunch,” Missouri said. “Let’s look around a little first. I want to see the China exhibit. It says here they brought a section of the Great Wall with them.”

“Wonder how that works,” Sam said, trying to imagine them hacking away at a centuries old wonder for an American fair. He doubted they were going to see a real section of the wall, but he hoped whatever it was they had brought would please Missouri. She seemed more excited about the fair now that they were there, but he was sure any disappointment would be laid at his feet, though it would be good natured. Missouri wasn’t capable of holding a grudge. She was too kind a woman.

“Do you know where it is?” Sam asked.

“I’ve got a map,” she said, tapping the program.

“Lead the way then,” Sam said happily.

They joined the throng of people walking along the main path through the fair, looking around as
they went. Each country had its own pavilion to showcase its exhibits, larger than Sam had imagined. There were restaurants and drinks booths suited to each country, and Sam was curious about the different cuisines. They were going to spend a couple days at the fair, and he hoped he could persuade James to try more than a burger, even though he was released from Missouri’s dietary rules by the special occasion.

James rushed ahead of them, making Missouri call for him to slow down. He seemed unable to calm himself, surrounded by so much to look at. It was a far cry from Lawrence’s streets. There were other children there, too, and adults with large cameras around their necks and fanny packs. Sam had changed his old fashion choices almost completely to fit in with the time he lived in, but he had vowed never to don a fanny pack for anything. Even as a time traveler, he had limits.

James came to a bouncing stop outside a pavilion with a large Chinese flag hanging outside. “I found it!”

“Well done James,” Sam said. “You discovered China.”

James rolled his eyes. “I think someone did that before me, Sam.”

“Well, James, you’ll have to be faster next time.”

“Boys, don’t fight,” Missouri said.

Sam and James exchanged a glance and then they both laughed.

Missouri and James led the way into the pavilion and Sam followed, looking around as he went. There were terminals set up where children could experiment with building bricks—crafted to look centuries old—to build their own Great Walls, and a film playing on a huge screen detailing the creation and upkeep of the wall. Curious, and hopeful now of what he would see, Sam hurried after Missouri and James under the arched entrance declaring a real world experience of the wall. There were people crowding around and staff wearing traditional Chinese dress. Though the staff members were all speaking enthusiastically, Sam heard disgruntled mumblings from many of the visitors. He peered over their heads and looked for the display. He saw nothing interesting but Missouri working her way to the front.

He squeezed his way in after her and came to a stop at the head of the crowd where Missouri stood with her hands on James’ shoulders. Sam followed her gaze and understood what people were unhappy about. On a black plinth was a small section of wall made from a grand total of seventeen bricks. They were clearly old and Sam guessed it was interesting to see a real piece of history, but it obviously wasn’t what Missouri had been hoping for.

“That’s the wall?” James asked doubtfully, mirroring his mother’s disappointment.

“Yes,” a man in traditional enthused. “It’s genuine bricks from the wall.”

James frowned. “So there’s a hole in the wall now?”

“No,” he said reassuringly. “These are bricks that have been replaced. We have many.”

“So the wall isn’t really that old?” James asked.

“It is very old… in places.”

Sam hid a laugh as a cough at James’ disappointed expression. His mother’s excitement had evidently infected him and the truth of the exhibit was an anticlimax.
“Do you have anything else Chinese here?” James asked.

“Of course. We have the build-a-wall activities and a history of China film in the viewing area. Our staff is available to answer any questions you have about my great country.”

“Can’t you answer them?” James asked.

“Of course.”

James smiled. “Is it true you can see the Great Wall from the moon?”

The man’s face fell. “Technically no.”

James sighed heavily. “Then it’s not really as good as I thought.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way,” the man said.

“It’s okay,” James said innocently. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t build the wall. You just inherited it from your ancestors.”

Sam couldn’t hide his laugh this time. He took James’ shoulder and steered him away from the man and portion of wall and back through the crowd. When they were free to speak, he asked, “You already knew that about the moon thing, didn’t you?”

James grinned at him. “Maybe.”

Sam shook his head. “You’re mean.”

“They were mean with those bricks,” James countered. “That wasn’t a wall. It wasn’t even a pile.”

“You’re not wrong,” Sam said, leading him outside, sure James was not going to be entertained by building a wall that would probably finish up being bigger than the ‘section’ they’d brought with them.

Missouri appeared behind them and said, “Well, that was a disappointment. Never mind. Let’s move on. It says here Hungary has a Rubik’s Cube.”

“Mom, I have a Rubik’s Cube,” James said patiently.

“Not like this,” Missouri said enigmatically. “Come on.”

They walked through the fair towards the Hungary pavilion. Being taller, Sam saw the Cube before the others, and he smiled as he anticipated James’ reaction to it. It was bigger than him, and automated so that the pieces rotated. It was far more impressive than some old bricks.

When they got close enough for him to see it, James breathed out in a rush and hurried forward.

“That’s more like it,” Missouri said, satisfied, rushing after James who was reaching out to touch the rotating cube. “Mind your fingers, James!”

James pulled back his hand and grinned up at her. “Sorry, Momma.”

He had shed the term Momma a while ago, unless he was in trouble, and it always amused Sam when he used it to mollify his mother.

Missouri looked at the impressive entrance to the Hungarian exhibit and said, “Well then. Shall we
In reply, James bounded ahead of them into the pavilion and Sam and Missouri followed.

xXx

The next day they returned to the fair to explore the pavilions they hadn’t already visited. James wanted another trip to the observation deck of the Sunsphere; he’d been entranced by what he had seen the day before and wanted another look. Sam was happy to oblige. He had seen the Sunsphere from a distance when making the trip through Knoxville for a hunt with Dean many years before, but he’d never been close, let alone inside, and the views had been incredible.

He was enjoying the fair. It wasn’t exactly what he’d imagined when he’d suggested the trip, but it was still good. They were going to visit the Peruvian exhibit where they were exploring a mummy they’d brought with them and were unwrapping there at the fair, and Egypt had brought millions of dollars’ worth of artifacts to see. There was technology, too. They hadn’t visited the US pavilion, even though it was the most impressively built of them all, and Sam knew from the program that they had some interesting technology to see that was unlikely to disappoint James and Missouri with their antiquated experience.

They started out with the Japanese pavilion and they were all impressed with the robot that demonstrated its abilities at calligraphy. The conversations happening around them with staff were exploring the role robots would have in the future. Sam was amused to hear them discussing how each home would have a personal robot that would help with household chores and childcare by the year 2000. Missouri raised a questioning eyebrow at Sam and he shook his head. Unless Roombas counted as real robots, that was a prophecy of the future that wasn’t going to come true, though the idea would make for an interesting Will Smith movie.

When they left the Japanese pavilion, they passed by the huge arcade area. James’ face lit up with excitement and he quickly turned pleading eyes on his mother.

“Can we go see?” he asked. “Please…”

“You say see but we all know you’re mean play,” Missouri said. “Those things will rot your brain.”

“They won’t, will they, Sam?”

Sam held his hands up in front of him. “I’m not getting between you on this issue. It’s down to your mom to decide.”

James looked betrayed. “They really won’t. All my friends play them and their brains are fine.”

Sam smirked.

“Okay, you can play for ten minutes,” Missouri conceded. “But I’m not going in there. I’m not going to watch you throw money away surrounded by flashing lights and loud noises. You’ll need to persuade Sam to go with you.”

James turned his wide eyes on Sam and held his hands up in a pleading way. “Please, Sam. It’ll be fun.”

Sam pretended to consider. “Okay. I’ll come in with you.”

James punched the air. “Yeah!”
“I’ll take a seat out here on the bench,” Missouri said. “No more than ten minutes, mind.” She reached for her purse but Sam shook his head.

“I’ve got it,” he said.

James rushed ahead on him inside and he hurried to catch up. He went to the counter and bought five dollars’ worth of tokens and then let James decide where to lead him. He chose Donkey Kong and Sam fed in the custom minted fair tokens. James’ beamed at him and then his face became concentrated as he grabbed the joystick and started his game.

Sam watched, encouraging him as he played, remembering the games of his childhood. Donkey Kong had featured, as had Pac-Man and Space Invaders. Dean had always been much better than him at them. He’d always beaten the high scores and replaced the names with rude words, back when Sam had known he had the coolest brother in the world.

He kept an eye on the clock and prompted James when five minutes had passed so he could decide whether to move to a different game. James chose to play Gorf, whooping excitedly when he destroyed an enemy ship. When their time was up, Sam dragged James away from the machine and handed him the paper cup of unused tokens. “Find someone to give them to,” he said.

James looked around the arcade and saw a child that looked a little younger than him watching another, slightly older, child play Qix with a look of yearning. James went over and handed him the cup. Sam didn’t hear what was said, but he noted that both boys smiled and James looked pleased when he came back to him.

“He didn’t have any tokens,” James explained. “His brother took all his and spent them.”

“Then it’s good he has some more,” Sam said. “It was nice of you to give yours to him.”

“Yeah,” James agreed. “He’s happy now.”

They went out and found Missouri on her claimed bench, glancing at her watch. She looked up as they approached and smiled.

“Did you have fun?” she asked.

“Lots,” James said. “And I gave some tokens to a boy that didn’t have any.”

“That was very kind of you,” Missouri said with a proud smile as she ruffled his hair.

James ducked out from under her hand and ran a hand over his hair to smooth it with a scowl. Sam smiled. He never had moments like that with his mother, but he remembered how it felt when Dean had teased him by messing up his hair and he’d felt the same way.

“Where next?” Missouri asked.

“Let’s go to the US,” Sam suggested. “There’s some stuff there I want to see.”

“Okay,” Missouri said, and they set off for the largest and most impressive pavilion.

When they got there, they saw it was one of the busiest, too. People were streaming in, and they had to join a queue. As they edged closer to the entrance, Sam spotted a stall set up that was declaring a new invention in the world of Coca Cola.

“Cherry coke,” Sam said with a laugh.
“What?” Missouri asked.

“They’re bringing out a new flavor of coke,” Sam explained.

“Cherry?” James asked.

“Yeah, it’s good,” Sam said then quickly covered his slip. “I mean it sounds good. Shall I get us some?”

“Not for me,” Missouri said while James nodded excitedly.

Sam went to the counter and brought two cans. He carried them back and handed one to James them popped the top of his own. Sam hadn’t drunk soda in years, not since he became conscious of a healthy diet, but the sweet taste flooded his mouth and mind with memories of a youth spent sometimes eating out of vending machines when John was on a long hunt and they’d been left alone too long.

“Let me try some,” Missouri said to James.

James handed her his can and Missouri sipped at it. “It’s good,” she decided. “Too sweet, but coke always is. I think it’ll catch on.”

“It will,” Sam said fervently.

Missouri handed the can back to James and warned, “You’ll have to be extra careful brushing your teeth tonight.”

“I will, Mom,” James said happily.

When they’d finished their drinks Sam dumped the cans in a trashcan, wondering how long it would be until recycling was a thing. The queue edged closer until they were at the door and when a group exited they were gestured inside by a woman wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with stars and stripes. They weren’t going with the subtle approach, Sam thought.

The pavilion was large and there were many stations set up with history of the country and inventions. It was the best exhibit Sam had seen at the fair so far, though he guessed America had the home advantage. They went to a station where a man in a suit was demonstrating something on a computer. Sam listened and understood he was explaining touch screen technology. Sam was impressed. He had no idea it would be invented already.

The man gestured them forward and invited James to try it out. James looked wondrous as the cursor followed his finger across the screen.

“This is the technology of the future,” the man declared.

Missouri glanced at Sam and he nodded. “It is,” he agreed. “One day we’ll be using this for all kinds of things.”

“Oh computers?” Missouri asked doubtfully. She invested in technology stocks because she trusted Sam, but she couldn’t yet see the potential computers held.

“Most of all on computers,” Sam said. “I know you don’t see it, but one day almost every home in the States will have a computer of some sort in it.”

The man helping James looked up. “You’re a man with vision!”
Sam smiled wryly. “I just see potential, that’s all.”

“He’s getting a computer,” James said.

He had been excited to learn that Sam had ordered a Commodore 64 from the electronics store in town. Missouri had been doubtful of its use, and Sam admitted that there wasn’t a lot he could use it for with the current technology available, but he wanted one anyway. He was going to get some programs and games James could use. The sooner he was introduced to computers and started to explore them the better it would be for his future.

“You are?” the man asked.

“A Commodore 64,” Sam said.

“A good choice. Commodores are the future of America.”

Sam smiled at his conviction, knowing that other brands would quickly take the place of the Commodore.

A new group waited at their elbow for a chance to try out the computer so Sam indicated that they should move on. James thanked the man for his turn and they went to the next display, an exhibit on the future of renewable energy. None of the ideas he was seeing were new to him, but he felt that, for once, he was seeing the future coming to him instead of him waiting for it to happen.

xXx

Darkness had fallen and Sam and James were in the Ferris wheel from the Netherlands exhibit.

Missouri had declined to join them, happier taking pictures of them with her Pentax camera and her feet on solid ground instead of ‘swinging about in the sky’. She hadn’t complained about James going with Sam, so he knew she wasn’t really worried about it.

Sam was happy to have a moment alone with James. He was very aware that these moments were limited and he wanted as many as he could have while the chance was there.

“Do we really have to go home tomorrow?” James asked dolefully.

“I think so,” Sam said. “You’ll be back at school soon, so you need to make sure all your summer reading is done. And I have things to do, too.”

“Like what?” James asked. “Are you going away again?”

“Maybe,” Sam said.

He had been shuttling between home and the hunts he’d found recently, taking some with George but most alone. He didn’t have a new case lined up, but he would try to find one. While he wasn’t working, he wanted to use the time wisely.

“Where do you go?” James asked.

“I have to work.”

“But you worked at the site,” James said. “And I heard Mom say you quit.”

“I have a new job.”
“What is it?”

Sam considered how to answer. He didn’t want to lie to James, but he could never tell him the truth. He decided to keep it vague. “I go to help people that need it,” he said.

“Like my dad did?”

“Just like that,” Sam said.

“Is it hard?” James asked.

“Sometimes, yes. It’s always a good thing to do though. The feeling of helping people is more than I can explain.”

“I want to do that,” James said decisively.

Sam winced. He didn’t want James becoming a hunter. He deserved better than a life on the road. He didn’t want the kid he loved, the man he would grow to be, to risk his life at every turn.

“I always wanted to help people,” Sam said. “I wanted to be a lawyer.”

“Like Perry Mason?”

Sam glanced down at him. “You know about Perry Mason?”

“Mom watches the old shows sometimes while I’m doing homework. I watch it a bit, too.” He looked ashamed of the admission, though Sam wasn’t sure if it was because of the fact he was supposed to be doing homework or because he had recently reached the age when it was important to be seen as ‘cool’.

“Like Perry Mason,” Sam agreed. “I wanted to defend people that were innocent. I thought that would be a good thing to do with my life.”

“Why didn’t you do it?” James asked.

“Because my life turned out different,” Sam said. “I am happy with it though.”

James was silent a long time as he considered. “I could be a lawyer.”

“You could,” Sam agreed. “Or a doctor or a teacher or a fireman. All of those jobs help people somehow. You can do whatever you want, James. That’s the best thing about life. You can make what you want of it if you work hard. You’re smart enough to do anything.”

James nodded slowly. “I think I’d like to be a lawyer, too. It looks exciting.”

“I thought so, too.”

“I’ll tell Mom,” he said decisively.

Sam grinned. “She’ll be happy to hear it. But just because you want to be a lawyer now, it doesn’t mean you can’t change your mind later. You have your whole life ahead of you.”

“Can you change your mind?” James asked.

“Yeah, I guess I can,” Sam said.
He was hoping to have life changed for him when he killed Azazel. He wished to return to a life with all of his family and Jessica with him. He didn’t care what job he had or life he lived as long as they were there. That was his wish.

“Then maybe you should, too. You can still help people. It might be fun.”

Sam laughed. “It might be. I’ll think about it. Thanks, James.”

“You’re welcome.” He leaned forward suddenly in his seat, making it rock. “Look! The fireworks are starting!”

Sam saw the explosion of color light the sky on the other side of the fair. “Yeah. They’re pretty special. And we have the best view.”

“We do,” James said happily. “Thank you for bringing us here, Sam. It’s been great. Mom’s enjoyed it, too, I can tell.”

Sam smiled and wrapped an around his shoulder. “You’re welcome, James. I’m glad you came with me.”

James leaned against him, pointing as the fireworks exploded in the sky, and Sam just took in the moment. He was happy. He hadn’t thought he would be living in the past, but Missouri and James had brought him joy and he was going to miss that when it was over.

He hoped he was going back to something better and that they would be a part of it, but he couldn’t be sure, so he just took these moments and treasured them in case they were among the last.
Sam set down a coffee on the table at Missouri’s elbow. She thanked him and her eyes followed him as he sat down on the armchair opposite her. Missouri had come over ostensibly for a coffee and chat, but Sam knew it was more than that. She wanted to see him before he left for Colorado to retrieve the colt from Daniel Elkins. He was leaving later that day.

It was October 29th and he wanted to get there and back and still have enough time to prepare for Azazel’s arrival. He also wanted to be back for Halloween. James was going to be trick or treating with his friends—despite the fact Sam thought he would say he was too old for it now that he was fourteen—and Sam wanted to see him in costume. Little moments like that meant more than ever now that they would be among the very last he would have.

“When are you leaving?” Missouri asked.

“When we’re done here,” Sam replied. “I won’t go in until the early hours while he’s sleeping, but I want to be there early to scout the place. I went there once and didn’t notice much protection, but I don’t want to get caught out by something when it’s time.”

“Probably a good idea. I know Elkins well, and he’s good.” A shadow crossed her face, and Sam guessed she was thinking about Richard. He’d been hunting vampires with Daniel Elkins the day he died.

“I think the hardest part is going to be cracking the safe,” Sam said. “Dean’s much better at things like that than me. If I have to, I will have him open it for me. I won’t hurt him, but I’ll be armed and he can’t exactly do much to me.”

“I hate that you’re going in there expecting to be hurt.”

Actually, Sam was expecting to go in and have Daniel attempt to kill him, but since it was impossible for him to die, he wasn’t too worried.

“This is one of the last times,” Sam reassured her. “When this is over, there will be no one trying to kill me ever again. My life will be completely different.”

“You’ll be gone,” Missouri said bitterly.

Sam bowed his head. He hated that this was hurting her. It was the last thing he wanted to do to the woman he loved like a sister, but he couldn’t do anything else if he wanted to save his family. And himself. He was doing this for himself as much as anyone else.

“I’m sorry he whispered. You know I wouldn’t hurt you for anything if I had a choice.”

“What about James?” she asked.

Sam looked her in the eye and saw the emotion swimming in them. “I want to hurt him even less.”

“But you’re going to. He will be heartbroken when you’re gone. You mean so much to him. How am I supposed to explain why you’ve suddenly disappeared from his life?”

“I’ll explain before it’s time,” Sam said. “I’ll find something to tell him. He knows I go to help people when I’m not here. I’ll tell him it’s about that, but for longer.”
“Longer? It’s forever.” Missouri couldn’t mask her anguished expression. “You might never see us again. If you go back to your time and everything’s changed, you might not remember us.”

“Then you’ll remember for me,” Sam said. “You can find me again. You’ll see me grow up, Missouri.”

“And that will make me happy, to see you living a normal life, but it won’t be the same for me or James. You’ll be a child.”

Sam wished he had the words to explain to her how much he needed this. He wanted her to understand that he had no choice but to do it. As much as he loved her and James, he loved his family, too, and the consequences for them were so much worse. And there was the world to consider. That was at risk if he didn’t do it. Lucifer would be freed and the end would loom over them. That was more than anyone should have to suffer through. It was the loss of two people he loved from his life that would save millions.

“Maybe I will remember,” Sam said. “I can find you when I get back.”

“When James is a grown man and I’m an old woman?”

“You won’t be an old woman. I knew you, remember. You will be just as beautiful then as you are now, and you’ll still be a force of nature.”

“In nearly thirty years,” she said.

“I’m worth the wait,” Sam teased.

“You are,” she said seriously. “I just wish I knew for sure that you’ll remember. If I had that to hold on to, if I could tell James we’d see you like this again, I could bear it.”

Sam felt her heartfelt words like a weight on his chest. He wished he could make her understand that he had to do it. The only way was to tell her the truth of the fate of the world and no one should live with that knowledge. He could tell her something though, he realized. He couldn’t tell her what would come for the world, but he could tell her what would come for the people he loved.

“If my mom dies, my dad will become a hunter,” he said.

“You’ve told me this before.”

“I know, but there’s more. He’ll set off on the road looking for the thing that killed my mother, and me and Dean will be dragged along with him. I’ll be lucky. I won’t remember my mom or what I’ve lost, but Dean will. Dad will be broken, and Dean will be left to take care of me. He’ll be four years old and he’ll be the one changing my diapers and feeding me. He’ll lose his own childhood because he has to raise me. When I am eight years old and I find out the truth of the world, he’ll be the one that will have to reassure me and try to comfort me while I cry. I’ll be so scared, and it will be my brother, younger than James is now, that has to help me through it.”

He stopped and glanced at Missouri. She looked like she wanted to cry.

“His life will be hunting, too,” he said. “From when he’s little more than a child, he’ll go on hunts with my dad, risking his life for other people, and he’ll never question it. He won’t understand how his life should be because this is all he will ever know.” He took a breath. “I will leave him alone. When I am eighteen, I will get into college, and my father will tell me that if I leave, I can never come back. I will leave Dean behind, too, and I won’t see him again for years. I’ll choose myself over him and other people, and he’ll be a hunter still while I live a normal life.”
“You deserve a normal life,” Missouri said. “Everyone deserves that. Just because your father chooses to hunt, it doesn’t mean you have to.”

“That’s what I will think. I will love college. I’ll make friends and even have a girlfriend. She will be the most amazing, beautiful and talented woman, and I will love her so much. I will plan to propose to her after I have this interview that will decide my future. I will want to spend the rest of my life with her, and I really think she’ll say yes. I don’t get a chance to ask though. My dad will disappear on a hunt and Dean will come to me for help. I’ll go with him, leaving Jessica alone, and the night I get home, I will see Jessica die.”

Missouri sucked in a breath. “Oh, Sam…”

“She’ll be killed by the same demon that killed my mom—Azazel—and I will see it happen. I will be helpless to do anything but watch while she burns. I will want to die, too, but Dean will pull me out of the burning apartment. I will start hunting again and searching for my father. We will find him but Azazel will come back. He will hurt Dean so much, he’s as good as dead, and my dad will make a deal with the very demon he has hunted most of my life for Dean’s life. Dean will be saved but my dad will die.”

He broke off, drawing fast breaths. Retelling these things were hurting him, but he knew from Missouri’s wrecked expression that she understood why he had to act now, and so he forced himself on.

“Things will happen because of Azazel, ending with me in a ghost town with a bunch of other people, and we’ll be doomed to fight to the death. I won’t fight, I’ll be too weak-willed to kill the man that threatens me, so I’ll walk away. He will come after me and stab me in the back, right in front of my brother. I will die in Dean’s arms.”

“You died?” Missouri asked, sounding horrified.

“Yes. Dean will make a deal for me though, he’ll bring me back, and it will cost his soul. We will have one year left together then the hounds will come for him. I will see him torn apart in front of me, and I will be unable to do a thing to save him. He’ll go to Hell because of me…” He broke off, unable to finish the tale.

“He’s brought back though,” Missouri said. “You told me he was with you when you were brought back.”

“He is. Angels will bring him back. It doesn’t end there though. Things will happen that will affect the whole world. Because of those things, I will be brought back here and Michael will trap me. All that will happen if I don’t kill Azazel. This is bigger than my family. It’s everyone. That’s why I have to do it. Do you understand?”

“I do,” Missouri said quietly. “I am sorry that you’ve lived through all that; it’s more than anyone should have to handle. I understand now though. I don’t want to lose you, and I still hate that it’s going to break my son’s heart, but I see why you have to do it. I’m sorry I made it hard for you.”

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “You didn’t know.” He checked his watch. “I should go now.” It was earlier than he’d planned, but he didn’t think he could stay with Missouri another moment, seeing her sympathy and pain.

“You should,” she agreed.

They stood and Missouri came to Sam and pulled him into a hug. Sam could feel her unsteady
breaths as he held her against him, and he rubbed her back.

“Good luck, Sam,” she said in a choked voice.

“Thank you,” Sam said.

Now that she knew the story, he believed she meant it. She didn’t want him to go, but she finally understood that he had no choice. It was about more than him. He was saving the world.

xXx

It was well dark by the time Sam reached Manning, Colorado, and Sam drove through the streets, trying to remember where Daniel Elkin’s home was. He’d only been there once, and it was years ago, but he remembered it was outside town and just past a crossroads. Sam had a good memory for journeys, but Dean’s was better. He seemed to have an impossible recall of all the roads they’d travelled. Sam was going to need to rely on luck and searching to find the place he was looking for.

It was past midnight when he found the dirt track with its ‘no trespassers’ sign at the entrance. He parked the car just out of sight and went the rest of the way on foot. It wasn’t the best plan for a quick getaway, but the engine was loud and he wanted to get through this without waking Elkins if he could. It would be much easier if he could get in and out with the colt undetected.

He walked up the twisting track, coming to the cabin which was in darkness. He took his lock picking tools from his pocket and bent at the door and inserted them into the lock. It was easy to work in darkness, as it was a case of feeling the lock rather than seeing. He felt the lock give and he eased the door open. The drapes were open, but there was not much light as the moon wasn’t even half full. Sam needed his flashlight to locate the safe in the large room that housed both a living room and a kitchen.

Sam roved the glow of the flashlight over the walls, searching for the safe, seeing the salt lines and sigils carved into the doorframe and windowsills. Elkins was well protected from the supernatural, but nothing there would be able to stop Sam.

He spotted what looked like a cloth-covered table against the wall by the fireplace, and he walked over and lifted the cloth to reveal the dial and turn handle of a safe. It wasn’t a cheap model, and Sam knew he was going to have a hard time getting it open. Dean could have done it by touch alone. Sam needed touch and sound. That was why he had bought a stethoscope from a mail order medical supplies company.

He set his duffel down on the floor and knelt in front of the safe. For a moment he just ran his hand over the dial, getting the feel for the mechanism, and then he took the stethoscope from the bag and inserted the earpieces and set the head against the door beside the dial. He took a deep breath and started to turn the dial slowly but without pause clockwise, listening for the double click. When he heard it, he stopped and marked the number on his hand with a pen. He took a breath and started to move the dial anti-clockwise. When he heard the double click again, he marked the number and turned in the other direction.

He worked slowly and carefully until he had the code and then he leaned back and removed the stethoscope from his ears. He checked the number on his hand and reached for the dial, aiming his flashlight to illuminate the numbers.

Suddenly, the room was flooded with light and he heard the click of a gun being cocked. “Stop right there,” a cold voice said.
Sam looked over his shoulder and saw Daniel Elkins standing there with a rifle aimed at him and a face full of anger.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said turning away and reaching for the dial again.

“I will shoot.”

“You can. It won’t stop me though,” Sam said. “I need what’s in this safe.”

“How do you know about it?” Elkins asked.

“It’s family lore. I know what’s in here and what it can do. I need it.”

“Don’t make me do this. I will shoot you.”

“I have no choice.” Sam started the turn the dial again, checking the numbers on his hand. There was a sharp crack and Sam felt the impact of the bullet at the same moment. It hit him in the upper arm and came through the front into the wall. Sam gasped with the pain, but it didn’t knock him down, and Sam felt it healing almost at once.

He turned the dial again and the safe door clicked open. Sam reached inside and pulled out the crafted wooden box. He straightened up and turned to face Elkins who looked stunned.

“How did you do that?” he asked, his eyes fixed on the arm he’d shot, apparently marveling at the fact Sam was using it freely.

“I have protection,” Sam said.

“What the hell kind of protection makes a man take a shot like that? Are you a demon? Christo!”

“I’m not a demon,” Sam said. “I’m just different.”

Sam set the box on the back of a couch and opened it. There was a bundle of cloth and a small leather case holding five bullets with crosses etched into the tips. He unwrapped the bundle and held the beautiful gun in his hand, feeling the familiar weight and the sense of power it exuded.

“Put that back,” Elkins ordered.

“I can’t,” Sam said.

“I will shoot you.”

Sam looked him in the eye and saw the truth there. He would shoot again, and this time to kill. He would regret it, but he would still do it to protect the colt.

“You can,” he said. “But it won’t stop me walking out of the door with this gun. Like I said, I need it.”

“And you think that gives you the right to steal from me?” he asked.

“Yes. I am doing this for the world. That gives me the right to do anything.” He sighed. “I’m not stealing it really. I’m borrowing it. You can come with me and take it back when it’s time, or I can tell you where to come to find it. I’d bring it back but I won’t be there anymore.”

“I’ve heard this before,” Elkins said. “Some kid told me he needed it to save his family. I’m pretty sure he failed as when I went to get it back the Campbells, the people he told me would have it,
were dead.”

Sam nodded. “I know. I won’t fail though, I know what I’m doing.”

Elkins shook his head. “I can’t let you take it.”

“Then come with me,” Sam said. “Come see me save the world. You can take it back when I’m done.”

“I’m coming nowhere with you because you’re not taking it.”

Sam knew there was nothing more to be gained by staying and arguing with him. He was probably going to take another shot for it, but it was time to leave. He tucked the bullets in his pocket and rewrapped the gun.

“I really am sorry,” he said.

“So am I,” Elkins said.

There was a second shot and the bullet hit Sam in the chest. His breath rushed out of him and he bowed over for a moment as he waited for his lungs to start working again. When he was able to take a full breath, he straightened and looked into Elkins’ stunned face. “The Winchesters at 485 Robintree,” he said. “That’s where it will be when it’s over. Come November 3rd and you’ll find it.”

“What are you?” Elkins asked weakly, his eyes fixed on the bloody hole in Sam’s jacket.

“I’m something different,” Sam said. “Thank you for your help.”

He crossed the room and walked out of the front door. He heard Elkins following him, but he didn’t stop. He went down the steps and then jogged down the track towards where he’d left his car. He’d been shot twice but he was leaving with the colt he needed. He would take any number of wounds, any amount of pain, whatever it took to save his family and the world.

He was a Winchester.

xXx

“James, have you got a minute?” Sam said. “I need to talk to you.”

James came out of the kitchen carrying the ET mask that was the finishing touch of his Halloween costume. “Sure.”

“In here,” Sam said, walking into the living room and holding the door open behind him.

James followed him in and Sam clicked the door closed. He and Missouri had agreed that it was better that he and James had this conversation alone together, man to man, rather than crowding him while Sam shared the news.

“What’s wrong, Sam?” James asked when they were both seated.

“There’s something I need to tell you,” Sam said. “And I need you to be a man about it.”

James looked worried. “Am I in trouble?”

“No,” Sam said. “You’re fine. We’re all fine, but we need to talk.”
James set his mask down on the end table and looked at Sam, his eyes troubled. “Tell me.”

Sam took a breath. He had been dreading this conversation for a long time. At least Missouri could understand why Sam had to go and what he was gaining by doing what he planned. James could have no idea.

“I need to go away,” he said.

James frowned. “Like on a trip again?”

“Like that, but this one will be a lot longer. I might not be able to come back.”

James’ face fell. “Never?”

“I hope someday, but it might not be for a very long time. And things will be different when I do. I won’t live here anymore, and I won’t see you and your mom so much. I will be changed.”

James’ lips pressed into a thin line and Sam felt a wave of guilt when he realized he was trying to hold back tears. He had known James would be upset, but he didn’t expect this level of sadness. It made sense in a way. Sam had shed tears at the thought of leaving him and Missouri.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

James turned away. “Why do you have to go?”

“I need to help some people,” Sam said. “And it will take a long time. It will change everything for me. It’s very important, but it means I lose you for a long time, and that’s not good. I don’t have a choice though. I have to do it.”

James bought up a hand to wipe at his face. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I know,” Sam said gently. “But sometimes we have to think about other people. I love the people I am helping very much, and they need me.”

James turned back to him. Though he had wiped away his tears, his eyes were red and his cheeks smeared. He also looked angry. Sam felt like an asshole for doing this to him. He was hurting him, and that was the last thing he wanted to do. He loved James.

“That’s bull,” James snapped. “We need you, too.”

Sam knew he should correct James’ language, he would ordinarily, but he was already hurting the kid. He didn’t want to make it worse. “Not the same way,” he said. “I love you and your mom, and I don’t want to leave you–”

“Then don’t!”

“I have to. These other people need me so much more.”

“How do you know?” James asked. “You don’t ask what we need, do you? We need you here. Mom does. She’s happy with you here; we both are.”

“I can save lives if I go,” Sam said.

“How?”

“I can’t explain it to you,” Sam said. “It’s complicated.”
“Adults always say stuff like that when they don’t want to talk about something.”

“This is different,” Sam said. “It really is complicated, and I don’t want to hurt you by trying to explain it.”

James crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m tougher than you think. I’m not a kid.”

“Maybe it’s me then,” Sam said. “I don’t want to hurt myself by trying to explain.”

“Who’s life are you going to save?” he asked sardonically.

“A family’s,” Sam said. “If I don’t do it, a mom is going to die, and the family will be ruined. Do you remember how hard it was to lose your dad? Remember how much it hurt you and your mom? I can save other people from feeling that.”

James locked eyes with him. Sam thought he could see the battle raging inside of James. He didn’t want Sam to go, but he didn’t want other people to suffer the way he had. It was his own need battling against someone else’s. He was a good kid, and he would want to help others if he could, but he wanted to help himself, too.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said.

James drew a shaky breath and asked, “When do you have to go?”

“Wednesday.”

“That’s soon,” James said.

“I know.”

James wiped a hand over his face again. “Okay. Fine. I get it.”

“Can you do something for me when I’m gone?” Sam asked.

James nodded but didn’t speak.

“I need you to take care of your mom. She’s going to be sad, too, and I want you to help her.”

“I can do that,” James said, puffing out his chest. “I can be a man.”

“You can,” Sam agreed. “And she’ll need you.”

James stood up and wiped a hand over his face. “I think I’ll go meet Toby and Max now.”

“Okay,” Sam said, rising to his feet. “Thank you for understanding, James. I knew I could rely on you.”

James teetered on his feet for a moment and then he rushed at Sam and threw his arms around him. Sam bent to hug him back, noting how tall he was getting now.

“I’ll miss you, Sam,” James said.

“I’ll miss you, too.”

James released him and grabbed his mask from the table. “Goodbye, Sam.”

Sam accepted the word for what it was. James wanted this to be the goodbye. He didn’t want Sam
to come back and draw out the process of leaving him. He would have to make sure to be gone before James got back tonight. It was better. He didn’t think he had it in him to share more goodbyes either.

“Goodbye, James,” Sam said, his throat constricted.

He watched James dash out of the room and then heard the front door open and close. He waited a moment to compose himself, and then he went into the kitchen where Missouri waited. When Sam joined her, he saw she was staring out of the window, watching her son rushing down the street.

“How did it go?”

“About as well as it could,” Sam said. “I’m going to go before he gets back.”

Missouri nodded. “Will I see you again before it’s time?”

“And you want to?” Sam asked. “I can come back, but it might be easier if we don’t draw it out.”

“Nothing about this is going to be easy, Sam.”

“I know.” Sam put an arm around her shoulders. “I’ll do whatever I can though.”

She shook her head and sniffed as there was a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Sam said, not wanting her to need to deal with people while she was upset.

He left her in the kitchen went into the hall to pick up the bowl of candy on the table then opened the door. The people he saw on the porch made him suck in a sharp breath. Mary and Dean were standing on the threshold, and John stood on the sidewalk with a baby in his arms wrapped in a blue blanket. Dean was wearing a traditional Dracula costume with the high collar and red bowtie. He was holding a plastic pail shaped like a pumpkin.

“Trick or treat!” he said excitedly.

Sam swallowed down the lump in his throat and said, “Wow. Look at your costume. You look great.”

“I’m Dracula,” he said proudly.

“I can see,” Sam said. “Very scary.” He held out the bowl. “Here, take some candy.”

With obvious glee, Dean dug into the bowl and pulled out a small package of candy.

“Is that your brother?” Sam asked.

“Yes, that’s Sammy,” Dean said happily.

“Do you think he’d like some candy, too?”

Dean laughed. “He’s too small. All he gets is gross green beans and bottles.”

“Would you like to have his candy then?” Sam asked.

Dean looked up at Mary hopefully. “Can I?”

“Okay,” Mary said with an amused smile.
Dean reached into the bowl again and pulled out a red sucker. “Thank you!”

“Yes,” Mary said. “Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome,” Sam said. He looked from his mother to his father, who was smiling widely as he cradled baby Sam and pointed at Missouri’s pumpkins on the lawn. He absorbed the sight of them, this perfect family, his family. He would see them again soon, but it wouldn’t be the same. He would be a grown man then. This was the last chance for him to see who it was he was going to be saving as they were before a demon entered Sam’s nursery.

Mary and Dean thanked Sam again and then walked down the steps to where John waited.

“Look what I got!” Dean said, holding up his candy for his father to see.

“You’re a lucky boy,” John said.

“I got Sammy’s, too.”

John smiled fondly. “Then you’re extra lucky that you have such a generous brother. You need to say thank you.”

Dean laughed. “Yeah. Thanks, Sammy.”

Sam watched them as they went together back to the sidewalk and then on to the next house before closing the door. He turned and saw Missouri had been watching him.

She looked sad, but she smiled at him. “I really understand now.”

“They’re so happy,” Sam said quietly.

“They are.”

Sam sighed as he looked into Missouri’s eyes. “I should go now.”

Missouri stepped forward and pulled him into a hug. Sam held her tightly, feeling her unsteady breaths. He sensed this was it. There would be no more goodbyes after tonight.

When she released him, he leaned back and said, “Thank you, Missouri. I could never have gotten through this without you.”

“I will see you again,” she promised.

“I think so, too.”

She stood on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “I’m going to miss you, Sam, but I am happy that you’re getting what you want.”

Sam nodded. “I’ll miss you, too.”

He grabbed his jacket from the hook by the door and pulled it on. He opened the door and then hesitated as an idea occurred to him. “You can leave all my stuff for whoever uses the house next,” he said. “But can you store the car?”

Missouri sounded amused. “You’re coming back for it?”

“No. I want James to have it,” Sam said. “Whenever you think he’s ready, when it’s time, make
sure he has it. It’s my last gift for him.”

“You’re leaving him more than a car, Sam,” she said. “You have given him a father these past five years. He’s never going to forget that.”

A hard lump formed in his throat that he couldn’t swallow down. All he could do was smile at Missouri before he closed the door behind him and walked down the path.

James had been like a son to him, and he was going to miss him so much, but perhaps fatherhood was something that was waiting for him in the future, too. If it all worked out as he wanted, he would be with Jessica and children were something that he could share with her.

He hoped.
Thanks to John’s alcohol sodden recitations of the story, Sam knew every detail of the night his mother had died.

It was only when he was drunk that John spoke about it. When sober he would barely mention what had happened outside of the need for revenge; he never told them details. When he was drunk though, he would share the story again and again, as if each telling exorcised some part of the horror for him. Dean had always hated to hear it, but Sam had enjoyed the first part of the story, the tale of how the evening had begun for John, coming home from work to his family and settling his children into bed. That small vignette of his family’s life had made up for the fact he had to hear the rest of the macabre tale.

He knew that, after putting Sam and Dean to bed, John had said goodnight to Mary and then gone downstairs to watch an old film on the TV. He knew that Mary had been so tired she was almost asleep before John said goodnight, but Dean had been restless and had wanted to stay up with his father longer. Sam knew that John would fall asleep, too, and would be woken by a noise that would send him rushing upstairs. He knew that the clock had stopped at exactly twelve minutes past eight and that Sam would be awake and happily gurgling in his crib when John went in. It would all be fine until John noticed the blood dripping down into the crib.

That was how it had happened then. Sam was going to change that now.

He was ready.

He needed access to the house, but it was still too early to go through the front door in case someone spotted him, so he snuck into the back yard and bent with his lock picking tools to the back door that led into the kitchen. John kept the lock oiled, and it was easy to open. Sam tucked the tools back in his pocket and eased open the door.

The clock above the stove said it was almost eight o’clock. The fact it was finally so close to time made Sam’s breath quicken. He had been waiting for this moment for years, and it was finally upon him. He was going home to a different life soon.

He crept into the hall and peered around the living room door. John was sleeping in an armchair and an old war movie was playing on the TV, just as he had said. It was eerie to see the moment he’d imagined so many times coming to life in person.

He smiled at his slumbering father and then crept up the stairs. The nursery was the second door on the left, and Sam went straight there. His infant self was in the crib, his eyes on the spinning mobile above his head. Sam smiled down at him, seeing his absolute innocence. Sam was going to save himself from the horrors that he would witness but never remember.

He turned away from his younger self and took his place beside the changing table in the corner. He wanted to be out of sight when the demon arrived so he could act before he was detected. He wanted to get the shot off fast. He hoped as soon as it was over, as soon as Azazel was dead, he would be swept back to his own time straight away, but if not, he would have to get out as fast as he could before Mary and John saw him. He could probably make the drop from the window without breaking anything if he lowered himself first, not that a broken bone would last. He much preferred the idea of being swept home straight away though. The sooner he was back there, ready to start his new life, the better.
He watched the clock ticking past the minutes, waiting for the moment Azazel would arrive and listening to his young-self gurgling happily. The minute hand reached twelve and at the same moment there was a flicker of the night light and a man appeared in front of the crib. He was wearing a long overcoat and his hair reached the nape of his neck.

Sam took less than a split second to raise the colt and cock it. His finger started to squeeze the trigger, his heart racing, but at the same moment, the man spun around and swept a hand through the air. Sam was shoved back against the wall hard enough to knock the breath out of him and knock the colt out of his hands.

Yellow eyes met Sam’s and Azazel smiled. “Hello,” he said. “And what can I do for you?”

“You can die,” Sam said, fighting against the demon’s hold to be free.

Azazel looked down at the gun on the floor and he smiled cruelly. “So, it has been found again. Are you somehow related to the last man that wanted to use that on me?”

“Yes,” Sam snarled, fighting harder than ever. “He’s my brother.”

“And you’re a man out of your time, just like he was. Well, you are a persistent family, I’ll give you that. Are you the psychic one?” He sniffed the air. “You are! What did you get?”

Sam ignored the question and snarled, “I’m going to end you!”

There was a sound in the hall and the demon waved a hand at him again. Sam felt his breath rush out of him again as the demon pressed a finger to his lips.

“John, is he hungry?” Mary’s drowsy voice came from the doorway, though Sam couldn’t see her.

“Mom, run!” He tried to shout but the words were a mere breath of air. The demon had stolen his voice. It didn’t stop him trying though. He begged her to leave, to run away and not look back. If she didn’t interrupt, Azazel would feed Sam the blood and leave. She need never die.

Azazel turned his head slightly and shushed her.

“All right,” she said, and Sam heard her footsteps disappear along the hall.

“That’s better,” Azazel said.

He brought up his wrist and cut across it with a fingernail. Sam had seen this before, when the demon had visited him in a dream, but to be here in the present and watching, unable to stop it, was so much worse. He tried desperately to free himself, his eyes on the colt, knowing what he needed to do but unable to do it. He could only watch as Azazel dripped the blood into the baby’s mouth as he began to fuss.

Sam felt tears streaming down his cheeks as he watched, unable to do a thing, knowing that his plan was doomed unless he could kill the demon. He was infected by the blood now, on the path to the apocalypse unless Azazel died.

“Sammy! Sammy!” Mary voice was coming along the hall again, and Sam willed Azazel to leave. If she could just live, things would be different still. It might not end with Lucifer being freed.

She rushed into the room and Azazel turned to look at her. Her eyes widened and she looked terrified. “It’s you!”
“Mom!” Sam bellowed silently. “Run!”

Though he had made no sound, she seemed to sense him there. She looked into his corner where he was pinned to the wall and her mouth dropped open. “You?”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said soundlessly. “I am so sorry. I love you, Mom. Please go. Run!”

It was too late. Azazel was already in action. He held out a hand to Mary and her feet slid across the floor to the wall. She was drawn upwards by an inexorable force until she was pinned against the ceiling. Azazel moved his hand in a slashing movement and a gash of blood appeared on her stomach. Sam cried out as she screamed. He felt sickened and horrified. He struggled to be free, knowing it was too late to save his mother but not too late to kill the demon, but he was stuck fast.

Azazel turned his attention on Sam and walked toward him slowly. He bent to pick up the colt, but his theatrical movements were too slow. Anna appeared with a flutter of sound and snatched it up. She reached for Sam’s arm and then he was swept away, his father’s voice calling Mary’s name echoing in his ears.

They came to a stop in the backyard of a house in darkness. He was free to move, and he immediately rushed at Anna with his fists bunched. “How could you?” he shouted. “Why didn’t you help her?”

She pushed him away and Sam fell onto his back.

“I couldn’t,” she said, and Sam thought he heard regret in her voice. “I never had that power.”

Sam struggled to his feet again, his heaving sobs making him unsteady. “She’s dying even now, my mom is dying, and you took me away.”

“I didn’t want you to see it happen,” she said. “I thought I could spare you that at least.”

“You could have spared me from it all!” Sam shouted. “She needn’t have died. You could have saved the world!”

“I couldn’t,” she said. “It’s impossible.”

Sam turned away and swiped a hand over his tearstained face. He had seen many things in his life, he had seen his own brother torn apart by hellhounds, and that had destroyed him, but he had never felt so utterly helpless as he did now. Even as Dean had died, Sam had known he would find a way to bring him back. He would save him. Now the whole world was doomed, and Sam couldn’t save it. The life he had imagined and lost didn’t even occur to him. He was consumed by his mother’s death and his family’s loss, by the world’s fate.

“You could have helped,” he said tearfully.

“I couldn’t,” she said through her teeth. “Whatever happened, happened. You were always brought back here. You were always there that night, and I always saved you. That’s is fact.”

“And the battle? Will Lucifer and Michael fight? Is that fact, too?”

“I don’t know. All I know is it will happen if it always did in the circle of time.”

Sam bent over and tried to breathe past the agony in his chest. He felt like his heart was being squeezed by an iron fist.
“I’m sorry, Sam,” she said.

“The hell you are!” Sam snarled. “You wanted this.”

“I don’t want the end. I didn’t want your mother to die. I just knew it had to happen.”

Fresh tears streamed down Sam’s cheeks. He had failed. She was gone. Their lives were changed forever, and the world was on a path to destruction because of that failure.

He turned and walked away from her. He could hear firetrucks in the distance drawing close, and he followed the sound automatically, returning to the scene of his failure.

Anna fell into step at his side. “Where are you going?”

“Away from you, you monster,” Sam snapped.

Anna sighed. “You can go, I won’t try to stop you, but you shouldn’t go back there, Sam. You don’t need to see it.”

“Screw you, Anna. You know nothing about what I need.”

Anna sighed. If Sam didn’t know better, he’d believe she really felt regret for him. “I’ll take this back where it belongs,” she said, holding up the colt. “And I’ll see you again. When you’re ready to listen, pray. I’ll come.”

“I’ll never want you,” Sam said.

“You will,” she said and then, with a soft breath of wind, she disappeared.

Sam walked out of the backyard and to the street. He couldn’t hear the firetrucks’ sirens now, but he could hear the rumble of the engines. He supposed they’d reached their destination. He followed the sound around a corner, coming to his family’s home. A crowd had formed in front of the burning house, but he saw one small group in particular. John was sitting on the hood of the Impala, Dean at his side and Sam cradled in his arms. Dean and John bore shell-shocked expressions and Sam moved fitfully in his blankets.

Sam felt new tears streak down his cheeks at the sight of them. He knew he should leave, he couldn’t stay and see this, but he felt as though they were nailed to the sidewalk. He just stared at them in horror, his view occasionally occluded by a firefighter or neighbor crossing his path to offer blankets and comfort to them.

A gentle hand settled on Sam’s arm, and Sam turned to see Missouri standing at his side. Her eyes were tear-streaked and her lip trembled. “I’m so sorry,” she said softly.

Sam shook his head dolefully. “I couldn’t do it. I tried, but he still killed her.”

“I know,” she said gently.

Sam looked away from her, back to the small family grouped on the Impala. He wanted to do something for them, but there was nothing he could do that people weren’t already doing.

“Come on, Sam,” Missouri said. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Where should I be?” Sam asked in a dead voice.

“Home with me. I know you want to help them, but people are going to start to notice you soon.
We can’t let that happen.”

Sam knew she was right. He had no more than a passing acquaintance with the Winchesters, but he was obviously upset and that would draw attention.

He started to walk away in the direction of the edge of town where his house was. He’d walked there rather than bring his car as he’d wanted to make things as easy as he could for Missouri after he was gone. He had said goodbye to his house and left letters for James, Missouri and George there. He would have to burn them now.

“Not yet, Sam,” Missouri said, rushing after him and taking his hand. “Come home with me.”

Sam had no will to argue with her. He had no will for anything. He was directionless. He allowed her to lead him around the corner towards her house without a word. He could still smell the smoke and hear the rumble of the engines that battled the flames.

When they reached the house, Missouri opened the door and gestured him inside. Sam heard the TV playing, and he froze. He had forgotten about James. It was still too early for him to be in bed.

“Mom?” James called.

“I’m back,” Missouri said. “Stay there and watch your show. I’ll be there soon.”

She gestured Sam into the kitchen and to a seat at the table. Sam sat down and leaned his elbows on the table, burying his face in his hands as the tears began to flow again.

Missouri busied herself at the counter for a moment and then came back to him and set something down with a chink. Sam lowered his hands and saw a glass with a generous measure of whiskey in front of him.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

She sat down beside him and laid a hand on his arm. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Sam sipped his whiskey and then set it down. “I got there in time, I had the colt, but Azazel pinned me to the wall and I couldn’t move. I saw it all, Missouri. I watched her die, and I couldn’t do or say a thing.”

“Did he hurt you?”

“No, Anna came and took me out. I think he was going to shoot me with the colt. Hell, it might even have worked.” He laughed softly. “Something good might have come from it after all.”

“You don’t mean that,” Missouri said.

“Don’t I? The colt might have worked. It would be better for the world if I was dead. Anna could have torn me apart like she planned to before and made it so I could never be brought back. She could have saved the world.”

“No!” Missouri snapped. “Nothing would be saved if you were dead. The world would be changed for the worse. You’re needed, Sam.”

Needed. That was exactly the problem. Lucifer needed Sam, and if he got him, it would all end.

“I am not needed for anything good,” he said.
“What is happening in your time?” she asked. “You have told me a lot but not everything. I want to know what’s happening in 2010 that scares you so much. Tell me, Sam.”

“I can’t,” Sam said. “It will change you.”

“Whatever it is can’t be worse than what I am imagining. I am picturing all kinds of horrors coming for me and my family. I need to know what it is.”

Perhaps she deserved to know. Perhaps it was because Sam had lost all his defenses in his grief. Perhaps he was just being selfish. Whatever it was, Sam decided to tell her. “The end is coming in 2010,” he said. “The real end. The apocalypse. The world is ending because of me.”

Missouri sucked in a harsh breath. “Not you.”

“Me,” Sam said firmly. “I do it.”

“What happened?”

Sam could tell she was asking so she could find a way to refute his blame, but she wouldn’t find it. Sam was the one that had made that mistake.

“What Azazel did to me, the baby, tonight set the world on a path downwards. It was a plan set in motion long ago; I needed to be born and primed for my part in it. Mom didn’t need to die, but she interrupted the demon and he killed her for it. He was there for me.”

“What did he want?”

“He fed me demon blood,” Sam said. “I had, I have, demon blood in me, and not just from him. Things happened, will happen, a lot of bad things, and they will lead to me being in a chapel in Maryland with a demon named Lilith. She will be the one trying to start the apocalypse by breaking seals, and I will think I’m saving the world by killing her, but it’s the opposite. Her death is the last seal. When I kill her, I will free Lucifer from a cage in Hell into the world. He will want to bring about the end.”

“Lucifer is real?” Missouri asked in a breathy voice.

“Real and coming,” Sam said. “All because of me.”

“You didn’t know though,” Missouri said, seeming relieved to have found a defense for him. “You thought you were saving the world.”

“I did,” Sam agreed. “But I should have stopped. It wasn’t just me killing her that did it. It was how. I used my mind. When Azazel fed me his blood, it changed me, made me psychic. I had visions and then later learned to exorcise demons with my mind. I couldn’t do it alone though. I needed the blood.”

“The blood Azazel gave you?”

“That and the blood I gave myself. There was a demon called Ruby that I thought was on our side. I drank her blood to give myself power. I drank so much I became less than human. I was so twisted by it that I killed a woman. She was a demon, but the meatsuit wasn’t. She was just a woman that had been violated.” He stared across the room, not wanting to meet Missouri’s eye. “She died because of me, and she was just the first of many. When Lucifer was freed, he started killing people. He slaughtered a whole town so he could free Death. That would never have happened without me. And it won’t end there. He wants to destroy the world if he wins, and if
doesn’t, if he dies, Michael will win but their battle will kill millions. So you see, Missouri, this was about more than saving my family. I have ended the world by failing.”

Missouri touched his arm. “Look at me, Sam.”

Sam forced himself to turn to her and look into her eyes. He expected hatred, but she merely looked sad. There was no accusation in her.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“You’re sorry?” Sam laughed. “What do you have to be sorry for? I’m the one that did this. I ended it all because I was arrogant and stupid.”

“I’m sorry that all of this was laid on you when you were just a baby. You were set on a path today and that led you to that place. You made some mistakes, I’m not denying that, but your intentions were good.”

“The world is ending!” Sam snapped.

Missouri nodded. “I heard you. And I won’t pretend that doesn’t scare me, but it was not your fault. You didn’t just tell me your story; you showed me in your mind, too. I read your thoughts and I know what you were thinking and feeling when it happened. You aren’t to blame for anything other than being tricked by a demon.”

Sam leapt to his feet, sending the chair crashing back to the floor. He had to get out of there. He couldn’t bear Missouri’s sympathy and understanding on top of everything else that had happened to him that night. He needed to get away.

As he strode through the hall James appeared at the living room door, “Mom, are you… Sam!” His face lit up with joy. “You’re here! I thought you were going away.”

Sam shook his head curtly. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re not?” James beamed at him. “That’s great.”

Sam yanked open the door and strode out into the smoky scented air, down the steps and along the path.

“Sam!” Missouri shouted behind him, but he didn’t turn. He needed to get away from her and James. He couldn’t breathe with them there. James was so happy and Missouri was giving him undeserved comfort. It was so wrong.

He didn’t need them. He needed Dean. He couldn’t see his brother though. He was so close, just around the corner, an innocent child, and his life had been destroyed. Sam couldn’t see his real brother again for almost thirty years, and when he did, the world would be ending.

All because of Sam.
Sam stood under the shower, washing the blood from his face and hair. The vampires had died hard, and he had been coated with blood by the time he’d finished. Perhaps that level of violence wasn’t necessary, but the vampires had fought him, and Sam had been angry. He was angry all the time now. Nothing sated his need to punish the monsters of the world for existing. He knew that none of them were responsible for what would happen to the world, but they were evil and needed to die nonetheless. His mother, a good and gentle woman, was lost from the world that they had no right to be alive in. Also, the more Sam killed, the fewer there were for John to face now that he was hunting.

The idea that John was out there hunting now was abhorrent to Sam. He was supposed to have prevented that. He knew that even now Dean was dealing with his own grief while trying to care for Sam, even though he was a child himself. Only four years old, Dean was taking the mantle of father and mother for Sam. It was unfair. If Sam thought he could have helped, he would have tracked John down and tried to shake some sense into him. He had no idea what would happen if John knew the truth though, and he didn’t dare risk it. He had already proved, by failing to kill Azazel, that his presence wasn’t going to help his family. All he could do was watch as they were destroyed.

He shut off the water and stepped out of the shower, wrapping a towel around his waist. It was still early enough for him to go out and get a drink before closing, and he wanted that desperately. He was drinking more than was healthy now, but it was what it took to get him through the days. He had 27 years until he was going to be back in his own time with the people he loved, and he wouldn’t be able to get through those years sober.

In the bedroom he rooted through his duffel for clean clothes. He needed to make a stop at a Laundromat soon, that or go home. He was in Iowa, close enough to pass by there to stop and get fresh clothes, but it might involve seeing Missouri and James, and he couldn’t bear that. He needed to distance himself from them while he was feeling this level of anger at the world. He didn’t want to hurt them more than he already had.

He took out clean jeans and a shirt and then dried off before dressing and toweling his hair dry. He threw the wet towel onto the floor and grabbed his wallet from the table. He didn’t take his car keys as he had seen a bar a little down the street, and he didn’t want to drive home after consuming the amount of alcohol he planned to drink.

The night air was cold on his face and he huddled closer in his jacket. It was December, almost Christmas, and if he was home he would be needing to bring wood in for the fires. Thankfully, he wasn’t home, so he was able to keep mostly warm with the average heating systems in motels.

He reached the bar and went inside, into the hum of music and conversation. It was busy and he wasn’t going to be able to get a table. He didn’t mind. If he stayed at the bar, he could get his drinks faster. When the bartender, a middle-aged man with a heavy gut, came to him, he ordered a beer and shot of whiskey. The man served him without comment and slid his drinks and change across the bar.

Sam knocked back his shot and picked up his beer. He had a clear plan in mind. He was going to get good and drunk and then he was going back to the motel to sleep it off before leaving in the morning to find his next hunt. That was his life now: drinking and hunting. It would be his life until he was home again.
He gestured for another shot and knocked it back, feeling the warmth of alcohol running through his veins, soothing the raw edges of his anger. It only lasted so long. Soon he would be burning with anger again, he knew. He always was.

Sam was onto his sixth drink when someone brushed past him, making him spill some of the shot he was about to bring to his lips. He drank what was remaining in the glass and then turned to face the man that had been stupid enough to get too close to him. He was a big guy with meaty hands that would make powerful fists. Sam was pleased. He thought the man would make an interesting opponent if pressed. Sam grabbed his thick shoulder and turned him. “You made me spill my drink.”

The man looked from Sam to the line of empty glasses at the bar and said, “Seems like you’ve had plenty already.”

“Did I ask what you thought?” Sam asked. “No.”

The man glowered at him. “How about I buy you another drink and you can sit here and go back to getting loaded alone? I’ve got friends to get back to.” The threat in his voice was clear. He wasn’t here alone, and if Sam wanted to fight, it wouldn’t be a fair one.

Sam didn’t care how many friends he had. They couldn’t hurt him enough to make him stop. He was the one with an archangel’s protection. Even if he didn’t have that, he would have wanted the fight. He was young and fit and, big as this man was, he could take him with the boost of his anger fueling him.

“I don’t want a drink,” Sam said, stepping into his space.

The man sighed and stepped back, his huge hands balling into fists. Sam was too fast for his strike though. He slammed a fist into the man’s gut, curling up into his ribs. His muscles were hard, and Sam thought he was going shake off the blow, but it had been strong enough to knock the air out of the man and make him bow over. Sam used his capitulation to bring down both fists on the back of the man’s neck, knocking him to the floor. He bought back a foot to kick him, but the man was out cold already and there was no need for more. People were edging away from the scene and giving Sam furtive looks.

Disappointed that it had been so easy, Sam gestured to the tense looking bartender for another shot and took a swig of his beer. He bought it to him, and he knocked back the shot then froze with the glass raised as someone laid a hand on his shoulder. He turned and saw two men standing side–by–side facing him. They looked menacing as they cracked their knuckles, and Sam grinned at them.

“Take two?” he asked, widening his stance and bringing his fists up.

The men exchanged a glance and then the shorter one snapped out a fist, slamming it into Sam’s jaw. Sam’s head rocked back but the pain disappeared almost at once and he grinned. “That’s more like it.”

He punched the smaller man and he staggered back as the blow collided with his temple. The larger man surged forward, and Sam let him come right into his first to the stomach. Just like his friend, he bowed over and Sam brought his fists up to lay the felling blow. Someone grabbed his wrist though and held it fast. Sam turned to look at the man that had so foolishly interrupted and blinked twice as he recognized him.

“Are you quite finished?” George asked.
Sam pulled himself free. “No.”

“Correction, you are finished,” George said.

The smaller man helped his friend to straighten up and they glowered at Sam, looking as ready to resume the fight as he was.

“Gentlemen, playtime is over,” George said. “Collect your friend from the floor and take him home.”

“And what if we don’t want to?” the smaller man asked truculently.

“Then by all means leave him there. My friend and I are leaving though. Unless you want to fight me as well. It’s your decision to make.”

“I’m not leaving,” Sam said angrily.

“Yes, you are,” George said. “There is somewhere you need to be. Missouri needs you.”

“Is she okay?” Sam asked, concern damping his anger.

“No, she isn’t. Come with me and I will explain.”

Sam cast the two men that had wanted to fight a look as they heaved their friend to his feet and then dropped a bill down onto the bar to cover his tab before following George out of the bar.

George started down the street and Sam rushed after him, catching his arm. “What’s wrong with Missouri?” he asked.

“Later,” George said.

“No, now!” Sam snapped.

George pulled his arm free and walked away. Frustrated but needing to know what was happening, Sam walked after him down the street and to a motel door beside his where the Mustang was parked. George unlocked it and went inside. Sam followed him in and said, “Now?”

Without answering him, George went to the table where a bottle of whiskey and two tin cups sat. He poured a measure into each and then sat down and sipped his drink.

“What is wrong with Missouri?” Sam asked.

“Sit,” George said.

Sam thumped down into the seat opposite him and drained his whiskey. “I’m sitting. I’m drinking. Now what aren’t you telling me?”

“Aren’t you curious about how I found you?” George asked.

Sam rolled his eyes but played along. “How did you find me, George?”

“I followed signs of vampires to town and saw your car when I checked in here,” George said. “I assumed I’d find you in a bar since you weren’t here, so I tried my luck. Imagine my shock when I found you beating those men bloody.”

“I hardly beat them bloody,” Sam said. “It was barely a fight at all.”
“And the vampires?”

“They’re dead,” Sam said. “They did die bloody.”

George closed his eyes a moment, seeming to be summoning patience. “I guessed as much after that show I just saw.”

“What’s wrong with Missouri?” Sam prompted, disregarding George’s reaction.

“She’s very worried about you.”

Sam exhaled a breath of relief. If that was all, she was fine. He’d been imagining so much worse. “Is that it?”

“No, that is not it,” George said angrily. “She has a son that is very upset, too, and she feels she has betrayed you.”

“How?” Sam asked.

“You’ll have to ask her that yourself,” George said.

Sam sighed. To ask Missouri what was wrong would involve going home or at least calling her. He didn’t want to do either. He wanted to be left well alone to hunt as he liked.

“I’ll take a raincheck on that,” Sam said.

“She needs to see you, Sam.”

“She really doesn’t. I bring nothing but bad.”

“Like the apocalypse?” George asked.

Sam froze reaching for the bottle of whiskey to replenish his mug. “She told you about that?”

“She didn’t want to,” George said. “But, as I have said, she is upset, and it slipped out. Once she started, I persuaded her to tell it all.”

For Missouri to have told George what Sam had shared, she must have been very upset. She wouldn’t have wanted to betray Sam or scare George. Sam felt guilt for how he had left her, dealing with that knowledge. For the first time since he had left her house that night, he put himself in Missouri’s position. He had been so consumed with how he felt and what had happened to his family that he had forgotten that it impacted other people. She had been blasted with the news of the coming apocalypse and the truth of what Sam had done, along with his failure to kill Azazel, something she had selflessly wanted for him. And Sam had barely spoken to James. After telling him he wasn’t going anywhere after all, he had walked out and not been back for weeks. The kid had to be confused. Sam felt like an asshole.

“I’m sorry she told you,” Sam said.

“I’m not. I am not happy about what’s coming, but I understand you a little better now. Ever since I met you, I have known there was something big that you were hiding. Now I know what it is. I won’t pretend I am not afraid, but I have been to Hell before and I know it can be overcome.

Sam frowned. “You’ve been to Hell?”

“Not in the literal sense, but yes, I have been to a place as bad as Hell, if not worse. I have lived
through the end of the world once already.” When Sam merely looked at him, confusion etched in his features, George went on. “The Second World War, Sam. I was there.”

Sam ducked his head. He had guessed George would have served, but he hadn’t expected to talk to him about it.

George refilled their glasses and leaned back in his seat. “I am an old solider, Sam, and I have seen much in the world. I don’t pretend to understand how you feel knowing what’s coming, but I do understand what it will be like to live through it.” He looked at Sam for a long moment, seeming to be weighing a decision, and then said, “I enlisted the day after Pearl Harbor was attacked. I was eighteen years old. Until that day, the war was hard to imagine. It didn’t really reach us in my hometown. It was until the Japs brought it to America’s doorstep that I realized what I had to do. I went to the recruiting office with a group of my friends. We’d been together since grade school, and we were going to war together as men. We were so proud, excited even. We thought we were going to make a difference.”

“You did,” Sam said. “Every soldier that fought did.”

George nodded slowly. “I suppose they did. It cost us all though. Of our group of eight that went into that recruiting office, I was the only one to live past the first year of our conflict. I had to write to their families. I wasn’t a better fighter than them; I was just luckier than them.” He sipped his drink and took a deep breath. “I was lucky until April 1944. We were on a mission to flush out some of the enemy from a town in France when I took a bullet to the gut. I guess my luck hadn’t completely run out, though. I was shipped back to England to recover. By the time I was ready to return to duty, they were preparing Operation Neptune.” He glanced at Sam with haunted eyes. “You would call it the D-Day Landings.”

“You were in Normandy?” Sam asked, his voice quiet with awe.

“Omaha Beach,” George said. “Our boat was one of the last to beach, and the carnage was already almost absolute. Men torn apart by mines, shot down by machine gun bullets, limbs lying on the sand and more blood than you can even imagine. It was worse than any nightmare.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said quietly.

“I knew that it was the end; our enemies were going to spread from that beach, that country, and take over the world. I was going to die, and everyone I loved in the world was going to suffer. I wanted to lie down and stop there.”

“What happened?” Sam asked.

“I lived,” George said simply. “My platoon was mostly lost to a mine when we stepped on the beach and our lieutenant took a bullet to the brain before we were halfway up the beach. The sounds were unimaginable, screams of fear and anger, so much suffering combined with the blasts of mines and the machine gun fire and tanks. You couldn’t hear the waves at all, even from the boat. All you could hear were the sounds of my brothers being massacred and all you could do was run toward the bullets. The only way to live was to fight, to keep going, and pray to God that you lived.”

Sam stared at the man in awe. Reading and watching movies about a war was one thing, you think you know what it was like for them, but hearing it from someone that had been there was a completely different thing. It made him look at George in a completely different light. He was more than an old hunter. He was a true hero.
“I don’t know what to say,” Sam admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be sorry, but not for me. I didn’t tell you this for your admiration or pity. I told you so that you would see that the end doesn’t always come, even when it seems inevitable.”

“It’s Lucifer, George,” Sam said.

“I know. Missouri told me, and it scares me, too, but I don’t think it’s the end for you any more than that beach was for me. You have to fight, too.”

“How?” Sam asked. This wasn’t like a war. There was no weapon Sam could equip himself with that would kill the devil. The colt had failed. He was helpless. “I can’t kill him.”

“Can’t you?” George asked. “Have you exhausted every possibility? Is there no one else you can ask, no one that might know more than you? Has every piece of lore been scoured?”

“There won’t be anything in lore,” Sam said. “It’s never happened before so there’s no one to tell the story of how it was stopped.”

“He was trapped in that cage, wasn’t he? There must be lore on that. He was defeated once. He can be again.”

“It was Michael that defeated him though. He’s the one that’s supposed to fight him now. If they do fight, half of the planet will be destroyed.”

“Then find a way to stop them fighting,” George said. “They haven’t fought yet, so something is already stopping them. You need to find what that is and strengthen it.”

“I already know what it is,” Sam said. “They need vessels. Angels are like demons. They need meat suits. But the vessels have to come from a particular bloodline and the angels need consent, but once they have it, they can live on earth. They’ll be able to fight.”

“They don’t have vessels yet?”

“Lucifer has one that he’s using, but it’s just a stopgap. It’s not strong enough to beat Michael. And Michael doesn’t have one. He used my father when he trapped me here, but he let him go again.”

“Your father?” George asked.

Sam nodded, seeing that he had made the connection. “Me and Dean are the vessels. Dean is Michael’s and I am Lucifer’s. When they have us, they will fight. Either half the planet will be roasted if Michael wins, or Lucifer wins and he destroys the whole thing.”

“Then you have to keep saying no,” George said. “If Lucifer doesn’t have you, he can’t fight. This is good, Sam. There is a way.”

“We are saying no, we did, but Lucifer is so sure I’ll let him in. I don’t want to, but I’m more worried since I got sent back here than I was in my own time.”

“Why?”

“Michael. He brought me here for a reason, and it wasn’t to help me. He wants this fight. He thinks it’s his destiny. Somehow me being here is supposed to help him, and I don’t understand how. What if this is how Lucifer makes me say yes? I am trapped here now until 2010. How do I fight whatever it is that long?”
George considered. “I see. Then our first step is to discover why you’re here. If we can arm you against that, we can keep you strong and move on to the next problem of how to deal with the archangels.”

Sam felt the first tinge of hope at the realization he wasn’t alone. At home he had Dean, Bobby and Castiel fighting with him, but here he was alone. Until now. With George’s support and strength, perhaps he could do something to help after all.

“How do we do that?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know,” George said. “But we have time. Lucifer isn’t free in the world until your time, so we have years to find a way. First thing first, we’re going to get you home. You need to see Missouri and James, and you need to apologize for abandoning them.”

Sam nodded. He knew he owed them that and more. Missouri and James had been everything for him these past years, and yet he hadn’t been strong enough to stay with them when they needed it. He was a coward.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll go now.”

“You will go tomorrow,” George corrected. “Tonight you will sleep off the alcohol. You can’t drive as drunk as you are. Stay one more night and I’ll come back with you.”

“You’ll come?”

“Yes,” George said firmly. “I am still a soldier, and now there is a new war to fight. I won’t pretend I am not scared again, but I have lived through much before; I can get through this with you.”

Sam smiled slightly. He felt cautiously hopeful. He wasn’t sure they would find a way to defeat Lucifer and Michael, but he would at least not be alone to search.

xXx

Sam and George left Iowa early and got to Lawrence around noon. Sam’s plan had been to go home and clean up before going to see Missouri, but George must have called ahead at their last gas station stop as Missouri’s Pontiac was parked outside Sam’s house. He felt a momentary urge to turn around and leave, to avoid facing her, but he pushed it down and climbed out of the car as George pulled up beside him.

He walked to the door and let himself into the hall. He could hear the radio playing in the kitchen, and he followed the sound through the living room to see Missouri bustling with a tea kettle at the counter. She turned to him as he entered and set down the kettle.

“Hello, Sam,” she said gently, as if worried a harsh word would drive him away.

He ducked his head, ashamed to meet her eye. “Hey, Missouri.”

He heard her crossing the room and then her hand was under his chin, lifting his face to look at her. He forced a smile that felt like rictus and looked her in the eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“None of that,” she said, pulling him into her arms and holding him tightly. “You have nothing to apologize for.”

But he did. He had abandoned her and James after dumping the approaching apocalypse on her.
She needed someone to help her work through that, and he hadn’t been there. He was a coward.

“Not a coward, Sam,” she said firmly, pulling back to look at him. “You were hurting.”

Sam smiled genuinely. “You’re reading my mind again.”

“I am. I will stop when I can see you’re being kind to yourself again.”

Sam figured he had no choice but to accept what she was saying. He wouldn’t be able to stop her, and perhaps she needed this freedom of his thoughts to reassure her.

“It’s cold in here,” George said, coming in behind them. “Don’t you have heat?”

“I’ll build a fire,” Sam said, stepping out of Missouri’s hold and going into the living room. There was a basket of firewood and he stacked it with kindling and newspaper in the grate and then lit it. The flames caught the paper and licked over the kindling. When he was sure it had a good hold, he straightened up and received the cup of coffee Missouri brought him.

“So,” Missouri said, taking a seat on the small couch. “We need to talk.”

Sam sat in his usual armchair and George sat opposite. They each had a cup of coffee in their hands and wore matching somber expressions. There was silence for a moment apart from the tick of the clock on the mantle that Missouri broke, “I told George everything you told me, Sam.”

Sam’s eyes widened. Had she told him about the demon blood, too? He hadn’t seemed to be angry at Sam for any reason other than the fact that he’d abandoned Missouri and James. If he knew Sam had been drinking demon blood, he would have been disgusted and furious.

“Everything that was relevant,” she corrected herself.

George’s eyebrows rose but he didn’t question them.

“So now we need to decide what to do next,” she said.

“I think Sam being here is a blessing in disguise,” George said. “I know you’re not happy, Sam, but you have time now to find a way to counterattack the archangels without them knowing. They can’t use you as a vessel for another twenty-seven years.”

“Vessel?” Missouri asked.

“Angels need meatsuits,” Sam said, thinking of the fate that was supposed to be his in 2010.

Missouri stared into his eyes. “And you’re Lucifer’s.”

Sam nodded, realizing she had seen the answer in his mind. “And Dean is Michael’s. They can’t fight without us, but every day there that we refuse them is another day of Lucifer plotting to destroy the world. We can’t give them consent to fight as it will destroy the half of world, but we can’t leave Lucifer to do what he’s planning either.”

“What is he planning? Do you know?” George asked.

“He’s going to overwhelm the world with something call Croatoan. It’s a demonic virus that makes people rabid and murderous. If it works as Dean saw when the angels showed him the future, it will be everywhere by 2014 and the few uninfected people will be living in small compounds all over. It’s about as bad as you can imagine.”
“Okay,” George said in a bracing tone. “We need you and your brother to keep saying no and we need to find a way to defeat Lucifer.”

He said it as if it was just another mystery on a hunt to solve. It was so much bigger than that. It was finding a way to save the world from the biggest threat it had ever seen.

“We need help,” Missouri said.

“What?” Sam asked. “The only angel I know that is remotely good won’t come along until 2008. Until then he’s just a soldier, and he had no workable ideas when I did know him either.”

“What about the angel that killed Chronos?” George asked. “She might know something if she’s working with Michael.”

“She’s not going to help us,” Sam said dismissively.

“Are you sure?” Missouri asked. “She can’t want Lucifer to win if she’s working for Michael.”

Sam considered. Anna hadn’t wanted the battle before. She was going to kill him to prevent it. She may be working for Michael, but Sam thought that was to save the world rather than to serve him. Perhaps she thought that was the only way to defeat Lucifer. Perhaps it was. She had told Sam to call her when he was ready to talk.

He nodded slowly. “I guess we can ask.”

“How do you call an angel?” Missouri asked.

“You pray.” Sam raised his eyes and said, “Anna, I’m ready to talk now.”

Before he had even finished his sentence, there was a rustle and Anna appeared in front of the fireplace. “Sam,” she said soberly.

Sam felt a surge of hatred at the sight of her. She had killed him. She had helped trap him. She had left Mary to die.

She obviously saw his feelings on his face as she raised her hands. “I came to talk not to fight. I need you to hear me out.”

“You let my mom die,” Sam accused.

“I didn’t ‘let’ her. I told you I had no choice.”

“You were there,” Missouri said. “Why couldn’t you help her?”

“Because it was fated on Sam’s path,” Anna said. “The fact Sam is here now means we can change nothing on his path. His presence sets it in stone.” She sighed and addressed Sam. “You were always here, Sam. You met Missouri in 1978 for the first time for her and the second time for you. You were always there the night your mother died and I always saved you before Azazel could try to kill you. Everything that has happened to you since you arrived here, always happened. The Missouri you met in the future knew you as she had already lived through these years with you. Nothing you can do can change it.”

“That’s fatalism?” George said.

“Yes,” Anna said emphatically. “You can’t change the path that leads you here. Your mother had to die and your father had to become a hunter because that was how you came to 1978 to begin
with. I can’t change it any more than you can. Even Michael can’t change it. That’s why he didn’t stay. He knew there was no point just watching you as his plan would unfold without him just as well as with. He would just be an observer like me.”

Sam absorbed her words and felt a wave of defeat. What could he do if everything that happened was fate? He could live through these years and not make a difference to the future. Lucifer was still coming, that was fact, but Sam was only going to be able to defeat him if it was fate.

“Why is Sam here then?” Missouri asked. “What did Michael hope to gain by trapping him here?”

“He wanted to break him,” Anna stated. “He wants Lucifer’s vessel weak. It’s more than a bloodline that makes Sam and Dean vessels. It’s who they are as people. They’re strong, strong for the battle. But if these years break Sam, he will be ready for Lucifer when time matches again. He will give consent and he’ll be less of a threat as a weak vessel. Dean will have no choice but to give consent then to stop Lucifer and save the world. Without Sam to fight for, he will give in.”

Through the years Sam had spent in the past, he had wondered what it was for. He didn’t understand what Michael had to gain by trapping him here. Now he had the answer, but he felt no better for knowing. He thought it was a good plan. If he gave consent, Dean probably would, too. He would have no choice if he was going to save some of the world from the fate Zachariah had shown him.

“Will it work?” he asked Anna. “Will I break?”

“I don’t know. I can’t see the future. All I know is that it’s working right now. You’re becoming weak. Since your mother was killed, you have given in and let your anger reign. Michael would be happy if he saw you as you are.”

“And I can’t change that?” Sam asked, feeling defeated.

“You can. You can’t change the future here in the past, but you can change how you react to it.” She frowned. “Missouri, tell Sam what happened when you saw John.”

Sam’s eyes snapped to Missouri. He had forgotten in his grief that Missouri would see John after Mary died. She would be the one that told him about the world of hunting and set him on that path.

She looked guiltily at Sam. “I tried everything I could, Sam. I told him to stop and let it go. I wanted to spare you a life of hunting, but no matter how I came at it, he heard me telling him to go out and hunt rather than stay home. When I told him how it would hurt his children, he said he was doing it for them. When I told him how it would change everything for him, he told me it already had when Mary died. He wanted to find the thing that killed her, to save lives and get his revenge. I tried truly everything, but it always set him on the road to hunting. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “It doesn’t sound like you had a chance at doing anything different.”

“You didn’t,” Anna said. “That is my point.”

“Why are you telling us this?” George asked. “You killed Chronos to keep Sam here, so you’re not adverse to serving Michael. How does knowing this do that? If Michael had wanted Sam to know his plan, he would have told him.”

“I don’t want to serve Michael,” Anna said. “I thought I had to. He was going to kill me when he found out what I was doing. He said he would let me live if I served him. I didn’t want to die so I agreed. I didn’t want him to win though. I thought 32 more years of life was worth it before he found out I betrayed him. He will kill me for even telling you this much.”
Sam stared into her eyes, seeing the truth there. She was serious, which meant they had an ally. Though what help she could give him, he didn’t know.

“What do we do?” Sam asked her.

“We keep you strong,” she said. “We stop you breaking down and becoming prey to Lucifer. That’s on us as much as you. You need to fight what you’re feeling now and keep going, and we need to make you.”

“Oh okay,” George said. “We get Sam back to 2010 fighting fit, but what happens then? How do we defeat Lucifer when Sam is back to his own time?”

“I don’t know,” Anna admitted. “I don’t even know if we can. We have to try though. I am unobserved here, and I have the power of Heaven behind me again. I can search for a way.”

“That’s it?” Sam asked. “I stay strong and you look for a way even Castiel didn’t know about?”

Anna smiled slightly. “You’re forgetting, Sam, I was Castiel’s boss. He never had my knowledge or power. I am going to put everything I have into this, and you will dedicate yourself to staying strong.”

Sam was going to do that, but he didn’t know how to stay strong against something like this. He had clung onto the thought of killing Azazel to give him strength. He didn’t have that anymore. He just had years ahead of him waiting for it to be time to be with Dean again.

“Any tips, Anna?” Missouri asked. “How does Sam stay strong for the next 27 years?”

Anna fixed her eyes on Sam. “You do what I told you to do in the beginning. You live. This isn’t going to be easy for you, I know, but if you have a real life here, more than work and hunting, you can do it. Use your friends, make the most of this time, and I think that will be enough.

“I live?” Sam asked. “That’s it?”

“Unless you can think of anything else, yes,” Anna said. “You fix this goal in your head and fight for it.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. He thought he had been living. He’d connected with people and had a job, but apparently it wasn’t enough. He had to find a way to do more. He had no idea how to do that, but he would try.

It was a step toward saving the world.
Sam saw the green light blinking on his new answering machine as he passed through the living room, and he grinned, pretty sure he knew what was coming. He walked into the kitchen and set down the bags of groceries and then went back to the living room to listen to his message.

“Sam, are you there? Are you just listening to me talking on this horrible machine because it’s funny? You better not be. I’m calling to tell you that I’ve made too many meatballs, so you need to come over for dinner. We’re eating at the usual time, so be there.” There was a pause. “I know you’re there listening to me, Sam.”

Sam laughed as the message ended. Missouri hated his new answering machine. She thought it was impersonal. It was, of course, but how else was Sam supposed to take messages when he wasn’t home? He’d been excited when he saw them in the window display at the RadioShack. It would make his life so much easier until cell phones came along. He managed without one, like he did the internet, but he was looking forward to getting one when they were a feasible choice.

Technology was starting to feel more familiar, moving closer to what he had known before. The Apple Mac was going on sale in a week, and he had one on order, though it would take a while for availability to filter through to Lawrence. It was going to be much more modern than his Commodore 64. It was even going to have a mouse.

He checked his watch and saw that he needed to leave soon for Missouri’s if he wasn’t going to be late. He knew the story of her making too much was a misdirection. She had made too much intentionally so she could get him there. She had done it a few times in the month since he’d gotten back to Lawrence. He was supposed to be living, and she was encouraging that fully, making sure he had as much time with her and James as was possible. It was helping, as were George’s regular phone calls. He still struggled with Mary’s loss and what he knew was happening to his family somewhere in the country right now, but he knew he had to put it behind him as much as he could if he was going to get through this without breaking. That was his mission now: to stay strong in the face of what had and would happen.

He went into the kitchen and put the fresh meat he’d brought in the fridge, leaving the rest of the groceries on the counter to be put away later, and then went back outside to the car. He didn’t want to be late for dinner.

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Sam was on his knees, digging in the dirt that would soon be his vegetable garden. He had wanted one for a long time, but he’d not bothered to make one when he thought he was going to escape this time when he killed Azazel. Now that he knew he was there for the duration, he decided it was time to make something just because he wanted to, something he’d never had or would ever have again once time caught up.

He wondered what Dean would make of him doing it. Would he be proud that Sam had accepted what was happening and was living now compared to his selfish and dangerous hunting pattern from before, or would he just be amused that Sam was going to have a garden to tend? Sam imagined some teasing however Dean felt about it. He wouldn’t be able to resist.

Sam wondered sometimes if Dean would want to see his house when they were together again. He couldn’t decide if he would want to if their situations were reversed. He would be curious to see how he’d lived, but at the same time it would be physical proof of the life he’d had without his
brother. It was becoming more of a home now, too. Missouri had gifted Sam with a framed print of him and James from a picnic at the lake the previous summer and it now had a place on the mantle. It was a little piece of his life now that Dean wasn’t a part of, and Sam wasn’t sure how he’d feel about that.

He leaned back on his haunches and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. It was still early but the June day was warming to be a scorcher. He hoped they weren’t building up for another heatwave. The last one had been unpleasant.

There was a sound coming along the track that led from the road to the house, and he got to his feet. It wasn’t a car coming, it was a bike, and he thought he knew who it would be. His suspicions were confirmed when James rode into sight on his ten-speed with his newspaper sack across his body. He skidded to a halt beside Sam’s car and lifted a hand in greeting to Sam.

“Hey,” Sam said. “You finished for the day?”

“Yep,” James said, pushing the bike to lean against the house and dropping the sack on to the ground beside it. “I thought I’d come by and see what you were doing. Mom said you were home.”

“Does she know you’re coming?” Sam asked.

He looked uncomfortable and Sam pointed at the house. “Go on in and give her a call. I’ll get you something to drink.”

“Thanks, Sam.”

He let himself in and Sam brushed the dirt off his hands onto his pants then walked into the house. James was on the phone in the living room, telling his mom he had finished his paper route and was visiting with Sam a while. From the look on his face, Missouri didn’t seem to be giving him any trouble for not going home, and Sam smiled as he went into the kitchen and opened the fridge. He had a pitcher of lemonade already prepared and cooled, and he poured two tall glasses for them and took them out onto the porch where James was waiting for him.

“You mom okay?” he asked.

“Yeah. She’s okay with me coming over. Said I can stay as long as I like as long as we both make it back for dinner.”

“Okay,” Sam said, setting down the glasses and sitting down. “That’s fine with me.”

“What were you doing in the dirt?” James asked, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. “Planting flowers?”

“Getting the ground ready for some vegetables,” Sam said dryly. “I promised your mom I’d keep you stocked up.”

James’ face fell. “Really?”

“Not really, but if you annoy me, I’ll make sure to bring some over for her to cook for you. I know how much you love them.”

James grimaced.

“Most people grow out of being picky eaters,” Sam said.
“Not me,” James said decisively.

“I’ve noticed.”

James sipped his lemonade and asked, “Are you planning to spend all day making your garden?”

“No, it’ll be too hot soon. Why? What do you want to do?”

“I thought we could go for a drive,” James said.

Sam considered. He couldn’t spend all day tending to the garden, and he had no other plans for the day. It would be fun to spend some time with James, the only other person that appreciated his car as much as he did.

“Sure, we can do that,” he said. “Let me finish the plot I am working on, and then we’ll get going.”

“Great,” James said excitedly.

“If you helped, it would go faster,” Sam said.

James shook his head. “Sorry, Sam, but I can’t be involved in your campaign to inflict vegetables on the world. It’s not right.”

Sam laughed. “You’re getting way too smart, mister.”

“You should ask my teachers,” he said smugly. “I’m a prodigy.”

“And so modest,” Sam said, getting to his feet and walking back to the ground he was turning.

He worked faster now, wanting to get it done so he could enjoy a drive with James. He heard the radio start up on the porch and knew James had brought it out to entertain himself while he waited for Sam. He heard the strains of Duran Duran start and he smiled to himself. Music was improving with time—in his opinion—but there were still songs that he would be happy to have fall out of fashion. He was just turning the last section of earth, wondering what he was going to plant in it, when he heard a shout of shock and then an impact. He scrambled to his feet and ran around the house toward the sound, his heart relocating to his throat when he saw James crumpled on the ground at the foot of a tree.

He cursed as he ran forward and dropped to his knees beside the kid. He was unconscious and there was a wound on his head that was bleeding copiously. Sam slipped off his shirt and pressed it to the wound.

“James, buddy, it’s time to wake up now,” he said, trying to sound calm.

James remained quiescent on the ground, and Sam’s worry ratcheted up another level. He pinched James’ earlobe hard and was rewarded with a groan of pain

“That’s it,” Sam said gently. “Wake up time, James. You’re okay.”

His eyes opened and fixed on Sam, filling with tears. “I fell out of the tree,” he said.

“I guessed,” Sam said with a shaky laugh. “Do you hurt anywhere but your head?”

“My arm,” James said weakly, looking at his right arm that Sam noticed now looked swollen. “It really hurts.”
“No worries,” Sam said, forcing himself to sound calm. “We’ll get you to the hospital and they’ll fix you up.”

James nodded, though he looked scared. Sam wasn’t used to this kind of situation. He’d seen people he loved in pain before—Dean more times than he could count—but they could handle pain. Dean could grit his teeth and get through it. James was young and afraid, even at fourteen, and Sam didn’t know what to say to him to make it right. He was flying by the seat of his pants with the situation.

“I’m going to get you into the car,” he said. “It’s going to hurt, so make as much noise as you want. It’s okay.”

James paled as he tried to sit up.

“Hold still,” Sam said. “Just stay there a minute. I’ll get the car ready.”

He ran into the house and grabbed a cushion from the chair and his car keys. He unlocked the passenger side door and opened it wide and put the cushion on the roof. When he went back to James, he saw he’d struggled upright and was cradling his wounded arm across his chest. Sam bent and scooped James up into his arms, holding him tightly against his chest.

“I can walk,” James protested in a strained voice, clearly holding back his sounds of pain.

“I know,” Sam said in a tone of forced easiness. “But I hardly ever work out anymore, so lifting some weight would be good for me.”

James laughed and then winced. Sam soothed him. They got to the car and Sam eased James down onto the seat and set the cushion on his lap. “Rest your arm on this,” he said.

James adjusted himself so his arm rested on it and Sam eased the door closed behind him. He rushed around to the driver’s side and got in quickly.

“Do you think it’s broken?” James asked as Sam turned the key and the engine came to life.

“Pretty sure, yeah,” Sam said honestly. “It’ll be fine, though. They’ll get you in a cast and all your buddies can sign it.”

“Why not?” Sam asked, weak amusement in his voice.

“I’ll do my paper route?” James asked, weak amusement in his voice.

“Why not?” Sam asked. “It’s not like I’ve got a regular job to worry about right now. It might be fun even. I’ve never had a paper route before.”

“Not when you were a kid?”

“I really didn’t have a paper route kind of childhood,” Sam said. “Brace yourself.” They were driving off the track and onto the road and for a moment the ride was going to be bumpy.

James moaned as his arm was jostled and Sam winced. “Sorry,” he said quietly.

“I’m sorry,” James said. “I don’t mean to be such a baby.”
“You’re not a baby,” Sam said firmly. “You’re hurting. Never be afraid to let people know you’re in pain. It’s the only way to get help.”

“You’re already helping,” James said.

Sam realized his words had been more about other kinds of pain than the physical pain James was suffering at this moment. It was about the times in his life he’d been in pain but had stowed it so he could get on with the job. It was a lesson James needed to learn—to reach out when he needed to—but maybe not now. Right now he just needed a doctor.

“You want some music?” Sam asked.

“Sure.”

Sam turned on the radio and Cyndi Lauper’s voice came through the speakers. He exchanged a look of amusement with James and quickly changed the station.

Sam turned off the backroad his house was on and onto the highway that would take him to the hospital. “How’s your head feeling?” he asked.

“It hurts, too, but not as much as my arm,” James said.

“Any blurred vision? Nausea?”

“A little. Is that bad?”

“Probably just a mild concussion,” Sam said. “They’ll get you fixed up. You might need to stay overnight.”

James cursed and then quickly apologized.

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “You have a free pass to curse today, as long as you don’t do it in front of your mom.”

“Aww, mom,” James groaned. “She’s going to be so mad!”

“She’s going to be so worried,” Sam corrected.

“I was climbing the tree,” James said. “She told me not to a hundred times.”

“She won’t be mad,” Sam said. “She’s going to be more concerned that you’re okay. Trust me. If she’s mad at anyone, it’ll be me. I should have cut that tree down a long time ago. I knew it wasn’t safe.”

“You didn’t know I’d be dumb enough to climb it.”

“And that will be my defense,” Sam said with a laugh.

James chuckled and then winced again.

“We’re almost there,” Sam said.

James nodded and Sam increased their speed a little as the hospital came into sight. He turned on the blinker and pulled off the road and into the parking lot of the hospital. He parked as close to the entrance to the ER as he could and then climbed out and rushed around to James’ side. He opened the door and supported James’ shoulders as he got out.
The adrenaline was clearly wearing off and James was shaking as he walked into the hospital under Sam’s supporting arm. Sam reassured and soothed, though he was feeling stressed. James had been hurt on his watch, and now he was in pain. He felt the weight of responsibility and guilt.

He wasn’t used to dealing with situations like this. He’d never seen James suffer anything worse than flu before, and Missouri had been the one in control then. He needed to call Missouri and tell her what had happened, but he didn’t want to leave James yet. He wished he had a cell phone. They wouldn’t be a seriously viable option for him for years though.

He led James in through the front doors and went to the desk where a woman sat with teased blonde hair with pink highlights. She looked at James’ pale face and said, “How may I help you?”

“James Mosely. He fell out of a tree,” Sam said. “I’m pretty sure he has a broken arm and probably a concussion. He’s got a cut and a nasty bump on his head.”

The woman smiled at James. “Concussion, huh, that gets you straight to the head of the queue. It’s your lucky day.”

“Doesn’t feel that lucky,” James said quietly.

She smiled sympathetically at him. “I guess it wouldn’t. I’ll get someone to help you.” She picked up a phone and spoke quietly into it then said, “They’ll be right out for you. I have some paperwork for you to fill out.” She handed Sam a clipboard and said. “Do you have his insurance details?”

“I don’t,” Sam said. “I need to call his mom to get them. He has insurance though.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. Lawrence General was a public hospital so they wouldn’t turn him away anyway, but they would obviously prefer to get insurance straightened out first.

“My mom’s got money,” James said in a strained voice. “Can I get some help now?”

“Oh, of course,” she said, becoming concerned and kind again. “Head to those doors at the end of the waiting room, and someone will come out to you.”

Sam and James followed her directions and a woman in a pale blue uniform came out of the door. “James Mosely?” she asked.

“Yes,” Sam said. “He fell out of a tree. I’m Sam.”

“A daredevil, huh?” she said with amusement. “Let’s get you checked out.”

They followed her through the doors and into a curtained off cubicle.

“Oh, okay now, James, I’m Doctor White and I’m going to take a look at you. Hop up on the gurney and we’ll see what we have here.”

Sam helped James onto the gurney and adjusted the pillows behind him. James leaned back looking weary.

The doctor checked the wound on his head and then took a penlight from her pocket. She ran it back and forth across James’ vision and nodded to herself. “Your reactions are a little sluggish,” she said. “You must have given your head a hard knock when you hit.”

“He was unconscious for a minute,” Sam said.

“Do you feel any dizziness or nausea?” she asked.
James nodded. “Yeah. Some.”

“Then I think you’re the proud owner of a concussion as well. We’ll take a look at your arm and then get you taken down for an x-ray. If I’m right, you’re going to need an overnight stay as well as a plaster cast.”

Sam squeezed James’ shoulder on his uninjured side as James ducked his head, obviously upset.

“I’ll just call down to x-ray and have them make you a space,” she said. “You try to relax.”

Sam thanked her and then settled on a chair beside James’. “You okay?” he asked.

James nodded and sniffed. Sam saw his eyes were wet.

“It’s okay to be scared,” he said. “You gave me a scare when I found you at the bottom of the tree.”

“I don’t want to be a chicken.”

“You’re not,” Sam said. “You’re handling this better than I could. When I broke my arm, I was a mess.”

“You did?”

“Twice in fact,” Sam said. “When I was five my brother and I were playing superheroes. He was Superman and he jumped off the shed roof. He was fine so I figured I could do it, too. I jumped off and went down like a ton of bricks. Broke my arm in two places.”

“Really?” James asked.

“Yeah.” Sam smiled. “Dean told me later that the reason it went wrong was because I was Batman.”

“Batman can’t fly, Sam.”

“As I learned that day,” Sam said with a laugh. “Dean had to ride me to the hospital on the handlebars of his bike.”

“You mom wasn’t there?”

“I lost my mom when I was a baby. My dad raised us but he wasn’t around much so it was Dean that mostly took care of me.”

“Getting you to jump off a roof?” James asked.

Sam nodded seriously. “He did his best. It wasn’t his fault that I chose the wrong superhero. Anyway, the other time I broke my arm I was a mess. I was fooling around with Dean and I got hurt again; this was a few years ago.” Technically he had been fooling around trying to catch a revenant at the time, but James couldn’t know that. He remembered the pain though, and he was impressed James was handling this as well as he was.

James sighed miserably. “It really hurts.”

“Then let it out,” Sam said. “My dad gave my brother some advice once, and he shared it with me later. He said fighting pain only makes it worse. You have to let it out to be free of it. Let it go and you’ll feel better.”
James turned his face away and drew a shaky breath. His shoulders shook and he moaned as he
began to cry. Sam stood from his chair and climbed onto the gurney beside him, wrapping his arm
around James’ shoulders. He soothed him as best he could with words and touch, and marveled at
the young man beside him. James was growing up fast, faster than he would have liked, but he was
letting himself be open with his pain and emotion now in a way Sam couldn’t be. By showing how
he felt, he was being strong.

“Do you want me to go call your mom now?” Sam asked him.

“No!” James said quickly. “She’s going to freak out when she knows. Wait till it’s taken care of
and then call her.”

“Are you sure?” Sam asked. “It’s okay if you need her.”

“I don’t,” James said, looking up at him with wet eyes. “I’ve got you.”

Sam smiled slightly, touched by the absolute trust he could see in James. “You always will, buddy.
I’m not going anywhere.”

“You’re really not leaving anymore?” James asked.

“I’m not leaving,” Sam said. “I promise.”

That was fact now. He was there for the duration. He’d thought that was a curse, being trapped
there, but as he sat with James, he saw it could be a gift, too. He may not have Dean, Bobby or
Castiel, but he had James, Missouri and George, and that was more than he deserved. He may not
have blood, but he had family.

The curtain whipped open and the doctor came back in. “Okay then. Let’s get you x-rayed and
checked out,” she said.

James looked at Sam. “You’ll come with me?”

“Of course,” Sam said. “You’re stuck with me now.”

James smiled slightly. “Good.”

And Sam knew that was what they both needed. James was hurting and he needed Sam to comfort
him, and Sam needed James to be there for him, too. He was here for the duration, and the people
he loved were the ones that would get him through this.

xXx

When Sam biked to a stop outside his house, he saw Missouri’s car parked outside. He climbed off
the bike and slipped the newspaper sack from across his body. He’d just finished James’ paper
route, and he was ready for a cool drink to combat the early heat of the day.

He let himself in and called to Missouri as he hung up the sack and walked into the living room.

“In here,” she called back from the kitchen.

Sam wandered through to her and saw she was doing his dishes from the night before that he’d left
in favor of researching a case for Rufus. It was him that called alone now that he and Bobby had
parted company.

He was taking more calls from them and other hunters lately. Rufus had apparently passed his
name along to friends, and Sam was kept busy between helping them and James’ summer break. They’d been spending a lot of time together since James’ cast prevented him from doing a lot of the summer activities he usually would with his friends.

“You don’t need to do that,” Sam said, plucking the dishcloth from her hands. “I’ll get to it.”

“I know,” she said, snatching the cloth back and thrusting her hands into the soapy water again. “But I thought I would save you a job. How was the route?”

Sam chuckled. “I’m still taking some teasing from the kids about doing it. They like to ask what I’m saving up to buy.”

“What do you tell them?” Missouri asked.

Sam grinned. “A Ferrari.”

Missouri shook her head. “They don’t know you’d never give up your car for a million dollars then?”

Sam shrugged. “They probably think I only have the ten speed. They’re okay though. It’s just weird to them to see a grown man carrying the sack like them.”

“And you still don’t mind?” she asked. “Because we can make other arrangements while James is still healing.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t take long and riding the bike is good exercise for me. I’ve let that slip lately. Speaking of James, where is he?”

“In your office, having a go on that computer,” Missouri said.

Sam frowned. “I have a lot of books out still, Missouri. I was researching lore last night.”

“I put them all away before he got in there. Besides, he thinks you’re a myths and legends nut. He won’t take anything he sees seriously.”

Reassured, Sam went to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of juice. Missouri handed him a clean glass and he filled it then drank it quickly.

“It’s going to be a hot one again,” he said.

“I know,” she sighed. “And James wants to be at the lake.”

“He could go to the beach,” Sam suggested. “He doesn’t have to go into the water.”

“Do you really think he could stay out? No, he’s better off here, even if he is on the computer.”

“He needs to learn how to use it,” Sam said, not for the first time. “They’re the future, Missouri. We’ll be using them for everything soon, and the sooner James gets the hang of them the better. It’ll give him a head start.”

“Are we really?” she asked. “They don’t seem that useful to me. All James likes to do is make his pictures.”

“It’s all about building skills that will be important. Almost every business in the country will use them for one thing or another, and when the internet comes along, it’ll be vital for his life.”
“That’s the thing that connects all computers, yes?”

“Yes, it’s going to be everything. Everyone will want to be connected. It’ll be a part of daily life.”

“Seems crazy to me,” she said.

“It’s technology. You will even be able to access it from cell phones.”

Missouri snorted. She only knew the huge cell phones that were available now that could only take and make calls, and even then only sporadically because of coverage issues. She couldn’t imagine the small devices that Sam knew were coming.

“At least it’s making us money,” she conceded. “We just got another check from Apple Inc.”

“That sounds good,” Sam said distractedly, already making for the study so he could go check on James.

Missouri caught his arm and he turned. “It’s a lot of money, Sam,” she said.

“How much?”

Missouri grinned. “It was a number with five zeroes after it.”

Sam’s mouth dropped open. “Seriously?”

“Very seriously. You’re a rich man, Sam Winchester, and I am a rich woman.”

Sam gaped at her. They’d earned enough on the market to call themselves wealthy a while ago, but this was the kind of money Sam had never imagined he’d have. It was incredible. He and Dean would never have to worry about money again when he got back. And there was time to make more. Microsoft was going to surge soon and they had shares with them, too. Sam was going to be a very rich man.

Missouri grinned. “How are you going to celebrate?”

In answer Sam grabbed her around the waist and spun her. She laughed as he set her down, and he said, “I think we should start with dinner at Café Provence.”

“Sounds good,” she said. “Now, go see James. I’ll make you some breakfast.”

Sam kissed her cheek. “Thank you, Missouri.”

She smiled and touched the spot he’d kissed. “You’re the one I should be thanking. It’s your insider knowledge that’s done this for us.”

“And it’s your plotting and planning that made it possible,” Sam countered. He ran a hand through his hair. “This is so good.”

“I know,” she said happily. “I can afford for James to go to any college his magnificent brain can get him into. Speaking of, you better go educate him in computers if they’re so important.”

“I will,” Sam said. With a spring in his step he walked to the study where James was working on the computer.

He looked up and grinned at Sam as he entered. “Hey.”
“Hey. What are you working on today? Typing or art?”

“Art,” James said. “I’m still trying to get used to this mouse thing.”

“You will,” Sam assured him. “All computers are going to be using them in a few years.”

“You really think?”

“I’m pretty sure,” Sam said with a small smile. “Show me what you’re working on.”

James pushed back his chair and Sam circled the desk to look at the screen. James was getting better, but his lines were still shaky. He was going to need to practice, and he would. He was working on it already off his own back. He had a work ethic to admire. It was going to get him far in life. And now, with the money they’d made, he would have a great education. With his brain and Missouri’s tuition money, James was going to be great.

Sam had tried since the new year to find a way in his life to be happy, and he thought he had done that now. The trick was to live. Simple things were the ones that made the most difference.

He could do this.
Sam tucked the phone under his ear as he rummaged in his bag for the t-shirt he wanted, listening to Missouri’s chatter on the line. When she paused to draw a breath, Sam pressed his advantage.

“James would love this place, Missouri. There’s so much history here for him to see.”

He was in Pennsylvania for the Live Aid concert and was making one more attempt to persuade Missouri to bring James and come.

“I’m sure there is,” she said. “But we’re not going to that concert.”

“You don’t have to come. You can fly James out here and I’ll meet him at the airport. Or I can come back and collect him. I have time between the tickets going on sale and the concert.”

“No,” she said firmly. “He’s not going.”

Sam sat down on the edge of the bed with a sigh and asked, “What are you afraid of Missouri?”

“It’s too big a crowd for someone so young.”

“He’s fifteen,” Sam reminded her.

“I know how old he is. It’s still too big though. I have been reading the stuff in the papers about this concert. The stadium holds 80,000 people and they’re expecting it to be filled. That’s too many.”

“It’s history,” Sam said. “He should see it.”

“They say they’re going to televise it. He can see it here where I can keep an eye on him.” Her sigh crackled the line. “I know this is important, Sam. I understand that. I made donations, too. I bought the record. I see those starving people and I want to help them, but James is just too young for something like that. I know you’re excited, but you’re going to have to see it without us.”

There was finality in her tone that Sam knew meant there was no point arguing further. She wasn’t going to come, and she wouldn’t let James come either.

Missouri was normally very relaxed about things, but this was just a bit too much for her. Sam knew the concert was going to be fine, there would be no trouble, but he understood Missouri’s fear for her son. He was young still, and it was going to be a big crowd. Sam couldn’t wait. It was going to be awesome.

Ever since the first news stories broke of the drought in Ethiopia, people had been saying they wanted to do something. Sam and Missouri had both made donations to the charity funds set up for them, but there were people that wanted to do more. That was how Live Aid had been formed, and that was how Sam was going to see the most important historic concert in the country.

He had considered going to London to see the UK concert, but he had wanted James and Missouri to come with him, and he knew they wouldn’t travel that far for it. It was too late to switch now. Tickets were already sold out for the UK. He was happy enough to stay in Philadelphia though. He was experiencing America standing up and doing something to help people that were starving to death. This was something that could never have happened if he hadn’t been trapped by Michael.
“I better go,” Sam said. “I want to get to the market and Independence Hall today.”

“Okay. You have fun. Take lots of pictures.”

“I will,” Sam promised. “I’ll see you soon, Missouri.”

“Bye, Sam.”

Sam set the phone down on its cradle and pulled on the t-shirt he’d finally found in his bag. It felt like it was going to be a warm day, so he didn’t bother with his jacket. He would enjoy the warmth. He grabbed his wallet and door key and then went out along the hotel’s hall to the lobby. There were people checking in at the polished marble desk and Sam skirted them and went outside.

“Have a nice day, sir,” the doorman said.

“You too,” Sam said cheerfully.

He’d checked the map the night before and went right out of the door and walked north toward the Reading Terminal Market. The streets were busy with the morning rush, and Sam was happy to be among them. It would have been better to share it with someone, but it was still good. He was experiencing things he never had before in a time that now felt like his, even though it wasn’t.

He knew when he was close to the market as the calling voices reached him, people advertising their wares and prices. Sam grinned at the sounds. He’d not been to a place like this in years, not since college when he and Jess would go to the street market together on Sundays. It was a good feeling.

He entered the old terminal and took in the wash of colors around him. There were stalls set up selling produce of every shape and size and a table covered with bolts of fabric. A little further in was a cart selling rich smelling coffees. Sam bought himself an americano and wandered along the aisles, taking it all in.

A woman was walking past with a stroller and little girl clinging to the handle. The little girl was trailing a hand along the things they passed, smiling at the sensations. The girl’s hand caught on a cup that was set on its saucer with a small price tag in front of it. Unknowingly, the little girl had hooked a finger through the handle and as she was tugged on by the momentum of the stroller, she had pulled it to the edge of the table to fall. Sam shot forward and caught it just before it could hit the ground and break, and the little girl started to cry. The woman stopped and looked from Sam to the cup in his hand.

“Gemma!” she scolded the child, deducing what had happened.

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “I caught it.” He set it down on its saucer and adjusted the price ticket—which he now saw meant a breakage would have been an expensive business. “No harm done.”

“Thank you,” the woman said with a tired smile. “Gemma, come stand on this side. And no more touching.”

Gemma wiped at her eyes and switched sides of the stroller. Sam smiled at her and carried on through the aisles. He saw stalls selling clothes and he stopped a moment to examine a grey seersucker suit. He’d brought enough clothes with him and didn’t need more, so he passed on. He came to the dining section of the market and the air was filled with the scents of food from all over the world. He wanted to try it all and intentionally hadn’t eaten breakfast so he could eat at the market.
He scanned the booths on offer, seeing the variety. Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese were grouped with Mexican, Italian and American favorites. Sam couldn’t decide what he wanted until he spotted the specialist store selling variations on the Philadelphia cheesesteak. Dean loved Philly cheesesteak sandwiches and he never passed up an opportunity to have a real one when they were in the area. Sam made his way over and ordered a traditional hoagie version. It was handed to him wrapped in a paper napkin and he took a large bite. It was delicious, and he savored the taste. One day he would bring Dean to this place and see if the quality had withstood the years.

He took a seat on a bench to eat the sandwich, enjoying each mouthful, and feeling disappointed when it was finished. He balled up the napkin and tossed it into the trash then went to the Mexican vendor and bought a bottle of lemon Jarritos. He sipped it as he carried on, looking for a gift to take back for Missouri. He saw a heavyset woman presiding over a stall of scarves in various colors, and he walked towards it.

She smiled sweetly at him and asked, “Shopping for someone special?”

“My friend,” Sam said. “I want to get her something unique.”

“You’ve come to the right place,” she said. “Does she have a favorite color?”

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted. “She wears all colors.”

“Then how about something that will match all colors?” She picked up a patterned scarf in a rainbow of colors in the shape of diamonds. “Or this!” She held out an ivory scarf patterned with dragonflies.

Sam wiped his hand on his pants and then felt the silky material of the ivory scarf. “That’s perfect.” He could imagine her wearing it. “I’ll take it.”

With practiced movements, she folded the scarf and tucked it into a paper bag. Sam handed over a bill and tucked his wallet away, declining the change. She thanked him and Sam walked away with his purchase tucked under his arm.

He thought about looking for a gift for James, but he had an idea that a program from the concert would have more value to him. When Sam had spoken to him about the concert he’d been enthused, and he was probably sore that he couldn’t go. Sam would get an extra for him. It was something James could hold onto. Maybe one day he could show it to his own children and explain the story of the day the world stood up and made a difference.

Sam got to the box office at the John F. Kennedy stadium at dawn, wanting to be high in the queue for tickets. He wasn’t the only person with the same idea. There were already a lot of people there and more came when he’d taken his place in the queue.

At first it was quiet apart from murmured words and yawns as it was so early, but soon a group arrived with a boombox that they set down at their feet, blasting out WMGK FM and things picked up. They played mostly classic rock, and Sam was happy to listen to the familiar songs of his life on the road. When the local news came on, they mentioned the queue forming at the stadium for Live Aid tickets and people cheered, Sam included. That, coupled with the later hour seemed to bring people out of themselves. They started chatting, sharing excited stories of who they’d heard was going to be performing and what they’d sing.

Sam was content to listen, taking it all in, but the man beside him soon struck up conversation.
“Did you hear Phil Collins is billed for both concerts?” he asked. “How’s he supposed to do it?”

Sam grinned. “He’ll work it out. I hear he’s playing London and then taking the Concorde over here for us.”

“Man, that’s dedication.”

“It’s worth it,” Sam said.

“Yeah!” the man nodded eagerly. “This is going to be rad!”

Sam grinned, infected by him enthusiasm. “It is.” He held out a hand to shake. “Sam Taylor.”

“Jesse. You’re not local are you, Sam?”

“No, I’ve come up from Kansas for the concert.”

“Kansas? Cool. I’m Philly born and raised. Couldn’t believe it when they said they were doing the concert here. I can’t miss this. It’s special,” Jesse said. “The music for sure, but it’s the people too, you know? We can help them. We can make a difference.”

“We can,” Sam said.

Sam remembered seeing the news reports on tv about the famine and the horror he had felt. No sooner had the program aired before Missouri was on the phone, expressing her own shock and sadness. They’d discussed how best to help the people and where their donations should go, and Missouri had made the arrangements. He’d wanted to do more though, and he’d waited for this concert ever since.

He knew a lot of the things that were coming for the world now in the years he was going to relive, and a lot of them were bad, but Live Aid was something great, and he was going to be there to see it. He wished Dean was there to experience it with him. Led Zeppelin was going to flop, but this was the first time Ozzy would be with Black Sabbath since it had all gone to hell. Dean should see it. It was more than that, though. It was the experience of history that Sam wanted for them both. It was a heady feeling and he wanted to share it. Perhaps when they were together again, Sam would find a way to explain how it had been.

He wished he had someone to share it with though. He didn’t want to be alone in that massive crowd. He wanted someone that would see the same things he would and experience the same amazement. He decided he was going to buy two tickets. If he met someone he could share it with, he would. If not, someone looking for a ticket on the day would be lucky.

“Who do you want to see most?” Jesse asked.

“Sabbath,” Sam said quickly. “They’ve got a special place in my family.”

Jesse nodded seriously. “I’m here for Led Zeppelin.”

Sam would be too if he didn’t already know their set was going to be a disaster. He joined Jesse in conversation of the other acts that were going to be there, enjoying sharing thoughts and ideas, joined by a couple others over time.

Sam was happy to be there, with these people, experiencing a special moment in history.

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Two nights before the concert, Sam decided to go to a disco. He’d not been to one in his life. When he’d been in college, he’d spent his nights out in bars with friends, none of them were really interested in dance clubs, and they didn’t really fit in with his Lawrence life. This trip was about exploring new experiences though, so he asked the kid that worked the elevator where was good and followed his directions to a place called Eons in the north of the city.

When he got inside, he was shocked by the size of it. There were five dance floors, three of them raised and two sunk into the floor. The theme of the room was green lighting, and the walls were lit in a rainbow of shades. There were mirrors all around the walls, making the place seem even larger, and pillars from floor to ceiling. It wasn’t that late, but the dance floors were filled with people already.

Sam hadn’t come to dance but to experience the atmosphere of the place, so he skirted the dancefloors and went to the bar to get a beer. He had to wait as it was busy, and when he had been served, he carried his drink over to the low glass brick wall that separated one of the sunken dance floors from the bar area. He leaned against it and watched the people moving to the beat of the music. The atmosphere of it buoyed Sam up, too. People were happy, in their element, and it made Sam smile. He wished he had someone to share it with. Not Dean this time. He would hate it: the current music, the fashion, the laser lightshow. Perhaps Missouri. This was her time and she told Sam she had liked to party before she had James and life got serious.

The song changed seamlessly into a David Bowie number, and Sam felt the draw towards the dancefloor. He wanted to be out there. He hadn’t danced since Jess, and even then it had been rare for him, but the people looked like they were having so much fun and he wanted to be a part of it. He drained his beer and set it down on a high table before making his way down the steps and onto the dance floor.

For once unconcerned with what Dean would think of what he was doing, Sam eased his way into the crowd of people and began to move to the music. His self-consciousness faded almost straight away, and he felt his spirits soaring up with the other dancers. He was quickly warmed by the movements and heat of the air, and he wished he’d left his sports jacket behind, but it didn’t stop him. He was enjoying himself. His happiness grew when a woman began dancing in front of him. She gave him an impish smile as she took his hands, and then Sam was dancing with her.

Her hair was pulled into an untidy blonde ponytail, and she was petite. She was wearing a Madonna-esque outfit of a black leather mini skirt and basque under a sheer white see-through shirt. She had so many chains around her neck Sam thought it was a miracle they weren’t all tangled into a single clump. Her lips were coated with deep red lipstick and her wrists circled with chunky black cuffs and bracelets. The effect was startling and had clearly taken a long time to achieve the apparently careless look. Sam felt underdressed in his pants and sports jacket over his white t-shirt.

She was enthusiastic though, and Sam soon found himself sweating hard as he moved to the music. Another song ended and Sam indicated to her that he was going to get a drink. She nodded and, still holding onto him, followed him off of the dancefloor to the bar.

Sam pushed back his sweaty hair from his face and pulled out his wallet. The woman leaned her back on the bar and looked at him curiously.

“What would you like?” Sam asked.

“A citrus wine cooler, please,” she said.

Sam nodded and when the bartender reached them he ordered her drink and himself another beer.
When he had paid, he asked, “Do you want to sit down?”

She shrugged. “Sure.”

Sam led her over to a table with high barstools lit by a green spotlight. They sat down and Sam took a swig of his beer.

“Are you going to tell me your name?” she asked.

Sam laughed. “Yeah. Sorry. I’m Sam.”

“Nice to meet you, Sam. I’m Susie.”

She sipped her drink through a straw, watching him from beneath her lashes. “I’ve never seen you in here before. I think I’d remember you.”

“I’m not local. I live in Lawrence, Kansas. I’m just here for the concert.”

“Oh, wow. How did you get a ticket? Me and my friends wanted to go, but they were sold out.”

It was on the tip of Sam’s tongue to offer her his free ticket, but he held back. He wanted to know what kind of person she was first.

“I started queuing at dawn,” Sam said.

“I would have done that if I hadn’t been due at work.”

“What do you do?” Sam asked curiously.

“I’m not sure if I should tell you. Men seem to have two reactions when I tell them what I do.”

Sam was curious. He leaned forward and said, “Maybe I’ll be different. Try me.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Here goes. I’m a kindergarten teacher. Now tell me what you’re thinking. Am I your fantasy come true or are you thinking I’m too pure to dance with again?”

Sam joined her laughter. “Neither. I am thinking that’s a very worthwhile career. You don’t look like what I imagined a kindergarten teacher to look like though.”

“I never do,” she said. “I leave my Laura Ashley dresses at home on my nights off. This is my alter ego, a regular young woman living in the city.”

“I like it,” Sam assured her. “I leave my hard hat off when I’m on a night out, too.”

“Construction?” she asked.

“Yeah.” It was easier for Sam to tell her what he used to do rather than explaining he was unemployed and funded by profits from stock market investments.

“Shame you left your hard hat at home,” she said. “I can picture you wearing it, and it’s a nice view.”

“Have you been teaching long?” Sam asked.

She smirked. “Are you trying to ask how old I am, Sam? That’s not polite.”

Sam opened his mouth but no words rose to his lips. He had been trying to gauge her age. She
looked so young.

“It’s okay,” she said. “That’s another thing people have preconceived notions of. I’m twenty-seven, it’s my height that makes me look so young. I’m sure one day I will appreciate it, but right now it’s a pain. I get carded all the time. How old are you?”

Somewhere out in the world, Sam was just two years old, but in years lived he had surpassed Dean. “I’m thirty-four,” he said.

“You don’t look your age either,” she said. “Which has nothing to do with your size.” She made a point of looking him up and down.

Sam shrugged. “I guess it’s good genetics.” He hadn’t really paid much attention to his appearance before, but he was aware he wasn’t aging as much as he probably should. In fact, he couldn’t see any difference in himself to the man that had been stranded in 1978, apart from his eyes. They bore the years he had lived. Perhaps something Michael had done when he made him invincible had affected his aging, too. That would be inconvenient if he was going to stay in Lawrence until time lined up again. He would have to speak to Anna.

“Lucky you,” she said. “At least you still look like a grown up.”

Sam held up his bottle. “Here’s to eternal youth.”

She chinked her glass against his and smiled. “Eternal youth. May it last into retirement.”

They each drank and Sam looked around. He was enjoying himself, watching the people dance and talking to Susie. He would have been perfectly happy if not for the memories of Diane that were trying to creep in. His time with her had started like this, a pleasant evening together, and she had died. It wasn’t because of him that the ghost had killed her, but the memory remained. But he wasn’t here for a hunt, he was here to enjoy himself, and there was no sign that anything bad would happen. He knew Missouri would tell him to just relax and enjoy himself, but a life of hunting made him cautious.

“What are you thinking?” Susie asked. “You look serious.”

“Nothing important,” Sam said quickly.

“Liar,” she said shrewdly. “You don’t have to tell me. I can help distract you though. Do you want to dance some more?”

“Yeah,” Sam said, drinking down his beer. “Let’s dance.”

He would see where the night led them and take it from there. If things worked out, he would offer Susie the concert ticket. If not, it wasn’t like he had anything to lose. This was just about having fun.
Sam woke late the next morning, tired from his night of dancing but contented, mainly because of the woman that slept across his chest. They had stayed out till the disco closed, and Susie had come back with him to the hotel without either of them really discussing it. Sam had ordered them room service sandwiches and beers, and the night had progressed naturally until they were tangled in bed.

With her hair loose and make up washed away, Susie looked peaceful as she slept. Sam ran a hand up and down the smooth skin of her bare back, feeling her warmth. She stirred and nuzzled in closer to him.

“Morning,” Sam said.

“Morning,” she mumbled.

“You hungry?”

She opened one blue eye and looked up at him. “That depends. Do I have to leave this bed to eat?”

“Nope,” Sam said happily. “I can get room service for us.”

She sat up slowly, baring her chest to the cool air, and nodded. “Then yes, I am very hungry.”

Sam kissed her cheek and rolled over and out of bed. He went to the phone and ordered fruit, eggs, and coffee for them then pulled on a pair of pants from the end of the bed.

“This is a fancy place for a construction worker,” Susie said. “I didn’t really look last night. Do you really wear a hard hat or are you the owner?”

“I’m not the owner,” Sam said. “I just have a friend that hooked me up with a good deal.”

“Neat.”

“Be right back,” Sam said.

He went into the bathroom and used the toilet and then brushed his teeth. He checked his reflection in the mirror and saw that his cheeks were flushed healthily and his eyes were bright. Spending time with Susie had been good for him.

He went back into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed as Susie stretched luxuriantly behind him. When the knock at the door came, Sam answered and exchanged the trolley of food for a generous tip. He wheeled it into the room and asked Susie what she would like. She glanced over the trolley and asked coffee and eggs. Sam spooned some eggs onto a plate from the covered platter and handed them to her with a fork. She took them and sighed happily at the first bite. Sam filled a bowl with fruit salad for himself and sat down beside her to eat in companionable silence.

When they had finished, Sam took the plate and bowl back to the trolley and went to his suitcase to find clean clothes.

“What are you planning to do today?” Susie asked.

“I’m showering,” Sam said. “But after that I have no idea. The concert isn’t till tomorrow, so I have a day to spend in the city. I’ve already done most of the touristy things, but I’m sure there’s plenty
more to see.”

“Have you been to Queen’s Village yet?”

“I’ve never even heard of it,” Sam admitted.

“It’s great!” she said enthusiastically. “It’s full of eclectic stores and buildings. There’s great food there, too. I can show you around if you like?”

Sam grinned. “I’d love that.” He didn’t want to part company with her already. He’d enjoyed himself with Susie, and a day in the city together sounded great. It would be interesting to have a local’s perspective, too, and it sounded like his kind of place. He traveled a lot in his life but rarely enjoyed the sights.

“I’ll have to go home for clean clothes,” she said.

“Do you have to?” Sam asked, not wanting to lose any time together. “Can’t we just buy you something new?”

She laughed. “I guess we can. Why not? I like shopping.”

Sam grinned. “Great. I’ll shower and then we can go.”

“Hmm, a shower,” she said. “I need to do that, too.”

“We can share,” Sam suggested. “It’s pretty big.”

Her eyes lingered on his bare chest a moment and then she threw back the bedclothes and walked toward him, her naked body sashaying. “Sharing it is,” she said.

Sam grabbed a spare towel from the small closet and followed her into the bathroom.

xXx

Queen Village was unlike anything Sam had seen before. The houses were clearly historic but decorated in many colors with adornments that made them look fresh and new. Colorful flower boxes sat under windows and cellar entrances were brightly painted. Sam loved it.

As it was Susie’s town, Sam let her direct them around. They started in a thrift store where she found an outfit and more comfortable shoes to replace her stacked heels. The store owner let her stash her old clothes behind the counter to pick up later so they weren’t burdened with them while exploring.

They went from the store to a coffee shop where the interior was as interesting as the expansive menu. The walls were covered with eclectic art and there was a huge noticeboard papered with Polaroid pictures of customers. Sam and Susie had ordered and been served their coffees when a young barista came to their table armed with the camera and asked if they wanted to be added to the wall of fame. Susie was eager, so Sam posed with his arm around her and then watched as the image of them developed and was pinned to the wall.

It was strange, he thought, to have his image up there with Susie’s. The looked like a couple to an outside observer, and though they had spent the night together, they were not that. Sam didn’t even know her last name. Their time together was limited to the weekend. Sam doubted he would ever see her again after. They lived a thousand miles apart and they had completely different lives. Sam couldn’t leave Lawrence. Even if he could, what kind of life could they have with Sam’s situation?
This had to be one weekend of magic to be remembered by both but not repeated. The idea didn’t make him sad. It was a pleasant interlude in what was his usual absent love life.

When they had finished their coffees, they left the café hand in hand and wandered along Fabric Row. The wares on sale didn’t particularly interest Sam, but Susie said she liked to make her own clothes, and she was happy to browse the displays while Sam waited patiently. When she had selected some fabrics and arranged to collect them at a later time, they moved on.

The fabric stores were interspersed with antique stores and more cafés. They explored the antiques, something Sam hadn’t done since he was preparing his Palo Alto apartment with Jessica. He’d been looking for bargains to furnish then; this time he was just seeing the different items and comparing prices. Susie liked to talk about each piece, trying to imagine the lives they’d had before finding the store. What flowers had that nineteenth century vase held and what kind of home had it been in?

They moved onto South Street and Sam rushed ahead, dragging Susie after him by a hand, when he spotted a record store. In the window was a Metallica poster, advertising their current Ride The Lightning tour. Sam stared at the poster. Dean had a cassette of the album the tour was promoting, something he’d inherited from John, and Sam was here seeing the brand new poster for it. It was so strange. He had been living this life for seven years, but he was still sometimes caught off guard by the things he saw that linked to his real time. He went into the store and saw the counters covered in stacks of records. There were shelves of cassettes, too, and even a few of the relatively new CDs. Sam went straight to the rock records and began to flip through them. There were treasures on offer. Brand new copies of Houses of the Holy and Physical Graffiti among Powerage and Back in Black. Sam created a pile of ones he wanted to buy then delved in again.

“You’re a rock fan then,” Susie said, examining the piles records.

“Not really” Sam said. “It’s my brother. He loves this stuff. I am getting some gifts for him.” The fact Sam had to wait twenty-five years to give these gifts meant little to him. When Dean did finally get them, he would be happy; he would also know Sam had been thinking of him during these years he’d lived without him.

When Sam had a pile of all the albums he thought Dean would like, he carried it to the counter and waited as the clerk rang up the sale. He obviously shared Dean’s taste in music as he extolled on each record as he packaged them. Sam paid and picked up the heavy bag of his purchases. He and Susie thanked the clerk and left.

“Your brother is going to be happy,” Susie said. “He’s got a generous brother.”

“He deserves it. He’s done a lot for me over our lives.”

She linked their hands again as they set off along the street. “It’s good that you appreciate it.”

“I do,” Sam said fervently.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. “You’re a good brother.”

Sam stopped and looked at her. “You can get that from a dozen records?”

“I know it because of the way you look when you talk about him. You don’t see him much, do you?”

“No,” Sam said. “And it will be a while before I can see him again.”
“You miss him,” she stated.

“More than anything.” Sam admitted.

She nodded. “A good brother.”

They started walking again and Susie pointed them to a park with a children’s playpark. “You want to sit a while?”

“Sure,” Sam said.

They crossed the narrow street and went through a gate into the park and to a bench. Susie sat close to Sam, keeping their hands linked. She leaned her head against his shoulder and asked, “What happens tomorrow, Sam?”

Sam frowned. “What do you mean?”

“This has been great, spending time with you, but you’ll go home to Kansas after the concert and I’ll never see you again.”

Sam sighed. “I’ve enjoyed spending time with you, too.”

“But you will go home?”

“I have to,” Sam said. “I have a life in Kansas, a family. I’m not married,” he added quickly. “But my best friend has a son and he’s very important to me. I can’t leave them.”

“So this is just a whirlwind romance that ends tonight?” She didn’t sound upset. It was more that she was confirming what she already knew to herself.

“It doesn’t have to end tonight,” Sam said. “I have a spare ticket for the concert.”

She straightened and looked at him. “For real?”

Sam grinned at her excitement and the dated—to him—slang. “Yeah. Do you want to come?”

“I’d love to!”

“Then it’s a whirlwind that ends tomorrow.”

“That sounds better,” she said. “What about tonight?”

“We can get you more clothes for tomorrow,” Sam suggested with a smile. “You can come back to the hotel with me tonight.”

She pretended to consider for a moment. “I can do that.”

Sam kissed her. “Good.”

She leaned her head against him again and Sam rested his cheek against her hair. He barely knew her and this was only ever destined to be brief, but he liked Susie and thought he was going to think of her long after the thrill of the concert had left him.

xXx

While Susie showered the next morning, Sam stood in front of the mirror, bare-chested to the
waist, and examined his reflection. The longer he looked, the more he became aware that he had to do something about his appearance. The fact was he didn’t look a day older in the face than he had the day he’d arrived in 1978. He couldn’t hope to get away with it much longer. He needed to make a change.

He examined his reflection from each angle, seeing the hair that reached his shoulders despite the visits to the barber he’d made over the years. For a moment he considered having it cut short. He hadn’t had much choice in his own hairstyle growing up; it was cut when John remembered to arrange it and left long the rest of the time. When he’d gone to college, he’d let it grow as a form of rebellion, taking control of that part of himself. It had become longer as the years went by, but perhaps a change like that would draw attention from his face. Dean would be pleased if he was there. There was always good-natured teasing about Sam’s long hair from him. He didn’t want to cut it though. It had become more than rebellion. It was him. He wasn’t going to leave it as it was. That didn’t solve the problem though; he needed to do something.

He ran a hand over his stubbled jaw and considered the other option: a beard. He’d never gone more than a few days without shaving before. Keeping groomed was something John had instilled in him and Dean years before. But it might be the answer. He could leave off shaving a while and see if it made a difference. If it didn’t, he wasn’t sure what else he could do.

He washed his face, feeling the scratch of stubble, and then went back into his room to dress in a t-shirt he’d bought from Queen Village the day before.

When Susie came out and dressed, they gathered their belongings in backpacks and Sam checked he had the camera he’d bought especially for the concert then they left the room and wandered down the hall to the elevators. Though they traveled down in silence, the excitement they were both feeling was like a crackle on the air for Sam. He felt enlivened by it.

They hailed a cab outside the hotel and climbed in when it stopped in front of them. When Sam gave the address, the cabbie, a middle-aged woman said, “You’re going to the concert, huh? Good you’re going early. There is a queue forming already. Should be a good day. I get off in a couple hours, so I’m going to watch it on TV.”

“It’s going to be amazing,” Susie enthused.

Sam smiled to himself. He was glad he’d found someone special to give the spare ticket to, and he was looking forward to spending another day with her.

They soon arrived at the stadium, and Sam saw what the cabbie had meant about a queue. The crowd was already clamoring at the entrance. He paid the fare and then he and Susie rushed into the unordered people waiting to get inside.

As more people arrived, they were jostled about as everyone tried to get to the front. If this was just to get in, Sam thought, what was it going to be like at the front of the stage? He planned to be there, so he would soon find out.

The crowd was larger than ever by the time an excited murmur ran through the crowd from the front, saying the gates were opening. Sam and Susie pulled their tickets from their bags and clutched them tightly in their hands. As the crowd began to move forward, Sam gripped Susie’s hand and said, “When we get in there, run like hell and don’t let go of my hand. We’re getting to the front.”

Susie giggled. “Yes, sir. Just don’t run too fast with those massive legs of yours.”
“I can carry you,” Sam offered.

She punched his arm. “I may be short but I’m not a child. I’ll keep up.” She considered then grinned. “And if I don’t, you have my permission to pick me up and carry me wherever you like.”

The queue began to move forward, and Sam and Susie moved with it. When they reached the front, they handed their tickets to a man in a black uniform and he tore them in two, handing one piece back to them and dropping the other in a box beside him. “Have fun,” he said, gesturing them through.

They walked through the small turnstile and then set off running. They had to pass concession stands and portable toilets before they were in the main stadium, and then they were free to sprint. Susie, despite her short stature, kept up with Sam, and they were both laughing as they ran towards the stage. They weren’t the only ones running. Most people seemed to have had the same idea as them. It was a race to get a prime position. The very front of the stage was already taken, but Sam and Susie got prime positions just a couple rows back. They were going to have a great view of it all, Sam even more as he was so much taller.

It was going to be great.

xXx

By nine o’clock, the stadium was packed to breaking point. When Sam looked back, he saw a sea of people. He took some pictures of it to show Missouri and James what it had been like.

It was also hot, seeming to get warmer by the minute. Sam wondered just how bad it would be when the afternoon sun blazed. Susie had already shed her overshirt and tied it around her waist. She was now wearing a red vest and denim shorts.

Just as Sam was considering shedding his shirt, there was movement on the stage. Bernard Watson came out and greeted the crowd. There was a roar of sound in return, and the whole stadium seemed filled with static energy and excitement. He sang a couple songs to warm the crowd and then the real excitement began.

“I am pleased to welcome to the stage a man that needs no introduction. Ladies and gentlemen, Mister Jack Nicholson.”

The roar that had met Bernard Watson was nothing compared to the reaction as Jack Nicholson walked onto the stage. It must have been audible for miles around. He came out smiling, looking cool and comfortable in his black shirt and shades, despite the heat.

“Good morning, Philadelphia,” he said. “Say hello to the world.” The crowd erupted with noise and his next words were lost. He waited until they had calmed somewhat and then said, “It gives me great pleasure to introduce to you a woman whose voice has always been heard when a just cause needed her song. Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to present you with, and please welcome, the incomparable Joan Baez.”

Sam’s fist punched the air and he cheered as she came on stage. He had looked forward to seeing her as much as anyone at the concert. Her music was a part of his life—Jessica had loved it—and she was a great woman. Her name had been attached to causes of all kinds over the years, and Sam admired her strength and resilience in what she had done for the world.

Susie tugged Sam’s shoulder, and he bent to hear her over the noise around them. “She’s incredible!”
Sam nodded. “She is.” Her music wasn’t necessarily his taste, but it was powerful and a link to Jessica for him.

Joan Baez lifted her hands, and the crowd quieted to listen. “Good morning children of the eighties, and others.”

Sam grinned. He was definitely an ‘other’. The eighties were his home now, but he never forgot that he belonged in 2010 with Dean and the rest of his small family.

“This is your Woodstock,” she went on, “and it’s long overdue.”

Sam added his voice to the huge cheer that erupted in the stadium. He looked down and saw there were tears in Susie’s eyes. He understood how she felt; it was a powerful moment.

“And it’s nice to know that the money out of your pocket will go to food to feed hungry children.”

There was another cheer.

“I can think of no more glorious way of starting our part of the day than by saying grace together which means that each of us thanks his or her god for the many blessings each of us has in a world in which so many people have nothing. And when we say this grace we reach deep inside out hearts and souls and say that we will move a little from the comfort of our lives to understand their hurt, their pain, and their discomfort. That will make our lives richer and their lives real!”

The roar of the crowd went on as she began to sing Amazing Grace with them, and Sam felt a lump form in his throat. In that moment he did as she asked. He tried to put himself in the place of the people starving in Africa. He tried to imagine how it felt to wake up knowing that day would be pain and hunger with no end in sight. He tried to imagine how it felt to see the ones you loved, men, women and children all around you, starving, too.

He felt a chill work down his back at the thought and his mind shied away from it. He had seen his brother die so many times, the worst time the last time, when the hounds had come, and those were the worst memories of his life, but he couldn’t understand how it would have felt to watch him die slowly in front of his eyes, wasting away until his body had nothing left to go on with. How that slow death might have felt was almost more terrifying than Sam’s memories of the night the hounds had dragged Dean to Hell.

He put an arm around Susie’s shoulders and hugged her against him. She was shaking, and he knew she was overcome with emotion, too.

Joan Baez moved seamlessly from Amazing Grace into We Are The World, and the energy around them changed; it became energized again as people began to clap along to the beat. Sam stared at her face, so close on the stage, and he just took in the moment. He was listening to Joan Baez sing, at Live Aid, in 1985.

In some ways, Michael had cursed him, but he had also given him something incredible. These were memories Sam was going to treasure forever.

xXx

If Dean would have been jealous that Sam was feet from Jack Nicolson, it was nothing to how he would feel when he knew Sam was there for the Black Sabbath set. He and Sam had seen Ozzy play before, but seeing him up there with the original band was a different experience. It was history.
The crowd was rocking, surging forward as they pumped fists and roared with the music, and Sam moved with them. The music pulsed though them, the beat like a second heartbeat in Sam’s chest.

Ozzy was in full glam metal silver and his hair was teased high. He belted out the lyrics with passion, making the crowd feel each word. Tony Lommi was dressed from head to toe in black leather, crucifixes waving as he attacked the guitar. Geezer Butler cradled his iconic bass and his fingers moved smoothly along the strings, producing the well-known chords to Iron Man. Behind them all, Bill Ward’s long hair flew and his crucifix bounced on his chest as drumsticks pelted the skins, creating the beat Sam knew well from hours spend riding the highways in the Impala. It was an incredible moment that only grew when they changed into Paranoid.

“Let’s see you going crazy!” Ozzy shouted as the opening strains started.

The crowd obeyed. Heads were thrown around and hair flew as people gave themselves over to the music, joining the energy of Ozzy on stage. Sam jumped up and down, hands raised until Susie grabbed his arm and tugged him down. He lowered himself and then grinned as she said, “Lift me up!”

He bent and lifted her onto his shoulders. He steadied himself, gripping her calves, wary of her balanced on him, but she had no such care. She threw herself around, and Sam had to spread his feet to balance as she rocked out above him.

This was what Dean needed to see, Sam thought. He should share this moment. Sam wished for him more than ever. Not just because he missed him—he always did—but because this was something Dean would kill to see. Black Sabbath reunited, in their prime, for this magical moment.

xXx

When Kevin Cronin came on stage in his long, metallic jacket with the sleeves rolled up, Sam laughed softly. It was pure 80s in a way Sam had studiously avoided. He himself had stripped to his t-shirt hours before to combat the intense July heat. His laughter increased when the opening strains of Can’t Fight This Feeling began. Sam remembered Dean singing this in the car one time, on their way out of Nebraska after visiting The Roadhouse. Jo had played it on the jukebox and the song had evidently gotten stuck in his head. It had been a rare moment of lightness in the days following John’s death, a moment when Dean didn’t seem burdened by the cares of the world. It was all the more entertaining because Dean had professed to hate REO Speedwagon before that. Sam was amused to hear it here, today, on a day Dean was close in his thoughts.

Susie evidently loved the song as she put her arm around Sam’s back and swayed gently to the music. Sam held her back and allowed himself to feel the pleasure of having her there with him on what would be their last real day together. For a moment he considered letting it be more, coming back to see her, but he knew it wasn’t right. She could have no real future with him the way she deserved. He apparently wasn’t aging, and eventually she would notice. It wasn’t right. He felt the swell of emotion though, and assuaged it by leaning down and kissing her hair. She looked up at him and Sam thought there was understanding in her gaze. Perhaps she was thinking and feeling the same.

REO Speedwagon gave way to Crosby, Stills and Nash and they were followed by Judas Priest which Sam enjoyed for the associated memories. Bryan Adams got a great reaction as did Simple Minds, and Susie loved The Pretenders. Sam enjoyed them all; not necessarily for their music but for the fact they were all standing up and doing this to make a difference to people that really needed it. Money was being raised, more after Bob Geldof’s impassioned plea that was streamed to
the screens in Philadelphia, and even more after the video was shown of the people they were there to help. Images of the vast difference in the blessed lives of those in the stadium to the people they were seeing was absolute. They were all human, with human loves and needs, but that was where it ended. None of the people in the stadium were going home that night not knowing where their next meal would come from. They all had amazing lives in comparison. Starving people, from babies to old men, filled the screen with Drive by The Cars playing over them. It was an incredibly emotional moment, to see their suffering, and Sam vowed to himself to donate even more money to the cause when he was home.

He wasn’t the only one with tears in his eyes as it finished.

The next act Sam was looking forward to was Santana, and he felt a thrill of excitement as Carlos Santana led the band onto the stage. Susie was excited, too. She had told Sam they were among her favorites. He snapped pictures on her pointing at the stage and grinning, and she took some of him in return.

When the strains of Brotherhood began, she handed the camera to a woman beside her in the crowd and said something Sam couldn’t hear. Confused, he waited for an explanation, but she didn’t speak; she just took his hands and started to dance. Sam moved in time with the music, too, only understanding when he looked to the side and saw the woman with the camera taking pictures of them. He was glad he’d brought extra rolls of film—he’d already filled two—as she was snapping them with abandon.

Sam was glad he would have these pictures of Susie to bolster the memories of their weekend.

xXx

The day cooled as night fell. Sam felt no hint of tiredness though. He was still buzzing with energy with the rest of the crowd

The bands came and went, with standout performances from The Cars, Neil Young, Eric Clapton, and Phil Collins who had made the transatlantic journey from London but still came energized and ready for the second crowd. Led Zeppelin stood out only in their failure. Sam knew it was technical faults that plagued them and lack of rehearsal time, but something that could have been great was a disappointment. Sam was glad that Dean wasn’t there for that.

Susie was overwhelmed to see Madonna and she settled on Sam’s shoulders again and almost filled a roll of film with pictures of her. Sam was pleased to see her so happy. He was happy, too, but the awareness that it was almost over tried to cast a cloud over him. He had experienced something amazing with someone amazing, and when Jack Nicholson introduced Bob Dylan, Ron Wood and Keith Richards to close the concert, he felt the mood change in the crowd. People were still ready to rock but the fact it was coming to a close impacted them all.

They played Ballad Of Horace Brown and When the Ship Comes In and Sam loved both. When the opening of Blowin’ in the Wind was played, Susie wrapped her arms around Sam and they slow danced to the music among the now quiet crowd. Sam held her against him and wished it could be more. He didn’t want it to end. He wasn’t ready for it to be over—any of it. He didn’t want to lose Susie, he didn’t want the concert to end, he didn’t want to leave Philadelphia and go back to his life. He wanted to see Missouri and James, he wanted to talk to George, and he wanted to be ready if Rufus or one of his friends needed help, but he’d had an amazing time, the best since he’d arrived in 1978, and he would be sad to see it end.

As the song came to a close, Susie pulled Sam’s head down and kissed him. Sam returned it with passion, knowing it was the last time he would have it with her. The crowd around them cheered
the end of the song and Sam let it wash over him, just enjoying the moment.

It wasn’t until Jack Nicholson came out onto the stage again and introduce the last number, USA For Africa, that they broke apart.

Act after act came onto the stage, all smiling widely and holding hands out to the crowd as if wishing to embrace them. Hands reached for the air in return and the crowd cheered them. Sam had the feeling they were cheering more than the artists on the stage; they were cheering what had happened that day. They had all experienced something incredible and they were celebrating it.

Lionel Richie came to the center of the stage, and his smile was wide as he said, “What a glorious evening. There’s something really special we want to do right now.” After a pause to arrange the other artists on the crowded stage, he began to sing We are the World. When the chorus began, the crowd began to sing back to the stage. It was a powerful moment, and Sam sang with them, his hand holding Susie’s tight.

The roar of sound that met the end of the song was immense. The crowd, that miraculously hadn’t cheered itself hoarse, bellowed back at the stage, hands thumping together in applause. The sound seemed to last forever, and Sam looked back over his shoulder at the sea of people behind him, knowing they were all feeling the same exhilaration at what had happened.

When the applause eventually died, and the lights above the stage and screens turned outward to illuminate the crowd, Susie tugged Sam’s hand.

He knew what was coming, and he didn’t want it. He pasted on a smile and said, “That was amazing!”

“It was,” she said. “Thank you so much for bringing me. I’ll never forget it.”

“Me either,” Sam said.

She looked sad. “I’ll remember you, too.”

Sam knew she was saying goodbye, and he quickly asked, “Do you want to stay at the hotel again tonight?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“It’ll be great,” Sam said. “We’ll order room service. You’ve got to be starving. I am.”

She smiled sadly. “I think it’s better to say goodbye on a high rather than make it sad tomorrow.”

Sam sighed. “I guess.”

“I have had an amazing time with you, Sam,” she said. “And I really won’t forget it, but you’ve got to go back to Kansas, and I have to go back to my life. We’re not supposed to last longer than this.”

“Can I call you?” Sam asked.

“What would be the point? It can never go further than this. I can’t leave Philadelphia, and you have a family in Kansas. It’s better we say goodbye now.”

Sam knew she was right, but it didn’t make it any easier. He pulled her into his arms and held her tight for a long time and then, when she pulled back, he bent to kiss her cheek. “Thank you, Susie,” he said. “This has been brilliant.”
She smiled, pressed a kiss to her hand then touched his cheek. Sam smiled in return and then his face fell as she shouldered her backpack and turned away. She disappeared quickly into the crowd streaming away from the stage, and Sam turned to the empty stage.

It had been an incredible concert, and his time with Susie was unforgettable. It was sad to think of going home alone after having her company for days, but it was perhaps better that way. He was ready to be with his family again, he wanted to tell them about all the things he had done and seen. He wanted to be with them.

Though it had been among the best times in his life, Sam was ready to go home.
Chapter Twenty-Six

The voice of NASA launch control counted them down to lift-off and Sam held his breath.

“Five… We have main engines start… Four… Three… Two… One. And lift-off!”

There was a quiet cheer from the background of his feed, and Sam imagined the celebrations happening in the control room of the perfect lift-off for the tenth mission of Space Shuttle Challenger.

He had vowed he wasn’t going to watch this. He had tried to go out instead, he didn’t want to watch the disaster coming, but sitting in the car with the key in the ignition, he realized that was cowardly. The rest of America was going to experience this, so he should, too. Even James was going to be watching it at school.

Sam had warned Missouri what was coming, and he’d advised her to keep James home from school, but she’d said there was no way to do it without arousing his suspicion. He was a dedicated student and wouldn’t take a day off school for no good reason. She also thought he was old enough to see it now. This was a part of America’s history and James should witness it. As much as he wanted to shield James from the realities of the world, Sam eventually agreed she was right. James was old enough to face it.

So Sam was home, watching NBC’s coverage of the launch, fearing what was to come for the seven souls on board.

The news anchor spoke them through the stages of the initial flight, backed by the voice of launch control and the seconds ticked closer to the moment of disaster.

“It’s always amazing to hear how quickly the shuttle moves,” he said in a tone of wonder. “It’s already more than four miles downwind of us.”

The crackly voice of launch control spoke, “Challenger, go with throttle up,” and it was answered by the last words anyone on earth would hear spoken by the crew of Challenger. “Roger. Go with throttle up.”

Sam winced. That man was in his last seconds of life.

The news anchor’s voice came back, and Sam forced himself to look at the screen. “The shuttle mission will launch–”

He broke off as the view of the shuttle was occluded by a rush of flames and a cloud of smoke. Debris began to fall away to earth, leaving trails in the air behind it.

“My god. Was that an explosion?”

Sam raked a hand over his face. The smoke was billowing and the debris fell more thickly. The trails of smoke they left were like the streams of airplanes in the sky. A flaming section broke away from the cloud and circled around, falling to earth.
“This is not standard. This is not something that was planned, of course. I can see a solid rocket booster has broken away from Shuttle Challenger. That’s what you’re looking at on the middle of your screen. I cannot see the shuttle itself. I don’t know whether it’s able to continue on one rocket booster. If it’s able to jettison that rocket booster, it will be able to return to the Kennedy Space Center. Perhaps.”

“Perhaps not,” Sam said darkly. He knew, as people watching were surely now realizing, that there would be to return to Kennedy for the shuttle. It was too late for them all. The shuttle and crew were lost.

The voice of launch control came back, and Sam could hear the shock in the voice that was clearly straining to be calm. “Flight controllers here are looking very carefully into the situation. Obviously a major malfunction.”

“I hope they were able to survive,” the news anchor said.

Sam swallowed hard. He knew the truth and suspected the news anchor did, too. They were all gone. The five NASA crew, the engineer and, most famously, Christa McAuliffe—the woman who was going to be the first teacher in space—were dead, and their bodies wouldn’t be found for another five weeks on the ocean floor.

The news anchor cleared his throat and said in a still hoarse voice, “We have a report from the flight’s dynamic officer that the vehicle has exploded,” confirming what the world already knew. The Space Shuttle Challenger disaster had joined history and Sam had witnessed it on the small screen of his TV.

He’d experienced history again, but this time, unlike Live Aid, there was nothing good about it.

xXx

Sam was sitting in front of the TV when Anna arrived. He had been drinking steadily since morning, and he was now drunk to the point of blurred vision. He’d started with beer but had since moved on to the bottle of whiskey he kept for George’s visits and it was now seriously depleted. Alcohol hadn’t helped, but once he’d started, he’d found it hard to stop.

The evening news was broadcasting coverage of the continuing situation in Florida. The rescue efforts were out in force, and though Sam knew they would be too late, he didn’t stop watching. Like much of the country, he was transfixed by what had happened.

Anna could have arrived into the room directly, but she chose to come through the front door. When Sam heard the knock, he called, “Not today, Missouri.”

He didn’t want her seeing him so drunk. She deserved better than to have to pour him into bed because he hadn’t known when to stop.

The door opened and Sam sighed. He put his glass down and straightened in his seat, trying to look more respectable than the drunken show he currently was. When Anna appeared, he slouched again and said, “Long time no see. I was starting to think you’d forgotten about me.”

“If you needed me, why didn’t you call?” she asked.

“I didn’t need you,” Sam said. “I just figured you’d have checked in.”

“Just because you didn’t see me, Sam, doesn’t mean I haven’t seen you. I have been checking in. You’ve been doing well. I didn’t think you’d want my interference.”
“I didn’t,” Sam said.

“Then what are you complaining about? And why are you drunk?” She came into the room and sat down on the couch uninvited. “What happened to you?”

“You’ve not seen the news today then.” He pointed at the TV where they were showing coverage of the explosion once again.

Anna peered at it for a moment and then said, “Challenger.”

“Yes,” Sam said, picking up his drink and sipping it again. “I guess you missed it.”

“I’ve been busy,” she said blandly.

“Me too. I’ve been testing my body’s capacity for alcohol.”

“Which is apparently not that impressive,” Anna said.

“No,” Sam agreed. “I should practice more.”

Anna shook her head. “What’s the point in this, Sam? How is drinking yourself into unconsciousness helping anyone?”

“Exactly,” Sam said. “There is no helping anyone, right? I mean, I knew it was coming, it was part of my history, so it had to happen. I saw all the buildup on the news and in the newspapers. I saw their faces and knew what was going to happen to them, but I didn’t do anything.”

“What do you think you should have done?” Anna asked.

“I don’t know. I never knew. I tried to think, but nothing I thought of would have been enough to stop it.”

“Nothing anyone could have done would have stopped it,” Anna said. “You and I remember it from our time, so it had to happen. It was a part of our history, so it couldn’t be changed. That’s why you didn’t try, isn’t it?”

Sam looked away. He had found no way to stop the disaster, but even if he had, he didn’t believe it would have worked. Anna wanted to save the world as much as he did. If Azazel’s death could have averted the apocalypse, she would have done anything to make it happen with Sam. She hadn’t, therefore she couldn’t. There was nothing that could be done, and they both knew it now.

“I understand it’s hard,” she said gently. “I Fell last year, and there was nothing I could do about it.”

Sam frowned. “I forgot about that.”

“I didn’t,” she said mildly. “I stood in that field and watched my grace propel towards the earth, and I knew everything that was coming for me, but I couldn’t do a thing about it. If I could have done something, I would have taken my grace before Uriel could have reached it. I would have protected myself. But the fact I was there at all meant I couldn’t.”

“But you couldn’t have taken your grace from Uriel. He needed to have it. They would have been able to kill you in that barn if you’d still been human.”

Anna stared him in the eye. “So?”
Sam’s mouth opened to reply, but he found he had no response for her.

“I suffered so much as an angel, Sam,” she said. “It was the last thing I wanted to become again, but I did it to save myself and you and Dean. And I had a handful of months of living in hiding, never relaxing for a moment, and then I was captured and taken to jail. There is nowhere worse, Sam.”

“Hell is worse,” Sam said darkly.

She shook her head. “Perhaps it seems so to you as Dean was there, but it really isn’t. Alastair was an amateur compared to Thaddeus—my jailer. I suffered every minute of every day there in the most unimaginable ways. I watched myself Fall and knew that was coming for me, but I didn’t try to do anything because I couldn’t. I couldn’t save myself, just as you couldn’t save those people in the shuttle.”

Sam sipped his drink again. He was sure she was right, but it didn’t help. There was more coming that he knew about, not least of all for his own family, but there was nothing he could do about it. He was going to have to see it happen, know it was happening, and he would be powerless. John would die, Dean would go to Hell, Sam would die himself, and he couldn’t stop it.

He drew a breath. “Do you really think we can defeat Lucifer? If this stuff is all set in stone, is it even possible that we could kill him?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “We haven’t lived those years yet. I hope we can. I’m doing everything I can think of to make it possible. I’m scouring every inch of Heaven for information—staying under all angels’ radar to do it. I’m not ready to give up yet. Are you?”

“No,” Sam said firmly. “Not for anything.”

“Good. I’ll keep searching.” She considered a moment. “And you should keep living. I’ve been watching you. You have been happy these past couple years; I’ve seen it. People died today, but people die every day. You can’t save them all. Maybe one day we can, but not yet. You need to learn to let go of the things you can’t control, understand?”

Sam nodded. “I do. Thanks, Anna.”

She stood to leave and looked at Sam. “Keep faith. It’s all you can do right now.”

Sam looked from her to the TV screen where once again they were showing the shuttle at the moment it exploded. He knew what he had to do, for his own good as well as the success of the plan, but it was going to be hard. He was going to see suffering that he could have averted if the laws of time weren’t set in stone. It was going to take a different kind of strength to the kind he’d had most of his life. This was going to be much harder.

xXx

In February Sam and George met for a hunt in Colorado, and after the creatures were taken care of and the bodies buried, they decided to stay in town a few days to catch up. Sam hadn’t seen George since the previous November and they’d only communicated in brief phone calls. Sam had missed his friend and was glad of a chance to spend some time with him.

They were in a bar talking, but Sam’s attention was elsewhere. There was something he wanted to do, and he hadn’t told George about it yet. He thought it would make a good surprise. When it was late enough, Sam suggested that they leave.
“It’s still early,” George said, lifting his glass of whiskey.

“It’s late enough,” Sam said. “And you’ll want to see this. Trust me.”

Looking confused, George obligingly finished his drink and set down the glass. “Come on then. Show me what you must.”

Sam led him out of the bar to where he’d parked his car. He climbed in behind the wheel and turned the engine over while George climbed in the passenger seat. Sam pulled away from the road and drove them out of town.

They drove for about half an hour, long enough for George to question their destination and to gripe that it had been warmer in the bar. When Sam pulled them to a stop on Panorama Point on the Flagstaff Road, George looked around into the darkness.

“I know I may be getting on in years, Sam, but I know what kids do at places like this,” he said. “Is there a sane reason you brought me here?”

“I want you to see something,” Sam said. “It’s worth it, I promise.”

He climbed out of the car and zipped up his thick coat. The forecasted snow hadn’t arrived and the sky was clear, but it was still bitterly cold. As Sam looked up at the starry sky, he saw what he had come for though.

He walked around to the trunk and pulled out the pair of binoculars he’d bought specifically for this. As he knew George only followed news for hunts, he hoped he was unaware of the rare event happening in the skies right now.

He walked around to the side of the car and pointed up to the sky. “Look there, George.”

George obeyed. “What am I looking at?”

“The smudge,” Sam said.

“I see it. What is it?”

“Halley’s comet,” Sam said happily. “Here, try these.” He handed him the binoculars and George look up again.

“Ahh, I see a slightly clearer smudge now,” he said. “I have to say, Sam, it’s not as impressive as your reaction would indicate. It’s just a comet.”

“It’s our comet,” Sam said. “That was overhead in 1835 when the colt was made. It’s where some of the magic comes from, I think. It’s a hunter’s comet. It’s part of our story.”

George lowered the binoculars and nodded. “I suppose it is.” He handed them to Sam and gave the sky a lazy salute.

Sam laughed and looked up at the sky again, this time with the aid of the binoculars. It wasn’t as impressive as he’d hoped, but it was still something special. It was history. He might see it again, in 2061, but he wouldn’t share the moment with George then. Perhaps he and Dean would see it together as old men. Though would Sam ever be old? He had no idea if his inability to age would last forever, or his invincibility. Perhaps Michael would remove it when time lined up again. Sam hoped so, as the alternative was too much to imagine— living forever without Dean with him.
“I suppose this counts as another piece of history you shouldn’t have,” George said.

“Definitely,” Sam said. “And this is a good one.”

George eyed him curiously. “You’re thinking of the shuttle explosion.”

Sam nodded.

“Missouri told me you were upset about it. Tell me, Sam, did you try to avert it?”

“No,” Sam admitted. “I couldn’t think of any way. Even if I had…”

“You don’t believe it would have worked?”

“Anna says no, and I believe her. She’s suffering as much as I am with things that have happened, she will suffer more, but she’s not trying to change it. I think she would have if it was possible.”

George nodded thoughtfully. “I don’t think so either. I think some things are set in stone.”

“Me too,” Sam said. “Which makes me wonder about Lucifer. Is it set in stone that the world will be destroyed because of him?”

“I wish I could tell you for certain either way,” George said. “I don’t think it is, but I can’t be sure. I know what I believe though, and that is that you’re the one fated to win. You need to put your faith in Anna to help you, and those of us that know must put our faith in you.”

“You really believe that?” Sam asked.

“I do. I don’t think I will be here to see you win, but I believe that if anyone can, it’s you. I think it was more than Michael wanting you to be a vulnerable vessel that caused him to bring you here. I think he saw in you what Missouri and I see: a warrior. I think he was threatened by you and your need to defeat Lucifer, and that was, at least in part, what made him do this to you.”

Sam looked at him, startled. He had never considered that before. Since Anna’s explanation of Michael’s motives, he’d thought he had been left here purely to break him. The thought that Michael might feel threatened by him hadn’t occurred to him. He wasn’t sure he believed it now, but he liked the idea. If it was true, it was a bolster to the cause.

“I think,” George said slowly, “that you’re going to see many more tragedies that you will feel you should have averted, but I think you will come out the victor in the end if you remain strong. That’s what Anna told you to do: live and stay strong. She is the best person to advise you. I say you should continue to trust her, and forgive yourself the things you can’t do.”

“I’m going to lose a lot,” Sam said, thinking of John and Dean, Ellen and Jo, Pamela and Ash.

“But if you win, you will gain the world,” George said. “That’s worth being strong for, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Sam said.

“Then it’s settled. Now, take me back to the motel before I freeze. I have seen our comet and been duly impressed by the story. I think you owe me a drink.”

“I have a bottle of Johnnie Walker in my duffel,” Sam said.

George clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re a good man.”
Sam didn’t know about that. He had done a lot of bad in his life. But he was trying to do better. Perhaps he could. He knew one thing though; George’s faith had reached him. He thought he had to trust himself to succeed in order to stay strong still.

It was the best defense he had until Anna found a way to kill Lucifer.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

When Sam came through arrivals, he saw Missouri waiting for him with a wide smile on her face. He made his way over to her then set down his bag to receive her hug. He had arranged for her to pick him up from the airport so he could leave his car at home. There had been a couple thefts from the airport long term parking, and Sam wasn’t risking his car for anything.

“I was only gone a week,” he pointed out with a laugh when she released him from her tight embrace.

“I missed you,” she said, waving a hand at him.

Sam put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. “I missed you, too. How’s James?”

“He’s fine. He has an important essay due tomorrow so he’s ensconced in the library, working hard. He’d have been here otherwise. He wants to hear all about it.”

“He will,” Sam said enthusiastically. “He needs to.”

He’d been to Michigan to watch WrestleMania III in Pontiac. He had rediscovered his love for wrestling with the recent popularity boom in the sport and the televised matches. When he’d been growing up he, Dean and John had been more familiar with Top Notch games, and so the wins in the WWF world were unknown to him. To the man that seemed to know too much about what was coming, it was nice to be able to enjoy a match without knowing the victor.

He’d gone mainly to see the Hulk Hogan/Andre The Giant bout, and he’d been rooting for Andre. The Hulk got too much attention and credit in Sam’s opinion, as he put on a good show, but Andre was the real master of the art. He was the one pelted with trash as he’d rode out to the ring, though, while Hogan was cheered by the brainless sheep in the crowd.

Unfortunately, Hogan had been the winner, defending his title.

Missouri laughed. “I can tell you’re dying to talk about it, so why don’t you tell me.”

Unable to resist the invitation, Sam launched into an explanation of the match he’d seen as they left the airport and made their way to the parking lot.

“It was incredible, Missouri. Hogan tried a body slam Andre, but he couldn’t even lift him. Andre went down on top of him, and I thought it was all over. He almost had him pinned, but Hogan got out of it and went back at him. Hogan clotheslined Andre and it was over. He Hulked Out, scoop-slammed him and pinned him with a leg-drop pin off the ropes. It was over. Andre was down and out. I hate to say it, but Hogan deserved the win. He was the better fighter on the day.”

“You know, I understood maybe a quarter of what you just said, and you still managed to make me wish I was there,” Missouri said. “And I hate wrestling.”

“I’m just that good,” Sam teased. “Seriously though, it was an incredible match. I’m so glad I was there.”
“Another piece of history?” Missouri asked.

“Exactly!”

It was history, and it was the good kind. Sam was experiencing things he’d never had a chance to in life thanks to the freedom of his time and the fact he had money. It was great, even though he wished he could share it with Dean.

They got to the car and Missouri opened the trunk so he could stow his bag inside. “You need to hang on to that enthusiasm for James,” she said. “He’s going to want every detail.”

“I don’t think it’s running out anytime soon,” Sam said. “It was awesome.”

She patted his cheek. “I’m glad you enjoyed yourself, Sam. You deserve it. Now, let’s get you home.”

Sam climbed into the passenger seat and waited for Missouri to get in and start the engine. Perhaps he did deserve it, he wasn’t sure about that, but he’d had the best time, and he was pleased he’d been there for it. Once again, his life in this time had been a gift.

xXx

When Sam got inside the living room, he set down his bag and made towards the kitchen. “Do you want a drink?” he asked.

“Coffee would be good,” Missouri said, settling down on the couch. “You have a message on the machine.”

“I’ll be right there.” Sam filled the tea kettle and put it on the stove then came back into the living room and checked the answering machine. The red light was blinking at him. He pressed play for the first message and tapped his fingers against the table as he waited for it to start.

“Taylor, it’s Bobby Singer. I wanted to let you know that I’ve passed your number on to a new hunter. He’s after something I’ve never heard of before, so I sent him your way. He’s still fairly new to the life, but he’s got potential. He’s damn determined that’s for sure. His name is John, and he should be calling you soon.”

A beep indicated the end of the message and Sam turned off the tape. He felt faint and his hand gripped the table to support him. He heard the squeak of springs as Missouri got off of the old couch and then her hand was on his face.

“Breathe, Sam,” she said. “It’s okay.”

“It has to be my dad,” Sam said weakly. “Who else could it be?”

“We don’t know for sure. You have to wait for him to call.”

“How can I wait?” Sam asked. “He needs my help now.” He gasped. “How can I talk to him though? I can’t do this!”

“You can and you will. You said it yourself: he needs your help.”

Sam bowed his head and looked at the answering machine; the red light was still blinking. There was another message, and Sam was fairly certain he knew who it was from.

He was frozen. If that was his father, and he was almost sure it was, then he would have to call him
back and talk to him. He didn’t want to. He was scared to, but he had to. John needed help and that meant Sam had to push aside what he wanted and do what was best for his family.

The thought scared him so much he thought his knees would buckle.

“Come sit down,” Missouri said, putting an arm around his back and guiding him to the couch. “We’ll listen to the message in a minute.”

Sam sank down and clasped his hands on his lap. Missouri patted his shoulder and then went into the kitchen. He heard her fumbling with something and when she came back, she had a glass of water for him. He would have preferred a real drink, but he knew she wouldn’t agree. He sipped his water and then set the glass down on the end table.

“Are you ready to hear it?” Missouri asked.

Sam nodded.

She went to the machine and pressed play. There was a crackle as the tape ran and then a voice Sam had thought he would never hear again came through the speaker.

“This is John Winchester. Bobby Singer gave me your number. He thought you might be able to help me. I’ve got a case that I’m hitting a wall with. If you can help, call me back on 608-562-3705.”

No please. No thank you. It was pure John. It was also heart wrenching. The voice alone was enough to make Sam feel like he couldn’t breathe; the thought that he had to call him back made it worse. His hands shook as he reached for the water again in an attempt to relieve his dry throat.

Missouri set the pen she was writing the number with on the pad and came to him. She and took his chilled hand and clasped it in both of her warm ones. “You can do this.”

“Can I?” Sam asked, looking into her kind eyes. “I know I have to, but I’m not sure I can. This is my dad. He’s dead.”

“Not now he isn’t. He’s alive and fighting, and he needs your help. You can do that for him, can’t you?”

Sam nodded. He could do it because he had no choice. He had seen his father before, with Mary and Dean when they’d come trick or treating, but he hadn’t spoken to him. It had been different as that was when he was so sure he would be able to save Mary. Now John was living the nightmare life that came after her death. He was going to be a different man. He was going to be the father Sam had known. When Sam had said goodbye to his mother, he’d said goodbye to John, too.

“You should do it now,” Missouri said. “Get it done so you can relax.”

Sam nodded and got to his feet. He picked up the notepad Missouri had written the number down on and dialed it into his phone. No sooner than it had begun to ring, Sam panicked and slammed it down again.

“Sam,” she said soothingly. “He needs you.”

“I know,” Sam said. “I do. I’m just…”

“Scared,” she supplied. “That’s okay. Just don’t let the fear stop you.”
She picked up the phone and dialed the number in and then handed the receiver to him. It rang only twice before it was picked up, and another voice Sam never thought he would hear again, not in this form at least, spoke. It was Dean, sounding so young.

“Dad?”

Sam turned wide eyes on Missouri and mouthed, “It’s Dean!”

She looked shocked but whispered, “Talk to him.”

“Dad? Are you there? What’s wrong?”

Sam took a breath, forced himself to be strong, and said. “Hello. I’m looking for John Winchester.”

“Who are you?” Dean asked.

“My name is Sam Taylor. John called and asked me for help with work. Is he there?”

“He’s out getting dinner,” Dean said. “I’ll tell him you called.”

“Thank you,” Sam said.

He was considering how to ring off, not wanting to lose Dean but knowing he was stressing him with the call, when he heard a voice in the background. “Dean, is that Dad? Is he coming home yet?” It was himself, sounding so young. He also sounded concerned, which made Sam think Dean had lied when he’d said John was out getting dinner. He was ‘working’ and Dean had been left alone with Sam.

“Bye,” Dean said curtly and then call disconnected.

Sam set the phone down carefully and turned away from Missouri so she wouldn’t see his tears.

“I’ll get your coffee,” he mumbled, walking into the kitchen.

Missouri had taken the kettle from the stove, and Sam put it back on and turned on the burner. While he waited for it to boil, he added coffee to the French press and took two cups from the cupboard. He made no attempt to check the tears that were rolling down his cheeks. He couldn’t stop them, not while he knew that somewhere in the country Dean was taking care of his little brother, so young, with responsibilities laid on him that he should never have to bear. And Sam had sounded so worried. He needed his father there; they both did. They were too young to be alone. And he could do nothing about it. No words he could speak to John could persuade him to stay with his children, because he hadn’t. This was another unchangeable part of Sam’s life. John had hunted instead of taking care of them. That was fact. History.

Sam wished it wasn’t true. Dean shouldn’t have to bear the burden of being left to care for Sam, and Sam shouldn’t have to be worried about his dad.

The kettle boiled and Sam poured the water into the press. He put on the lid and wiped at his face. The tears had slowed, and he felt ready to talk again as he waited for the coffee to brew.

“It was Dean,” he said.

Missouri came into the kitchen from where she’d been hovering at the door and she stepped beside him at the counter. “I know.”

“I heard myself, too.”
She sucked in a breath. “That must have been hard.”

“It was hard to hear both of them,” Sam said. “It reminded me of what it was like, how hard it was for Dean.”

“He came through it,” Missouri said. “I know it’s hard for him now, but think of the way he was when you were left behind. He was okay, wasn’t he? I don’t mean with the apocalypse and how hard that was for you both; I mean as a man. He was okay, even though it was hard for him as a child.”

Sam shook his head. “He wasn’t. Dean was so screwed up from the way our childhood was that he thought my life was his responsibility, and it killed him.”

“What do you mean?”

Sam didn’t answer as he pressed down the plunger and poured two coffees. He added sugar to Missouri’s and handed it to her then carried his own into the living room and sat down on the armchair. Missouri came in and sat on the couch, setting her cup down on the table. She leaned forward and asked, “What do you mean?”

Sam looked down into the depths of his cup and said, “I died.”

“I remember,” she said.

“A few years ago, I was caught up in some serious trouble; the demon that killed my mom wanted something from me, and it ended with me trapped with some people to fight to the death. People died until there was just two of us left. Jake, the man I was left with, tried to kill me, and I won. I had the chance to kill him, to end it, but, like I told you, I couldn’t do it. I didn’t want to be a murderer. I walked away, and he stabbed me in the back because of it. I was killed, and because Dean was so screwed up by our childhood, the fact my dad set the responsibility for keeping me safe on him, Dean made a demon deal for my life.”

Missouri gasped.

“Yeah. He was so messed up he thought my life was worth an eternity in Hell. If it wasn’t for Castiel, he would still be there now. So no, he wasn’t fine. He was damaged forever because of it. And there is nothing I can do to stop him doing that, even though I am here now. That was his childhood. I can’t change it.”

“I’m so sorry, Sam,” she said.

“Why are you sorry for me? I’m not the one that went to Hell.”

“No, but you’re the one that was left behind when he did. That guilt must have been overpowering. It could have destroyed you.”

“It did,” Sam said. “It destroyed me and left me to destroy the world.”

Missouri shook her head but didn’t speak for which Sam was grateful. He didn’t want her to defend him as she would.

Sam sipped his coffee and stared at the phone, dreading the moment it would ring and John would be on the other end. He couldn’t decide whether it would be worse than hearing Dean and himself or not.
They sat in silence for a while, and then Missouri said, “Do you want me to stay with you until he
calls?”

Sam forced a smile for her. “No. James will get home and need to eat.”

“He can make something for himself.”

“Not something you’d want him to eat,” Sam said. “You know if there’s nothing waiting for him
he’ll be getting a burger minus the salad.”

Missouri shrugged. “For once, I don’t mind. He can have his treat. You need me more.”

Sam did, but he was ashamed to admit it. He wanted her there. That felt cowardly though. She had
things she needed to do, too. He had faced worse than a difficult phone call in his life. This was
next to nothing in comparison. That didn’t stop him willing it to be over though.

Ultimately, it didn’t matter that Sam hadn’t persuaded Missouri to go as the phone rang again then.
It was rare for him to get a call from anyone but George or Missouri other than hunters, so he was
confident he knew who it was going to be. He stood and walked to the phone, taking a deep breath
before answering with the deeper voice he used when speaking to Bobby and other hunters.

“Hello.”

“Is this Taylor?” John asked.

Sam closed his eyes. “It is. Are you John Winchester?”

“Yes. I was told by Bobby Singer that you would help me.”

“I can try,” Sam said. “What’s the case?”

“I have seven children in the hospital in Wisconsin with pneumonia. They’re all siblings, and I am
sure there’s something supernatural happening. They’re falling ill in the night, and I’ve seen the
same handprint at each house. It’s like something rotted through the wood. Do you have any idea
what it is?”

Sam felt a jolt in his stomach as he realized he knew this case. It was the hunt John had been on
when Sam was attacked by the shtriga. Only the fact John arrived in time saved Sam from
languishing away in a hospital with the rest of the children. Dean had told him about the hunt when
they’d faced the Shtriga again in Fitchburg. They’d killed it, at least Dean had, which meant this
was the hunt John was going to abandon.

He shook his head to clear it and said, “It sounds like you have a shtriga.”

“What’s that?”

“The closest thing I can come to it is a witch. It feeds from the life force of people—usually
children—leaving them weak and vulnerable to illness.”

“How do I kill it?”

“You need to shoot it with consecrated iron rounds, but you have to catch it in the act of feeding.
It’s the only time it’s vulnerable.”

“What do they look like?”
“A nightmare when in their true forms, but they can pass as human when they’re not feeding. They’re fast and strong, too. Watch yourself.”

“Anything else?” John asked curtly.

“I don’t think so,” Sam said. “But call if you need help.”

“Sure. I’ll be in touch.”

Without a word of thanks, John ended the call and Sam was left with the receiver in his hand. He set it down on the cradle and wiped a hand over his face.

“You did well,” Missouri said.

“Not well enough.”

“What do you mean?”

“I know the hunt,” Sam said. “It’s not going to work out. The shtriga is going to come for me while I’m under Dean’s watch. Dad will save me, but he has to get us out of town so he misses the shtriga. It’s already moved on when he comes back. It won’t come around again until Dean and I are hunting together, and though we’ll kill it, it’s another truck load of guilt for Dean to handle.”

Missouri sighed. “That poor boy.”

“Yeah. He’s going to carry it for years. I don’t think even finding and killing the shtriga is going to save him. Dean feels everything so deeply, especially the failures.”

“It’s not your fault, Sam,” Missouri said. “You can’t change it. You gave John all the information you could.”

“I know. It won’t make much of a difference for him, though it means Dean and I know how to kill it when we catch up with it. It’s just… Dean.”

She got to her feet and came to his side. She wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug and said, “I know, Sam.”

“I miss him,” Sam said quietly.

She patted his back, not speaking, and Sam took the comfort from her embrace.

He did miss Dean, and he hated what was going to happen to him. He wished more than anything there was something he could do to save him from that guilt. He couldn’t.

All he could do now was wait for another call from John and help him as much as he could.

xXx

In August, when the heat was beginning to bake down on them, Missouri celebrated her 40th birthday with a barbeque in the back yard. Many of her friends and clients came, and it was a real party. Sam manned the grill, and James worked as barman, handing out the beers he was forbidden to drink.

When the party had wound down and Sam, James and Missouri were left to clean up, they took a break to sit down on the patio chairs around one of the tables set out and relaxed a while.
“Did you have a good time?” Sam asked.

“I had a wonderful time,” Missouri said. “It’s almost worth turning 40 for a party like that.”

“I don’t know why you’re worried about turning 40. It’s just another year,” Sam said.

“That’s easy for you to say. Wait until you reach the fourth decade. I’ll remind you of this conversation when you’re freaking out.”

“I think I’ll cope,” Sam said. “I’ve got a few years to prepare. Besides, aging is nothing to worry about. You look great still.”

She did. It was strange for Sam to see Missouri slowly becoming the woman he first met in 2005. She did look great for her age, but she was changing and Sam wasn’t. He had successfully modified his appearance with his beard, but when you concentrated and looked past it, he still looked the same as he had when he’d sat down for breakfast with Missouri all those years ago.

Missouri waved a hand at him. “‘I look old.’

Sam shook his head. “You don’t, does she, James?”

James grinned. “You don’t look a day over 39, Mom.”

Missouri scowled at him as Sam coughed to cover a laugh.

“I’ll remember that comment when I’m shopping for your birthday gift,” Missouri said. James’ own birthday was only a week away.

James looked repentant. “I’m sorry, Momma. You’re as beautiful as ever.”

“Nice save,” Sam whispered.

“Hmm… We’ll see,” Missouri said.

“While we’re on the topic of my birthday, I wanted to float the idea of a party again.”

Sam grinned and picked up his beer to watch the battle wage. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen it.

“You can have a party,” Missouri said sweetly. “I’ll book a slot at Chuck E. Cheese for you and your friends.”

James groaned. “Please, Mom, I’m going to be seventeen. You can’t let that pass without a celebration.”

“You’ll have a celebration,” Missouri said. “But not a party. You’re a responsible young man, James, I know that, but some of your friends aren’t. I’m not signing up to have my house trashed by a group of rowdy juniors.”

“It doesn’t have to be here,” James said. “I can find somewhere else. Like Sam’s place. You wouldn’t mind, would you, Sam?”

Sam caught Missouri’s eye and saw the explicit warning there. “Not this year,” he said. “If your mom agrees, you can use my house for a party next year when you’re eighteen.”

James sighed. “Sure. Thanks.”
“We’ll still make this year special,” Missouri said. “Think about what you’d like, and I’ll see what we can do.”

“Would it make any difference if I offered to do this clean-up alone?”

“No,” Missouri said. “But you can go do the dishes for me since you offered. Most of the plates were paper, but there’s some glasses need cleaning.”

James stood up and stretched. “Okay, but remember this dedication when you’re looking for my gift.”

Sam laughed and Missouri smiled. “I will.”

James grabbed a few stray glasses and went inside. When the door had closed behind him, Sam said, “You’re going to use this gift thing to the fullest extent, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” Missouri said. “Though I think his gift is pretty special.”

“It is.” Sam and Missouri had gone together to Rainbow Motors to buy a joint gift for James. They’d found him a Chevette. It wasn’t remotely flashy, but it would be a good starter car for him. Though they could have both easily afforded something more impressive for him, Missouri was firm about James not being spoiled, just as she didn’t spoil herself. She had a lot of money, but she rarely spent it on anything frivolous. And she still kept her psychic readings going for a nominal fee, making her popular in town.

Sam didn’t spend much either. He lived well, but not extravagantly. Much of their money went to charities around the world. Their most recent donations were going to HIV/AIDS charities as the epidemic was rife over the country. It was still a taboo subject for many, but not for them. Missouri was open with James about the importance of safe sex as Sam had made sure they both knew it was a threat to more than the gay community and drug users as was the common belief.

They would have an influx of money soon when they sold off the majority of their stocks. Black Monday was coming in October, and Sam remembered from an economics class that the market would peak soon.

They both felt guilty for playing the system the way they were, but it didn’t stop them doing it. They were helping people with the money they made, and neither of them wanted to deny the vulnerable charities their help.

Sam finished his beer and set down the bottle. “I should finish clearing up.”

“We should,” Missouri said.

“I’ll do it,” Sam said. “You’re the birthday girl after all. It won’t take me long. You go inside and relax.”

Missouri smiled at him. “Thank you, Sam. I appreciate it. I am tired. Apparently age is catching up with me.”

Sam laughed. “I’ll take that today as it’s your birthday, but if you play the age thing too much, I’ll put a stop to it. You’re young.”

“That’s easy for you to say, Mr. Immortal. You are young.”

“It’s not the blessing it seems, Missouri. Trust me.”
She nodded as she looked at him. “I don’t suppose it is.”

Sam smiled to break the moment of awkwardness and waved her away. “Go on in and relax. It won’t take me long.”

Missouri disappeared into the house and Sam picked up the trash bag he’d been filling before and began to collect the paper plates and bowls that were left dotted around by the guests. He was just checking whether the barbeque was cool enough to close when the back door flew open and James rushed out. “Sam! Come and see!” he said breathlessly.

Sam dropped the bag and hurried after James into the house and through to the living room. On the TV a scene of chaos was shown, a flaming wreck of a plane and uniformed people around it.

“It is hard to imagine any of the 149 crew and passengers of the Northwest plane coming out of that wreck alive,” the newscaster said. “But we must pray.”

Sam stared in shock at the scene. It was a disaster he’d known of, but he hadn’t known when it was.

“What do you think happened?” James asked.

“I don’t know,” Sam said quietly.

All he did know was that Northwest Airlines Flight 255 had crashed, killing all on board except for a four-year-old girl.

Another slice of history for Sam to see.
Sam was uncomfortable sitting in the small portacabin office with Brad, waiting for Vic to join them.

He’d received a call that morning asking if he’d mind coming by the new site at the university, and Sam had come out of curiosity. He figured they were going to offer him a job. The site seemed to be doing well; the library they were building promised to be a big job, so it made sense this was the time they were choosing.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about coming back to work. He’d quit seven years ago and his life had been full since, even without having a job. He didn’t need the money, and it was convenient for him to be able to take off on a hunt whenever one came up. It might be good to see more people than Missouri, James and George on a regular basis though. He occasionally caught up with Ray and Carl for drinks after their work days, but it wasn’t the same as when they were all working together. There was also the fact that he had so many years until it was time for Dean. Perhaps he should fill the next 22 years with something more than what he had been doing.

He decided he would hear them out before making a decision.

The door opened and Vic came in. He walked around the desk and pulled up a chair beside Brad, looking across at Sam with an unreadable expression.

“How have you been?” Brad asked.

“Okay,” Sam said. “I see business is good.”

“It is,” Brad said. “That’s why we’ve asked you to come in. It’s a lot later than we expected, but you know the way the economy has been going. Now we’ve got the library contract, though, we were able to make the call.”

“We want you back,” Vic said.

“More than that,” Brad said. “We want you back promoted. There are no jobs with he roofing team anymore, but there’s another opening coming up.” He sighed. “I want to retire.”

Sam frowned. Brad worked carpentry, and Sam had no training in that. He couldn’t take over his place on the site.

“Okay…” he said slowly.

“We want you to take over,” Vic said.
“I know nothing about carpentry,” Sam said.

Brad smiled. “We know that. We don’t mean my job on the carpentry crew; we mean my spot as foreman.”

Sam leaned back in his chair and blew out a breath. He hadn’t expected this. He’d been out of the site life for a long time. He knew little about the business at all apart from the roofing tasks. He’d never been a part of people management. They had the wrong man.

“Before you say no, hear me out,” Brad said. “We need people that are going to protect the workers as well as the business. None of us have forgotten that you quit to save someone else’s job.”

“Unions are gaining power,” Vic said. “You would understand that and work with them. You were a hard worker, and we think you’d be a good fit.”

Sam was sure the recommendation had come from Brad himself, as Vic surely knew nothing about his work ethic. He would probably have never known Sam’s name if he hadn’t distinguished himself by quitting.

“I don’t know enough,” he said. “The crew will never accept me as foreman with the experience I have. How can I advise them on things I know nothing about?”

“We thought of that,” Brad said. “If you agree, I’ll stay a year to see you trained, gradually transferring my responsibilities to you. We will give you time on each aspect of the site, give you a chance to understand each role, so you will know their work. We’ll get you licensed with heavy machinery; you can work with the carpenters as a runner; you will know each job at least basically by the end of the year.”

Sam considered. He wanted the job. He thought he could make a difference for the workers if he was in a position of power, and it would be a challenge. If they trained him in each aspect, he would be able to handle it. The only sticking point was whether the workers would accept him in that role.

“What if the crew doesn’t like it?” Sam asked.

“They don’t have to like it,” Vic said gruffly. “They’re not paid to enjoy themselves.”

Brad held up a hand to him. “I think they’ll accept you as foreman. None of the crew you were with then have forgotten why you quit. They respect you. Having someone like you in charge will be better for them. You understand them.”

“Well?” Vic said. “Do you want it?”

“Yes,” Sam said slowly. “But I have commitments now that I didn’t have before. I have some family out of state that sometimes need me. I might need to take time off.”

“You have vacation days,” Vic said.

“And we can work with you on that,” Brad said. “We’re serious about this, Sam. We want you. The question is, do you want us?”

“I do.”

He would be nuts to pass up this opportunity to do some good. And he would have structure to his
life again. If they could work with him for vacation time, he could still hunt, and he had weekends. He could make it work.

“Good,” Vic said with a curt nod. “I’ll see you Monday.” He got to his feet and held out a hand.

Sam stood and shook it. “Thank you.”

Vic strode from the office, leaving Sam and Brad alone.

They were silent for a moment, and then Brad shook his hand and said, “Welcome back to the team, Sam.”

“Thanks,” Sam said with a grin.

He was back among the workforce, and this time he might be able to make a difference.

It was with a light heart that he left the office and walked to his car.

xXx

Sam and George had taken on a werewolf, and after it was dead, George decided to come to Lawrence to stay with Sam for a few days in a real home. Sam was happy to have him there. He never seemed to see enough of his friend, as they usually met for hunts and the occasional holiday.

It was a cool night, but they were sitting outside with coats on as it was a clear, starry night, and the moon was still bright so Sam wanted to enjoy it. They had been discussing the hunts George had been taking recently and the increased injuries he was taking.

“I’m getting old, Sam,” he explained. “I’m 65. If I was working a regular job, I’d be retiring.”

“Will you retire?” Sam asked.

“Not until I have to,” George said. “What kind of life could I have knowing what was out there? I’m in it till the end.”

Sam nodded. He had expected the answer. George was a protector. To expect him to give that up because he was getting hurt was stupid. Sam wished he would though. He didn’t want George hurt seriously, or worse, killed. It was a risk for all hunters, whatever age, but as George was slowing down, it was more likely.

In an ideal world, George would give it up and come live with Sam. He could take over the lore and phones role Sam had for other hunters. He could set himself up like Bobby had in Sam’s time. It would be better for everyone. Now Sam was working, he only had evenings and weekends to get back to the hunters that were calling him, and he had less time to research lore for them. He knew it would do no good to suggest it though. George was stubborn and may even be insulted by the idea.

“Speaking of working, how are you finding it being back among the workforce?” George asked.

“It’s good,” Sam said. “I’m enjoying it more than I thought.”

“And how are the rest of the crew taking you as their new boss?”

“I’m not. Not really. I have some input now, but mostly I’m still learning the ropes of the other parts of the job.”
“And how do they feel about that?”

The truth was that Sam was taking some flak for being the boss-in-training. The fact he’d been out of the job for so long rubbed some people up the wrong way. They thought the job should have gone to one of them. The fact Sam had quit for them didn’t mean much to them now, so many years later; their gratitude had an expiration date apparently. It didn’t bother Sam too much as the people whose opinion he valued were okay with it.

“Some aren’t happy,” Sam admitted. “But Ray and Carl are cool with it, and they’re the ones I care about.”

“Good,” George said, picking up his glass of whiskey and sipping it. “Though I have to say, it does seem strange to me. You’re the only millionaire I’ve heard of that works construction for a living.”

“I’m not a millionaire,” Sam said. It was true. Though he and Missouri had made a vast amount of money playing the stocks, they had both donated a substantial amount to causes that mattered to them. Sam had more than enough left, and it felt wrong that he would have so much just sitting in a bank when he wouldn’t use it whereas other people could, so he found charities that needed it.

“Because you keep giving it away,” George said. “You could be.”

“I don’t need to be,” Sam said. “I have what I need. And I like working. It’s good to be with other people, doing honest work for a living.”

George shook his head. “You’re a strange man, Sam.”

Sam grinned. “I don’t mind that. I’m happy.”

“Are you?” George asked.

Sam nodded. “I am happy with my life. I wish Anna had come through with something to kill Lucifer already, but we have time. She said when she came last time that she thought she might be onto something, and for all I know that’s going to be the solution. The search could end tomorrow, and then we’ll just be waiting for the right time.”

“Let’s hope,” George said fervently. “How are Missouri and James?”

“They’re good,” Sam said. “James is waiting to hear back from colleges now he’s sent out all his applications. It shouldn’t take too much longer. Graduation seems to be coming too fast though. It doesn’t seem that long ago that he was a kid with his Star Wars toys.”

“Children grow fast I hear,” George said.

“You’ve not had any in your life?”

George shook his head slowly. “No. I was an only child, and there was never much contact with extended family. I married the army when I was eighteen and left after the Korean Armistice. I was thirty, still young enough to marry I suppose, but then I was introduced to the hunting life and I had no time or inclination to marry after that.”

“Do you regret it?” Sam asked.

“Not really. It might be nice to have someone to share these years with, and someone to see grow as you are seeing James grow, but I am happy with my life, too. I would not exchange the lives I have saved as a hunter for a quiet life for myself.”
“How did you become a hunter?” Sam asked. It was a question he’d always wanted to ask, but there had never been an opening before.

George finished his whiskey in one swallow and said, “That’s a long story.”

“I have a long time,” Sam said.

“Then I will need another drink.”

Sam poured a new measure of whiskey into each of their glasses and picked up his own.

George adjusted himself in his chair and gave a deep sigh. “It was after the fighting in Korea ended, shortly after I had been discharged. Many of us left the service after Korea, and some of my friends and I decided to have one last week together before we separated and found our way back into civilian life. We were unwilling to leave each other’s lives, I think. When you’ve lived in close quarters for three years, you find it hard to part. There’s a brotherhood that develops.”

Sam nodded. He could imagine that. Relationships usually became much stronger thanks to shared experiences and trauma.

“We went camping in Montana. On the third night, I woke to screaming like I’ve never heard in my life. It was like we were surrounded. Instinct took over, and I was out of the tent, armed and ready in seconds. I looked around, searching for who was attacking us, but I could see no one. My friends Ben and Tom were out of the tent, too, and we were looking around the darkness, waiting for the screams to come back. Suddenly, out of nowhere this shadow passed us, so fast we couldn’t follow it. Someone shouted, and when I looked Tom was gone. One moment he was right beside me, the next he was gone.”

Sam thought he knew what had taken him, but he didn’t speak and break the spell of George’s story. He had a feeling it had been a long time since George had told anyone this, if he ever had.

“I fired six rounds into the darkness then picked up Tom’s gun. Ben was hollering and panicking, but I was calm. It had always been that way in the wars. When the worst happened, I was calmer than I ever was in peace time. Ben had always been more emotional in crisis. He’d hated the enemy with passion, whereas they were just the other side to me. I didn’t hate them. I just knew I was doing the right thing killing them.”

He cleared his throat and took a sip of his drink.

“For a moment, there was nothing, and then a shadow darted past us. I emptied my gun into the darkness again, knowing my only chance was to get a random shot into the enemy that I couldn’t see. Ben was shouting that we had to run, but it went against everything they had drilled into me in training. I was a good man that would stand.” He shook his head. “Then Ben was snatched from right in front of my eyes. What took him was too fast to be human, and I knew that it was something I couldn’t kill. I didn’t want to leave my friends, my comrades, though, so I stayed there with Ben’s gun in my hand. Then they came. Two men appeared out of nowhere, armed with flaming torches, and shouted at me to run. I obeyed, the need to follow orders drilled into me for twelve years. I ran blindly away into the darkness, still holding that gun in my hand. I slipped and fell though, and when I looked back, I saw the flames. The fire seemed to be coming right for me. It was like it was eating the trees and forest floor. I stood transfixed, and my calm deserted me. I hadn’t been so scared since D-Day. I saw the flames coming for me, and I froze. Suddenly, two men raced out of the flames and grabbed me. They dragged me away until my wits returned and I started running again. We ran for what seemed like forever, eventually coming to the start of the trail where I’d left my truck.” He sighed heavily. “The men that had saved me, albeit by starting a
forest fire, introduced themselves as Matthew and Robert, and they were the ones that told me the truth of the world.”

“It was a Wendigo, wasn’t it?”

George nodded. “My first monster, yes. I begged Matthew and Robert to tell me more, to explain so I could make sense of what had happened, and they took me under their wing. I started hunting with them.” He looked Sam in the eyes. “I started fighting when I was eighteen years old, and I thought I had stopped when I was thirty. The day I took off my uniform for the last time was the start of a new life for me; at least that was what I thought. In a way it was. My enemies were no longer human, but I started fighting again, and I haven’t stopped yet.”

Sam looked at his friend and wondered at the man he was. His whole life had been a soldier’s life. Even though he’d left the army behind, he never truly stopped fighting the war.

George cleared his throat. “So that was how I became a hunter. Was it the story you expected?”

“I don’t know what I was expecting,” Sam said. “I’m sorry that happened to you though.”

George forced a smile. “And I am sorry for what happened to you. We all have our story. Mine is just longer than most. And on that note, I am going to bed.”

“Thanks for telling me,” Sam said.

“Thank you for listening,” George said. “It’s sometimes good for an old soldier to tell tales. It helps us remember what we fight for.” He got to his feet and stretched with a wince. “Yes, I am getting old. Good night, Sam.”

“Night, George.”

George disappeared into the house and Sam sipped his whiskey and looked up at the sky of bright stars. He thought George had lived a life that, though devoid of apocalypses, was just as incredible as Sam’s.

George had always been somewhat of an enigma to him, but Sam was glad he knew him a little more now.

xXx

Sam had just gotten home from work and was changing out of his dirty clothes when the phone rang. He quickly tugged on a clean shirt and went through to the living room to answer it.

“Hello?”

“Sam, it’s James. Are you busy?”

“Hey, James. No, I just got in from work. What’s up?”

“Can you come over?” James asked, and for the first time Sam noted the strain in his voice. He sounded like he was poorly suppressing some emotion.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked. “Is your mom?”

“Yeah, we’re both fine. I just need to talk to you.”

Not wholly reassured, Sam said, “I’ll be right there,” and set down the phone.
He was worried. James rarely called. If he wanted Sam, he usually came over, and the tension in his voice was unusual. He was usually easygoing, not really getting worked up over things.

He grabbed his car keys from the table in the hall and stuffed his feet into his boots then went outside. He unlocked the car and climbed inside. The radio came on as he started the engine, playing a Kylie Minogue song that he quickly snapped off. He was already stressed without her blaring at him.

The drive to Missouri’s seemed to take too long, though it was a short journey, and Sam’s mind ran with possible reasons for James’ call the whole way. Only when he had parked on the street outside her house did he untense slightly. He strode up the path to the door and let himself in, calling, “James?”

“In here, Sam,” Missouri replied from the kitchen.

Sam went in and saw Missouri stirring a pot at the stove and looking perfectly well. James was sitting at the table with a textbook and papers in front of him, smiling up at Sam, though looking tense around the eyes.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked.

“I was going to ask the same thing,” Missouri said. “James said he wouldn’t say anything until we’re both here.” She turned to her son. “We’re both here, so what’s got you all excited?”

James smiled and lifted his textbook to reveal a large envelope underneath. He got to his feet and handed it to Missouri.

“What’s this?” Missouri asked.

“Just look, Mom,” James said.

Missouri turned the envelope and read the return address. Her mouth dropped open and she quickly peeled back the already opened flap and pulled out the sheets of paper inside. For a moment there was silence as she read, and then she made a high-pitched sound of excitement and jumped up and down. “You did it!” she said gleefully.

“I did,” James said, clearly embarrassed.

Missouri threw her arms around him, and though James had seven inches on her, and he was well built with muscle from his football career in high school, she managed to lift him a clear inch off the ground.

Sam laughed as he watched them. He had a feeling he knew what the celebration was for; he just didn’t know which one it was. James had been waiting for college letters for weeks, and unless Sam was much mistaken, he’d just got one.

Missouri released James and wiped at her eyes.

“Well?” Sam said. “Do I get to know what’s going on?”

“You tell him, James,” Missouri prompted. “It’s yours to tell.”

“I got into UC Berkeley,” James said.

“That’s fantastic!” Sam said, his face splitting into a wide smile. “Well done.” He walked forward
and shook James hand and then pulled him into a hug. James slapped his back and then, when he pulled back, he said, “I’m studying criminal justice.”

Sam gaped at him. “Law?”

James rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. I guess the idea took.”

Sam couldn’t believe it. What felt like a lifetime ago, he and James had rode the Ferris wheel and they’d discussed ways to help the world. James had said then, after discussion of Sam’s former dreams, that he would like to be a lawyer, but he’d only been twelve. They’d never discussed it since and Sam had thought James would have surely forgotten. The fact he still wanted to pursue it, six years later, was incredible to Sam.

“That’s…” Sam was lost for words.

“I want to help people,” James said earnestly.

“And you will,” Missouri said tearfully. “You’re going to be amazing.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“You are,” Sam said sincerely. “Really, James, I’m so proud of you.”

James smiled abashedly. “Thanks, Sam.” He suddenly grinned. “Does this mean I get a party?”

Missouri nodded. “If Sam doesn’t mind, you can party at his house.”

“Sam doesn’t mind,” he said. “Just give me warning so I can clear out the breakables.”

“Graduation?” James asked.

Sam nodded, and then another idea occurred to him. “When is graduation?”

“The third week in May. You’re going to be there, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Sam agreed. “And there’s something else I want to do for you if it’s okay with your mom.”

“My boy just got into Berkeley,” Missouri said. “Anything is okay.”

Sam laughed and shook his head. “How about you come to the Atlantic Show with me in New York after graduation?”

“Really?” James asked, his eyes widening.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Led Zeppelin is going to be there.”

In many ways James’ taste in music was similar to Dean’s, and Sam could tell from the glint in his wide eyes that he wanted to go. He turned to his mother. “What do you think, Mom?”

Missouri hesitated for a moment then laughed. “I think it sounds like a fine idea.”

James pumped a fist in the air. “Yeah!”

Sam looked at Missouri, wiping her eyes with a corner of her apron, and he smiled. He was so proud of James, and he could only imagine how it must feel for her. This was an amazing thing. James had an acceptance letter to a great college, and he had an amazing future ahead of him. After
all her care over the years, the times after Richard’s death, when she had to be mother and father to him, he had succeeded to this degree.

Sam looked from her face to James’ and just let himself feel the moment, knowing his place in their small family.

xXx

Sam pulled the car to a stop in a parking space outside Davidson House, the dorm James was going to be living in, and he looked up at the high façade and breathed out in a sigh. He remembered his first year at Stanford, when he’d still been living in a dorm, and he remember the joys and challenges of it. It was strange to think that they were James’ to experience now. Sometimes Sam forgot he was a man and wanted to protect him.

Missouri was struggling with the idea of James leaving even more. She was making a good show of excitement for the next stage of his life, but when they were alone, she confided in Sam that she wasn’t dealing with it as well as James thought. Her baby was going into the world and she was going to be left behind.

James himself was so excited that it sometimes was hard to get sense out of him. Not only was he leaving home, experiencing independence for the first time, he was beginning a journey that would lead him to a career that he longed for. He was prepared to put in the hard work for the next seven years to get on the ladder that would lead him to success. Sam remembered the excitement he’d felt when he’d been in James’ position, and almost he envied him for it. James was starting something special today.

He climbed out of his car behind Missouri’s and waited for her and James to get out. Missouri was smiling widely for her son, but Sam could see in her eyes that it was a strain. As proud as she was, she didn’t want to let him go.

James, on the other hand, practically bounced to Sam, his eyes alight with excitement. “I need to go in and get my key.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “I’ll start unloading.”

“Thanks, Sam. Mom, you coming?”

Missouri nodded and they walked up the steps and into the lobby, leaving Sam to go to the trunk and unload James’ bags. He wasn’t carrying as much as Missouri as he had the false bottom in the trunk under which his weapons sat. Between them, they had what James needed though, and under his bags Sam had stashed his birthday gift: one of the new Macintosh laptops that had just become available. Missouri was going to say it was too extravagant, but Sam thought James deserved it. He’d earned it with his hard work to get there.

James and Missouri came out again, and in James’ hand was a key on a large fob. “I’m on the third floor,” he said.

Sam nodded and handed him one of the bags while he lifted the laptop in its plain cardboard box into his arms. “Let’s go.”

Each laden with James’ belongings, they went into the building and up the stairs to the third floor. The air was full of excited voices and chatter. Sam saw that some of the parents they passed bore the same looks of forced happiness as Missouri, though their eyes belied the truth. Others were making no attempt to hide how upset they were, and more than a few students were comforting
parents at the moment of separation.

When they came to James’ room, they went in and Sam set down the box on one of the desks against the windowed wall. He looked around and said, “Looks like you’re first in, James. You get your pick of the beds.”

James grinned as he dumped his bag on the bed furthest from the door, opposite the desk Sam had set the laptop on. “Mine.”

“Do you want me to help you unpack?” Missouri asked, hesitating with her hand on the bag she’d set down beside him.

“Nah. I’ll get it later,” James said. “I’ve got time. I was thinking we could go out for lunch.”

Missouri looked pleased. “I’d like that.”

Sam nodded and said, “You’ll have to find somewhere good though, James. This is your town now.”

“Yeah,” James said in a wondering tone. “I guess it is. I’ll ask one of the sophomores’ where’s good.”

“I’ll get the rest of your stuff,” Sam said, leaving mother and son alone a moment.

He went down to the car and took a breath. This was turning out to be harder than he’d thought even. James was settling so fast, which was great for him, but hard for them to see him shed his life with them so easily. He took the last two bags from his trunk and carried it up the stairs. When he got to the room, he hesitated outside, hearing soft voices inside. When he heard someone clearing their throat and a weak laugh, he went in and said, “That’s your lot.”

“Thanks, Sam,” James said. “Really.”

Sam smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Missouri clapped her hands together. “Now, are we eating?”

“We are,” James said. “Let’s go.”

They walked out of the room, chatting about what to get, leaving Sam alone a moment. He looked around the room and tried to settle in his mind that this was going to be James’ home for the next year. He wouldn’t be close, but he would hopefully be happy.

He closed the door behind him and thought of the short note he’d left in the box for James’ laptop. It wasn’t remotely mushy. It was five simple words.

*Kick it in the ass.*
Chapter Twenty-Nine

For the first time in his life, Sam had left America.

He and Jessica had talked about visiting Europe on a shoestring budget after they’d graduated college, but, of course, it had never happened. Jessica had died before they’d had a chance to go anywhere. Now Sam was doing it alone, and once again, he was there to see history happen. He was in Berlin, and in two days, the wall would come down. It would be the biggest piece of world history Sam had seen so far, and he was filled with anticipation for it.

He’d written a paper on The Berlin Wall in middle school, and he’d wished at the time that he’d been old enough to remember it. Now he was living it. In two days he was going to witness the wall coming down and the freedom of peoples that had been separated by the heavily guarded wall for nearly thirty years. Families were going to be reunited and the two countries would reunify and change. Sam could barely believe he was going to see it, perhaps even find a part in it.

He still had two days to fill before it would happen though, so he was taking time to enjoy the sights of West Berlin. He had done a guided tour of the city the day before, and today he was going to visit the Charlottenburg Palace.

Armed with his camera and German phrase book, Sam left his hotel and walked left along the Kurfürstendamm to the Gedächtniskirche. It fascinated him, though he had seen it many times now. It was nicknamed the lipstick and powder box as that was what it was shaped like. It had once been an impressive church called the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church and had been a wonder of architecture. When the allied forces had bombed Berlin in the Second World War, though, it had been partially destroyed. New buildings had been added to it, but the original shape was still there, resembling a hollow tooth, as it had been dubbed by Berliners. It fascinated Sam, and he looked his fill once again before he flagged a taxi to take him on.

A white car pulled up in front of him and Sam climbed in. The cabbie was an older man with a shock of white hair and moustache. “Wo möchten Sie hin?”

Sam could tell it was a question by the way he raised his eyebrows expectantly at the end, but otherwise he was clueless of what the man had said. He flipped the pages of his phrase book, panicking, and found nothing. He looked hopefully at the cabbie and said, “Schloss Charlottenburg?”

“Ahh, ja,” the man said, and Sam relaxed. He knew a yes when he heard it.

He sat back in his seat and waited for them to depart. The taxi pulled into the passing traffic at breakneck speed and turned a corner.

Sam appreciated the fact that he had been raised with John and Dean’s wild driving styles, as the driver seemed to be of the same school of thought—get there fast and damn the other cars on the road. He watched the buildings whip past for ten minutes before they slammed to a halt and the driver said, “Da drüben liegt das Schloss,” as he pointed out of the window.

Sam peered out and tried to see through the trees marking the edge of the sidewalk, spotting the
The shape of a large building. He checked the fare on the meter and counted out Deutsche Marks. He handed them over and said, “Danke,” tentatively.

The man grinned over his shoulder at him and said, “You’re welcome, American.”

Sam’s mouth dropped open. “You speak English?”

“Of course. It is my small entertainment to see Americans squirm though.” He laughed. “Enjoy the palace.”

Sam sighed as he climbed out of the cab, wishing he’d given less of a tip.

He saw the arched entrance to the palace, and he followed a young couple with backpacks toward the booth. They weren’t speaking English, but Sam had no idea what their language was. When they got to the ticket booth, though, they spoke to the clerk in perfect, if heavily accented, English. Relieved, Sam queued behind them and waited his turn to pay the admission.

There was a young woman behind the counter and she smiled brightly at Sam as he stepped up. “Hallo. Willkommen im Schloss Charlottenburg.”

“Hi,” Sam said awkwardly. “Can I have admission for one please?”

“Of course,” she said, moving into English. She told him the fee and Sam counted it out in marks for her. When he handed it over, she exchanged it for a guide book which, thankfully, was in English. Sam thanked her and walked along the long drive towards the palace entrance which was marked with red ropes.

As he walked he took in the view, stopping to snap pictures of the magnificent building. The cream colored stone façade was evenly separated with high windows, and the flat roof was topped with a large dome of green copper that made Sam think of the Statue of Liberty. He had never seen anything like it in life. He’d seen pictures of palaces in books, but he’d never had a chance to visit one. It was more impressive in life than any picture he’d ever seen. The drive was lined with flowers beds that still bore color despite the lateness of the year. There were fountains that, though less impressive than the Bellagio fountains that Sam had seen, were striking.

Sam walked along the drive to the entrance where a man in a red uniform greeted him in German and gestured him inside with a wave of the arm. Sam stepped onto the parquet floor and looked around. The high ceilings were decorated with golden gilt and rose paint, and there was a large crystal chandelier hanging down. The open doors that led from the hall were also decorated with gold gilt, and at each stop a uniformed person stood guard. Sam thought they were discreet security.

He went left and into a vast, sparsely furnished room whose ceiling was a beautiful fresco. Sam opened his guide book and saw this was the ballroom. People were milling around, taking pictures of the decorations on the walls and the frescoed ceilings. Sam took some pictures himself, thinking Missouri would like to see them when he was home. He would add them to the albums he’d kept of the things he’d seen in case Dean was ever interested in what he’d done.

The next room Sam came to had walls lined with art. Sam stopped and just looked around, trying to take it all in. He spotted a painting on the far wall that seemed familiar to him, and he walked forward to examine it. Beneath the painting was a brass plate that declared it as the ‘Pilgerfahrt nach Kythira’ which he was sure he’d never heard of. He was sure he recognized it though, and he wondered what its English name was. He checked the guide book and found pages dedicated to the art work. The was a small blurb beneath a photograph of the painting that said it was called the
Pilgrimage to Cythera a second depiction of the Embarkation for Cythera by Jean-Antoine Watteau. That was the painting Sam knew. He had studied Watteau in his art history course at Stanford. The fact he’d found one of his pieces here in Berlin made Sam smile. He took pictures, wishing there was someone he could share the moment with, someone he could tell of the connection he’d found in this life to his old one.

When he’d looked his fill, he moved along to the next paintings, admiring them each in turn, and then went back to the hall. He scaled the grand staircase and went along another gilt-laden hall to double doors at the end that led into a bedroom. It said in the guide book that it had been the bedroom of the palace’s original occupant, Sophia Charlotte of Hanover, the Prussian Queen Consort. It had been restored to how it would have looked when she resided there, and Sam looked around, seeing the silver and ivory hair combs on the large dressing table and the chamber pot peeking from under the bed. He walked to the window that looked out onto the rear of the palace and saw the seemingly unending gardens. There were flowerbeds and elaborate topiary, and Sam watched people enjoying around them for a moment before turning back to the room. He snapped pictures of the bed and dressing table and then went back to the door, thinking to explore the gardens next.

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Sam spent longer at the palace that he’d thought he would, so by the time he left, it was long past lunchtime. The area around the palace was thriving with people and businesses, and he found a restaurant with a chalkboard menu on the wall. He took a seat and tried to make sense of the menu with the help of his phrase book. He thought he had mastered it when a woman in an apron came to him with a smile of greeting.

“Uh… hähnchensalat belegtes Brot… und bier,” Sam said awkwardly.

“Chicken salad sandwich and beer,” she said cheerfully in English. “Which beer would you like?”

Sam had no idea what was good or even on offer, so he said, “Whatever you recommend.”

She surveyed him a moment. “I think you’d like Weizenbock. How thirsty are you?”

“Very,” Sam said. He hadn’t drunk anything since breakfast.

“Super,” she said. “I’ll bring that to you.”

She walked away, and Sam breathed a sigh of relief. He’d known coming into this trip that his lack of knowledge of the German language was going to be an issue, and he was nervous when trying to speak it. The staff at his hotel spoke English, but some of the people he’d met hadn’t or, like the cabbie, they pretended not to so that they would have a chance to see him squirm; Sam wasn’t sure which.

He looked around the café and saw many people enjoying a late lunch. There were some he was sure were tourists, too, and others that looked local—they seemed more comfortable there and were lacking the backpacks and cameras of the people like Sam.

The waitress came back to him with a glass of beer so large that Sam did a double take. When he’d said he was thirsty, he hadn’t realized that she was going to bring him enough for two. It had to hold a quart.

“Here you go,” she said. “Enjoy.”

Sam thanked her and awkwardly picked up the glass to drink. The beer was strong but good, and
Sam took two deep swigs, feeling it soothe his dry throat. He set it down and snapped a picture of it. Next time Dean gave him crap for his lack of capacity for drink, Sam would show him this.

His sandwich came and Sam ate hungrily. It was good, and he was disappointed to finish, though it had been as oversized as the beer.

He sat back, replete, and eyed his beer. There was more left than had been drunk; he wasn’t walking out of there an American unable to finish his drink, but neither was he going to chug it. He sipped it slowly, enjoying the friendly atmosphere of the restaurant.

When he was done, he paid and left into the cool air. He would have liked to walk back to the hotel to work off his large lunch as it wasn’t too cold and his coat was good, but he had forgotten his map in his room. Instead he hailed a cab and ventured the address in English. The man driving didn’t say anything to indicate he spoke English, but he drove away from the sidewalk without question and Sam recognized places from the outbound journey as they passed along the streets. They pulled up in front of Sam’s hotel and he paid the fare and went to door. He stopped and checked the front desk, looking for a specific staff member that he’d seen earlier in the day that he wanted to talk to. The young man was on the phone and Sam waited in front of him to finish.

“Hallo,” he said. “How can I help you?”

“I was wondering if you knew any good nightclubs in the area,” Sam said.

The man nodded eagerly. “Of course! You like to dance?”

“I like to try,” Sam said evasively. In truth, he just wanted another experience of the world. He’d heard Berlin nightclubs had a well-deserved reputation of being good.

“You want Neues Schauspielhaus,” he said, then, seeing Sam’s blank look, he went on. “The New Theatre. It’s not new anymore, it’s very old, but they have made a club there called Metropol and it is very good. I go there.”

“Where is it?” Sam asked.

“I will show you,” the man said helpfully. For a moment Sam though he meant that he was going to take Sam there now, and he wondered what the boss would make of that, but he merely took a map from a drawer and marked a spot on it in pen. “Here. It is not far. You can walk.”

“Thanks,” Sam said, taking the map.

“Maybe I will see you there,” he said. “I like to party.”

“Maybe,” Sam said with a smile.

He tapped the map on the desk then raised a hand in farewell to the man and walked to the elevators. He rode up with a family of four that were chattering in German, and Sam smiled to himself. Unless they were leaving soon, they were going to be there for the fall of the wall, too. Their children would see freedom and history happen. It would be a heady experience for them, just as Sam knew it would be for him.

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That night, Sam dressed in what he hoped was a timeless leather jacket and white t-shirt over jeans. He had seen various fashions during his visit, but he hadn’t wanted to experiment with them. The late eighties were not his usual style, and though he’d adapted over the years to his new time, he
could find nothing fashionable he wanted to wear in this time.

He tucked his wallet into his pocket, picked up his map, and ran a hand through his hair before leaving his room and making his way down to the lobby. The young man he’d spoken to at the desk before was absent now, and Sam wondered if he would see him at the club.

He left the hotel and checked the map for the direction to travel in. The club was marked a few blocks away to the north, so Sam set off along the street, seeing other people dressed for a night on the town and others obviously heading home from a day at work.

He had wondered if the club was going to be easy to find; he had imagined a small and secretive place with a door barely marked with the name. He couldn’t have been more wrong. It was clear at once why it was called The New Theatre, as that was what it had obviously been at some point in the distant past. It was a large and imposing building made of grey brick with square towers at each side. On the second story carvings of naked people and columns flanked the doors. Sam could imagine it as it had once been in its glory days, and it was a little sad to see it as it was now.

Spoiling the idea of grandeur were the people outside. Women in various states of undress shivered under thin jackets and men dressed in everything from football shirts to sports coats.

Sam joined the queue and waited for his turn to enter. He paid the admission and went inside. The music, which had been quietly audible outside the doors, rushed over him as he entered the lobby, growing loud enough to pound Sam’s eardrums as he passed into the main club area.

His first thought was that he was maybe getting too old for things like this. He was thirty-eight now, and surely his clubbing days should be behind him. He may not look his age, or physically feel it, but mentally there were stark differences between the man he was now now and the man that had been left in 1978. He was there though, and he thought he was going to enjoy the experience if nothing else.

The dancefloor took up the middle of the large room, and it was bigger than Sam had ever seen. There were hundreds of people moving to the fast music. Above them were pulsing lights that made teeth seem brighter and the clothes of people who had chosen to wear white glowed. Around the dance floor were blinking neon lights in all colors, giving the closest dancers ghostly complexions. The bar wound around two walls, and the people that weren’t dancing were congregated there. Shots of what looked like tequila were being thrown back and the bar was also being utilized for other activities. As Sam watched, a girl and man snorted a line of white powder from the bar top. Sam wasn’t unfamiliar with the darker parts of the world, but he’d not seen it so open before. In the clubs he’d visited back home, cocaine was normally imbibed in the bathrooms.

Rather than detracting from the experience, though, it enhanced it for Sam. This wasn’t something he’d seen before and it was unlikely he would again. His concerns for his age forgotten, Sam made his way to the bar and waited for a bartender to reach him. When a man dressed from head to toe in black leather came to serve him, he asked for a shot of tequila and a beer.

The man nodded and came back a moment later with his drinks and a salt shaker. He slid over a napkin with a wedge of lemon on it and held out a hand. Sam paid him and grinned. If it was worth doing, he thought, it was worth doing well. He licked his inner wrist and sprinkled salt there then picked up the shot. He licked the salt from his wrist and then knocked back the shot. While still reacting to the raw taste of the tequila, he picked up the lemon and bit into it, filling his mouth with the sharp taste of his first tequila slammer since Stanford. He followed it with a swig of beer and then caught the attention of the bartender again. He ordered another tequila and followed the slammer routine again. Deciding that three was a good number, he ordered one more and knocked it back.
Grinning, he turned away from the bar and made his way over the edge of the dance floor, watching the people throw themselves around to the music. The techno music’s fast beat pounded against his chest, but rather than agitating him, Sam enjoyed it. He wondered what James would make of it. He’d finished his first year at Berkeley now and his music taste, if what Sam heard from his bedroom over the summer was anything to go by, had changed, but he didn’t think he’d discovered German dance yet. He would surely appreciate the atmosphere of the place though. It was a shame he couldn’t come, too. He was just starting his sophomore year though, and there was no way he could have missed a week of classes, no matter what the historical value of the moment.

A woman extricated herself from the dancers and came over to Sam. She was statuesque, almost reaching Sam’s height with her towering heels, and her long legs were encased in sheer tights that seemed to give her a look of respectability, despite the top she wore that exposed more than it covered.

"Tanz mit mir," she said breathlessly, her face sheened with sweat.

Sam raised his hands. “Sorry. I don’t speak German.”

“Dance with me,” she said with a heavy German accent.

“I can’t dance.” At least he couldn’t dance like this.

“Everyone can dance if they can hear the music,” she said, tugging on his arm. “You have to dance with me. All the men here are too small and you are tall.”

Sam thought that if height was a limit to her dance partners, she should have reconsidered the shoes.

“Please,” she ploed, stepping back towards the dancers.

Sam looked at the people dancing in a way he’d never done before, moved by the pulsing music, and he shrugged. She said if he could hear, he could dance, and he could definitely hear. He would try at least.

He nodded and she beamed at him.

“Come with me, American. We’re going to party.”

Sam allowed her to lead him onto the dance floor, thinking that whatever happened next would be a story to tell at least.
Sam had saved the last day for the most important activities of his trip, and he felt more somber that morning than he had at any other point of his time in Germany.

He was going to cross the wall and go into the East, and he was aware of the importance of the moment. It was the last day the wall would signify an impenetrable barrier. The next day the checkpoints would be open and people would be crossing No Man’s Land to enter the West. Berlin would be in celebration, but for the next fifteen hours they would remain divided.

He took a taxi to the border, and after paying and climbing out, he just took a moment to appreciate what he was seeing. The wall, which he’d had only had glimpses of while in the city, was unobstructed here. He was able to see the graffiti that covered it, pictures and words in German and English. Sam walked closer and examined the words taking them in and the feeling behind them.

*There is life beyond the wall.*

*When you start treating people like people, they become people.*

*When the power of love is greater than the love of power, the world will know peace.*

Sam just stared at them, swallowing down the lump in his throat.

There were many more messages in German that he couldn’t read, but he was sure they bore messages of the same poignancy. This wall was on the side of freedom. He wondered what people would say in the East.

He took pictures of the graffiti, feeling self-conscious. He wasn’t sure he should. Would the people now resent him for taking pictures of the shameful wall that separated them from the East or would they want their story told, to share it with the world at every opportunity in hopes of making a difference? There would be a difference soon, but Sam was the only one that knew that. All the people around him knew was that there was a desperately slow thawing of the Cold War happening. They couldn’t know how the day would end.

Sam walked away from the wall, past the checkpoint to the museum that was there.

The Checkpoint Charlie Museum was a wonder. Sam knew it had been born of the mission of a great man called Dr. Rainer Hildebrandt. Though he had died before Sam left for 1978, he was alive now, and Sam was hoping to get a glimpse of the remarkable man in the museum.

The doctor had come to the wall at the famous Checkpoint Charlie to peacefully protest against the wall, but he had done so much more than witness it. He became a cataloger and historian of the struggle of the Easterners to escape, and he had even lent assistance to them and supported the people that smuggled them out. He was a member of The Kampfgruppe gegen Unmenschlichkeit — the resistance that was funded in part by the CIA. His efforts had created the Checkpoint Charlie Museum where the evidence of the Easterners’ struggles to be free were exhibited. Sam had been looking forward to visiting it, though it was with trepidation that he walked to the door and entered.
He paid his admission and thanked the older woman behind the counter before entering the main museum. The first thing he noticed was the sheer wealth of things there. At the front was a copy of the sign Sam had seen at the checkpoint that declared the border of the American sector, a simple enough message that carried more weight that its words allowed. Sam circled it and saw a display of border crossing stories in German with English translations below. Sam read some of them with wonder. The things people had done were incredible.

There was a witness account of someone that had seen a man shot as he tried to cross No Man’s Land. Though he was within feet of the Western side, the guards had been forbidden to move to help him as it would have been declared a threat, and they would have been shot by the Eastern guards. The man had bled out in front of them.

Sam stared in shock at the account, trying to imagine what that had felt like. He had seen people die, he had lost people because he hadn’t been able to save them, but he couldn’t imagine how it must feel to watch a person bleed out slowly and not be able to even try to do anything for them. When Mary, Jess and Dean had been killed, it had been fast. He could have done nothing to save them, though the memories of his inaction still haunted his dreams. How did the soldiers cope with that?

He wiped at his eyes and then started as someone cleared his throat beside him. He looked and saw the man whose picture he had seen when studying the Wall: Dr. Rainer Hildebrandt. It took Sam a moment to cover his shock and close his mouth.

The doctor was younger than the picture Sam had seen of him, but his hair was already white, though his moustache was peppered with black still.

“It’s hard to read, isn’t it?” he said in English.

Sam nodded. “Very hard.”

“Ah, an American. My friends and I owe a debt to your countrymen.”

Sam knew he was referring to the assistance the CIA gave the resistance and the fact Ronald Raegan had added to the pressure against Gorbachev to bring down the wall.

He held out his hand and said, “Rainer Hildebrandt.”

“Sam Winchester.” It felt important that Sam give his real name to this incredible man.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sam Winchester. What brings you to Berlin?”

“I’m on vacation,” Sam said.

“It’s a good place to visit,” he said. “Especially now. Things are changing for us.”

Sam nodded, knowing that he was referring to the slow political machinations that, unknown to Dr Hildebrandt, would bring the wall down that day.

“What do you think of our city?” he asked.

“I love it,” Sam said. “I have seen some incredible things here.”

“Not all incredible things are good things. You have found that here, haven’t you?”

“I have,” Sam said.
“Are you going to the East?”

“Later today,” Sam said.

“Good. It is important that people see it. Take my advice, Sam Winchester, look with both your heart and mind when you’re there. See and recognize their struggle and remember it. The East must not be forgotten.”

“I will,” Sam said solemnly.

“Good.” He nodded to himself. “I will let you explore our museum some more. If you have questions, find me. I have many stories to tell.”

“I’m sure you do,” Sam said. “Thank you.”

The doctor walked away, and Sam stared unseeingly at the display in front of him again, not quite believing he’d had a conversation with Dr. Hildebrandt himself.

Someone else came to read the display, and Sam moved aside to allow them an unobstructed view. He walked toward the most striking feature of the museum: a Volkswagen car. Frowning, Sam went to take a closer look, and noted the hidden compartment beyond the trunk. It was so small it was impossible to imagine what it would be used for. Sam read the display plaque and his mouth dropped open. There was a photograph of someone inside the compartment. They were torqued into an impossible position to fit inside that must have been agonizing after even a few seconds. Sam could see, though, that if the hatch was closed, it would have been difficult to see it existed at all. He tried to imagine someone squeezing themselves inside long enough to cross No Man’s Land and found he couldn’t. The confinement and pain must have been unbearable.

The theme of contortionism as a form of escape was repeated with a loudspeaker that had been shelled. The space inside was little bigger than the compartment in the car, and once again Sam wondered at the desperation of the people that had been driven to those kinds of escape plans. There was a miniature submarine that a plaque explained had been used to tow an escapee across the Baltic Sea, and pictures of tunnels that had been excavated for escape. The most successful tunnel had enabled fifty-seven people to escape over the course of two evenings in October 1964. It must have been terrifying for them.

Sam’s life had been harder than most, but he had never felt the desperation these people must have felt for freedom. It was beyond imagining.

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After Sam left the museum, he moved onto the part of his trip that had filled him with the most trepidation: crossing the border.

He went to the small building with its formal sign declaring it as the Allied Checkpoint Charlie. The doors were flanked by armed men that watched Sam carefully as he passed them and went in. There were more soldiers inside, and a uniformed man sitting behind a high counter, stamping the passport of a couple in front of him.

Sam waited for them to finish and then walked forward.

“Hello,” Sam said. “I want to cross the border into the East.”

The guard looked him up and down. “Why do you want to go there?”
“I just do,” Sam said, not wanting to defend himself to this man.

“You need a visa.”

“Can I get one here?”

“You can.” The guard pushed aside the folder he’d been reading from and picked up a sheet of paper. “You need to fill this out.”

Sam took the paper and a pen that was attached to the counter with a thin chain and filled in his details.

“I need your passport,” the guard told Sam.

Sam handed it over and watched as the man examined it and then read over the form Sam had filled in. He nodded once and then stamped Sam’s passport roughly with a black rubber stamp.

“You can go into East Berlin only,” the guard said. “You cannot cross the border into the rest of the country. You must declare that you will in no way assist or enable illegal crossings upon your return.”

“I won’t,” Sam said.

The guard handed back his passport and said, “You can go,” shortly.

Sam thanked him and went outside. The closer he got to the actual border, the greater the military presence was. There was a car in front of them, and soldiers were gesturing the two occupants out and carefully comparing their faces to the photographs in their passports.

Another soldier saw Sam waiting and he waved him forward. Sam went to him and handed over his passport. The man shouldered his AK47 and opened the passport. He checked the stamp and then looked back and forth from the picture to Sam. Sam kept his expression neutral and waited in silence. He was intimidated by the soldier’s expression that told him in no uncertain terms that, if Sam gave him cause, he would shoot him without a second’s hesitation.

Eventually, the solider handed him back his passport and said, “You can go through.” He went to the barrier and pressed a button that raised it. Sam stepped through it onto No Man’s Land. It was a bare stretch of concrete and Sam walked forward at a steady pace, wanting to give the guards on each side no reason to shoot him. He felt very vulnerable. There was a reason No Man’s Land was also called The Death Strip after all.

He felt only a little less vulnerable when he reached the eastern barrier. There his passport was checked again by a grey uniformed man in a long coat and handed back to him. The barrier was raised, and Sam walked into East Germany.

His immediate instinct was to get as far from the border as possible, away from the heavily armed men that intimidated him even more than the ones on the West had. He didn’t want to run and draw suspicion though, so he stuck to a brisk pace.

He was so occupied with getting away that he didn’t take in his surroundings until he was halfway down a street. Only then did he stop and look around. His first thought was that everything was grey. The buildings, square structures of straight lines and no real architecture, were made of grey brick. The roads and sidewalks were a darker shade. Even the people he saw seemed colorless. Their clothes were drab and dark, lacking in any individuality. Sam felt out of place in his jeans and leather jacket. They seemed to broadcast Western living in a place that so obviously lacked the
same freedoms.

The air felt different too. It had a taint to it that Sam thought came from the thick exhaust of the infamous small Trabants. There were nowhere near the number of cars on the roads here that Sam had seen in the West, and they all seemed to be the small plastic bodied Trabbis.

It was a grim place, and Sam wondered if he had done the right thing coming. He quickly realized he had. This was what Dr. Hildebrandt had meant. It was important that he saw it. He needed to see their struggle and remember it. He would look with his heart and mind now, let himself feel what he was seeing and understand what it meant for the people whose life this was.

He carried on walking, passing people on the street. He smiled at the ones that caught his eyes, but many walked with their heads down, as if the burden of their lives weighed on them even now. Sam wished he could tell them it was almost over, but he couldn’t. Who would even believe him? He concentrated on the fact it was almost over. It was a matter of hours before the checkpoints would be opened.

He came to a small store with a grey awning and went inside. The difference between the stores he’d visited in the West and here were stark. In the West the shelves were full, bursting with things to buy. Here the shelves were almost empty. A few scattered cans of food and boxes of supplies were spread out, as if they wanted to make it look like more. Sam wondered how people could live like this. How did you get by when this was all the food available to you? Even if he had seen something he’d wanted to buy, he wouldn’t. How could he deny a person here a single piece of the little available here? He smiled at the storekeeper, receiving a confused look in return, and left.

He walked deeper in this side of the city, searching for something familiar from his privileged life, and found nothing. There were no parks or benches to sit on and pass the time. He couldn’t stop comparing it to the West. How was it possible that less than thirty minutes’ drive away was the Charlottenburg Palace? The opulence and magnificence there were as different as it was possible to be from where he was now. The wall was more than a physical barrier; it represented a whole galaxy between two different worlds separated by only a matter of a hundred meters of No Man’s Land.

The oppressive air, the sadness, the desperate lives of the people that lived there, seemed to press in on Sam, and he couldn’t bear it any longer. Perhaps he hadn’t seen enough to satisfy Dr. Hildebrandt, or perhaps this was his message, but he knew he had to leave. He turned on his heel and started walking, his pace quickening until he was within sight of the border again. It was then that he stopped dead and looked at the wall in front of him.

On the West he had stopped and taken pictures of the graffiti on the wall, and he’d wondered what the people on the East had to say. The answer became clear at once. They said nothing. They surely had even more to say than the Westerners, but they couldn’t. They didn’t have that freedom. The wall was an expanse of unmarked grey concrete, and Sam felt that was a perfect summing up of the difference between the two sides of the city.

The West was colorful freedom and the East was grey oppression.

xXx

That evening, Sam left the hotel and went to a bar near Checkpoint Charlie to wait for the announcement to come and for history to happen in Berlin.

Unable to understand the German news programs, he didn’t know exactly what had been said, but whatever it was it was enough to excite the people Sam saw on his way to the bar, and when he
arrived, he saw a television had been set on the end of the bar and was showing what looked like a
German drama. People were talking loud enough to drown out the music playing, and Sam wished
he could understand them. He felt the atmosphere of anticipation though. He ordered a beer and sat
at the bar, close enough to see the television, waiting for the moment it would happen.

Half an hour passed before the show ended and after a few commercials, a blue globe rolled on
screen and the word Tagesschau. A man was shown seated at a news reader’s desk, and the
barman shouted, “Sei ruhig!”

The noise died and every eye in the place turned to the screen. The barman turned up the volume
and Sam listened to the incomprehensible voice make its announcement with a serious tone that
didn’t hide the blazing light of triumph in his eyes.

“*Der neunte November ist ein historischer Tag. Der DDR hat angekündigt, dass ihre Grenzen ab
sofort für jedermann offen sind. Die Grenzübergänge sind alle geöffnet.*”

The sound in the bar started with gasps and confused murmurs and then swelled as people shouted
and cried with shock and joy. Sam didn’t understand a word of the news report, but he knew what
was happening, and when people began to move to the door, speeding up as they went and causing
a bottleneck as everyone tried to get outside, he followed.

He burst outside into the cold night air and followed the crowd to the checkpoint. The soldiers
were standing in a line, watching the crowd approach with their AK47s held ready. They showed
no sign of wanting to shoot though, and the people showed no fear of them. There was a babble of
German as people spoke to the soldiers, surely explaining what had happened, and they gestured
wildly at the closed barrier.

One of the soldiers, the senior officer if the insignia on his shoulders was any indication, turned
and walked into the small checkpoint building while the others stood guard.

The crowd was swelling by the moment, and even through the noise around them, Sam could hear
people shouting across from them in the East. It was an unexpected sound, as Sam would have
imagined they were too beaten down to raise their voices to authority, but perhaps the promise of
freedom had empowered them.

The sound swelled around Sam and he looked from face to face, trying to understand how they felt.
He was filled with excitement at the thought of what was coming for these people, and he was an
outsider, there to witness it. He wondered how it felt to live it as they were.

Words began to clear among the noise, a shout that was joined by others until the crowd was
chanting it. “Tor auf! Tor auf!”

Sam thought he could hear it being called back to them from the East. More and more people
came, and Sam felt people crushing in around him. A man who looked a little older than Sam stood
on his foot and apologized in German, one of the few words Sam knew.

“It’s fine,” Sam said automatically in English.

“An American!” the man said excitedly. “You live here?”

“I’m on vacation,” Sam said.

“You chose the right time to come,” the man said, holding out a hand to Sam. “Dieter Schulz.”

They shook hands. “Sam Taylor.”
“I am glad you’re here, Sam Taylor,” Dieter said, though he gave no explanation of why exactly he was.

“Do you know people on the East?” Sam asked.

“My aunt, uncle and cousins,” he said. “My mother and father came West before they closed the border, but my aunt and uncle were not so lucky. I have not seen them since I was a child.”

“You will soon.”

Dieter held his hand to his chest. “I hope so. We have not heard from them in a long time.”

Sam didn’t know what to say. He knew what it was to be separated from family, but he at least knew they were okay. He knew basically what was happening to them. He couldn’t imagine how it felt to be apart from the people you loved while not even knowing if they were alive or not.

The shouts of “Tor auf!” grew louder as more and more people arrived, and Sam looked over the heads around him for a sign that the barriers were being lifted. He saw people at the wall, climbing on top of it, and he squeezed through the crowd towards them. He turned back and saw Dieter behind him, sporting a wide grin.

“Are we climbing?” he asked happily.

Sam knew the soldiers weren’t going to open fire. The fall of the wall was a bloodless revolution. He wanted to see it happen properly. “Why not?” he asked.

Dieter laughed. “Yes, why not?”

The wall was too high for Sam to reach without help, and Dieter, who was shorter than Sam by five inches, was going to have more trouble. Sam created a cradle with his hands and bent for Dieter to step into it. With a wide smile, he did, and Sam straightened, lifting Dieter so he could get a grip on the wall. The people that were already up there reached for him and hauled him up.

When Dieter was securely up and leaning over to gesture Sam up, Sam bent his knees and then jumped, getting a handhold on the edge of the wall. He dragged himself up, assisted by the Dieter and other people. He rolled onto the wide wall and got to his feet.

The view from his new vantage point was incredible. He could see the crowds that had formed on the West, and across the space between them, the crowds on the East, too. They were huge; a mass of people chanting and pushing forward. Sam knew it was only a matter of time until the soldiers abandoned their efforts to hold people back. Soon they would be free.

Dieter was jumping up and down with the people around them, chanting the words Sam didn’t understand but recognized as a command, and Sam joined him. He jumped and shouted and let himself feel the incredible moment.

xXx

When it happened, it happened so quickly Sam didn’t see it coming. One moment the people on the East were gathered at the barrier, pushing to be free, and the next the barrier was up and they were surging forward into No Man’s Land. It was an incredible sight. Hundreds fleeing forward, racing towards the West where the barriers had been lifted. They cried and cheered as they fled the world of grey and came into color.

They were met with open arms and tears. People Sam was almost sure were strangers were
embracing like long lost lovers and clinging to each other. Some people had suitcases, others were still in nightclothes. Sam took out his camera and snapped photos of them. Dieter saw what he was doing and he grabbed it from Sam and held it out to one of the other people on the wall. He said something in German and then threw his arm around Sam. Understanding, Sam smiled as the camera flashed and the photo was taken. He took back the camera and took a photo of the people around him and then the people rushing across No Man’s Land. They kept coming, an unending stream of people fleeing the East, and Sam tried to work out how many there were. He wondered if there would be anyone at all left in the East after that night.

A woman was walking along the wall with a handful of roses that she was handing to people. Many of them threw them down into the people below them on the East, waiting their turn to come through the gates to the West, but when Sam was given one, he held onto it.

He saw a woman and child coming toward the barrier, being buffeted by the crowd. The woman looked young and she was holding the hand of a child that looked no older than five. In her other hand was a battered suitcase. They kept joining the crowd at the barrier and being knocked back.

Sam got down to sit on the edge of the wall, facing East, and then lowered himself down. There was a drop that jarred up his legs when he released the wall, but he quickly recovered and walked towards the woman and child. The woman watched him come with a confused expression, and the child’s lip trembled.

“It’s okay,” Sam said, holding out the rose. “I am going to help.”

He had no idea if he’d been understood, but the woman didn’t flinch from him, and when he reached out and took her suitcase, exchanging it for the rose, she didn’t resist. Sam saw the little girl was shivering, covered only with a thin coat, so he shrugged off his leather jacket and wrapped it around her shoulders. The woman, surely her mother, looked at Sam and said something that Sam didn’t understand but was sure expressed gratitude as her eyes were shining.

“Come with me,” Sam said, picking up the suitcase again and making for the crowd of people around the gate. He turned and saw the woman and child were still with him, but the child was lagging behind, perhaps scared of the crowd. Sam looked at the woman and said, “Trust me,” before scooping the child into his arms, still holding the suitcase on his fingers. The child was stiff and still trembling, but she didn’t fight him and the woman nodded with a smile at him as she said something in German.

Protecting the child with an arm, Sam used his bulk and the suitcase to force his way into the crowd. He checked that the woman was close and saw she’d tangled her hands in the back of his t-shirt. Slowly, they pushed forward into the crowd until they reached the opening into the West. Sam pushed forward into the people and then, when he’d finally found a space to stop, he set the little girl down and tucked her a little deeper in his jacket.

Her mother hugged her close and then turned to Sam. She smiled up at him with tears in her eyes and said, “Sie sind ein Engel.”

Sam smiled at her, not understanding the words but understanding the message. He touched her shoulder and said, “Welcome to the West.”

The woman took her suitcase from him and her daughter’s hand and they disappeared into the crowd heading deeper into the city. Sam felt someone clap him on the shoulder and he turned to see Dieter.

“Hey,” Sam said, startled. He didn’t know Dieter was still with him.
“She called you an angel,” Dieter said. “You did a good thing.”

“She needed help,” Sam said, embarrassed by the admiration in Dieter’s gaze.

“And you gave it. Now I am going somewhere special and you are going to come.”

“Where are we going?” Sam asked.

“Brandenburger Tor,” Dieter said with a grin. “There will be more people for you to help there, too.”

“Okay,” Sam said obligingly. “Let’s go.”

Dieter took his arm and led him out of the crowd. It took a long time because of the sheer number of people there. When they were free to move easily, they ducked down a side street and walked at a brisk pace. Sam had heard of Brandenburg Gate and he assumed that was where they were going. It was a place he hadn’t visited yet, and thought this was the perfect night to do so.

They heard the crowd before they saw them. It was the rumble of noise heard at a large concert or sports game, the sound of a sheer mass of people. Sam had heard it recently at the Atlantic Show he’d taken James to. They came out of a street and stopped as they saw the sheer size of the crowd gathered there. It was as if the whole of West Berlin had gathered to celebrate. People were dancing and jumping, cheering at the top of their lungs. Dieter grinned at Sam and said, “The wall!”

Sam followed him right at the edge of the crowd, and they came to a place where a smaller crowd had gathered. Sam looked over the heads and saw at the head of the crowd were a group of people with tools that they were using to hack away at the wall.

“Come on,” he said excitedly, pulling Dieter along by the arm.

They squeezed through the crowd to the front and Dieter cheered as he saw what was happening. A man swung into the wall with a sledgehammer, creating a dent in the concrete which peoplescrabbled at with their bare hands. He moved along a little further and created another hole. Sam pushed forward and dug his fingers into the broken concrete, trying to pull it apart along the fault lines. Dieter appeared at his side and delved in, too. Sam tugged on a loose area and a piece the size of a candy bar broke away. It was red and black along one side from where it had been a part of a German message, and he wondered what it would have said before the hammer had broken into it. He quickly scanned the wall for the rest the words and saw they said “Lass uns frei sein.”

He held it up to Dieter who cheered and delved harder into the hole for a piece of his own. A shard broke away and Dieter held it up triumphantly then clicked it against Sam’s as if he was making a toast.

Sam held up his own and said, “The end of the wall.”

“Yes!” Dieter said triumphantly. “The end!” He raised his voice to a shout. “This is the end of the wall!”

People around him cheered and Dieter jumped up and down, his shard of the wall raised in his fist and his face transfixed with joy.

Sam jumped with him, cheering with the crowd, and felt the moment he was living.

It was freezing cold and the middle of the night, but there was no place on earth he wanted to be
more than in Berlin with these people, seeing the wall come down and freedom coming to Germany.

This was history and humanity at its best.
1990

They said it was one of the coldest New Year’s Eves in Times Square on record, and Sam couldn’t argue. It was freezing. His breath misted with each exhale and his fingers in his gloves were numb. His head was cold as he’d shed his woolen hat in favor of a sparkly cowboy hat emblazoned with 1990. He wouldn’t be seen dead in it usually, but Missouri insisted that, if they were doing this, they were doing it properly. Sam wanted to do it, so he obeyed her instruction and wore it just as she and James were wearing their own. He wasn’t ever showing Dean these particular photographs though. He was only taking them as he’d promised to send Dieter pictures of an American New Year’s celebration.

He had stayed in touch with Dieter after he’d left Berlin. They’d exchanged addresses the day after the wall fell, when they’d finally parted after a whole twenty-four hours together, both exhausted to the point of stumbling instead of walking. Sam could go on less sleep rations usually, but the excitement that he’d felt over that wakeful time had been more than he could sustain any longer. They’d parted at Sam’s hotel door with promises to see each other again. Sam planned to keep that promise. Just as he was keeping one to James by being in Times Square that night.

On the night Sam had celebrated his very first New Year with James and Missouri, when James had been a child instead of the towering college student he was now, Sam had promised to bring him to Times Square when he was old enough to drive him. James hadn’t driven him; they’d flown from Kansas together and James was traveling directly to California from here in a couple days while Sam and Missouri flew home. They were there now though, and James had been excited to come, almost innocently so. Most of the time it was hard to see the child James had been in the man he was now, but sometimes he was the child Sam had met all those years ago. Sam loved those moments.

Missouri had been happy to come, too. She’d confided in Sam that she thought it was perhaps the last New Year’s James would want to celebrate with them. He was building his own life away from them now, and his friends would have a larger draw to him in future. She’d said she didn’t mind really, it was natural for him to change and grow, but Sam knew it was hard for her to let her only child grow up and away from her.

They were all together now though, and Sam was going to appreciate it.

“Not long now?” Missouri said, tucking her hands under her arms to warm them.

Sam glanced up at the countdown displayed on the screen above them and nodded. “Yeah. It’s coming up.”

The year that was approaching in minutes was 1990. A new decade. Somewhere in the world right now was a seven-year-old Sam, probably sleeping through the dawn of a new year. He couldn’t remember celebrating that year with Dean or John, and he thought perhaps he was too young to stay up. He wondered if John was with them, or if he and Dean had been left alone. It was likely that John was in a bar somewhere, counting another year that passed without him avenging Mary. Sam had spoken to him a few months ago when he’d been looking for advice with a case, and he’d sounded the same as ever. Sam knew he wasn’t ever going to hear John sound any different. He would die an unchanged man, the lightness in him lost the day Mary died. It upset Sam because he knew how hard it would be for himself and Dean to grow up with that man. He knew how he would rebel against it, eventually leaving, while Dean would bow to it, becoming the soldier John needed him to be.
The music being broadcast down to them from a rooftop ended, and Missouri shivered, whether from the cold or excitement Sam couldn’t tell. Dick Clark’s face appeared on the screens above them and Sam heard his voice resonate around him.

“We’re almost there folks. 1990 approaches, and it’s going to be a great year for us all.”

“Is it?” Missouri asked Sam.

Seeing James looking between them, Sam laughed and said, “You’re the one that uses a crystal ball, Missouri. I think it’ll be great, but how would I know?”

Missouri laughed, covering her mistake. “My crystal ball is on the blink right now. I’ll trust in your faith.”

James rolled his eyes. He had little patience for Missouri’s abilities. He didn’t believe in her woo-woo, and thought she was just a good reader of people. It was strange to Sam that her own son didn’t know Missouri was a genuine psychic that could read his thoughts if she let herself. Though perhaps it was better that way. Knowing that truth would leave him open to other truths that they didn’t want him exposed to.

The clock on the screen approached the one-minute countdown and Missouri looped her arm through Sam’s and took James’ hand.

“Here we go folks,” Dick Clark said. “The ball is about to drop.”

Their eyes moved to the top of One Times Square, and they watched as the counter reached one minute to go and the lit crystal ball made it’s slow progress down. Sam had seen this on TV more times than he could count, and it was a surreal feeling to see it in person.

The crowd counted down the seconds, and they joined them. When it reached ten seconds, the volume ratcheted up and Missouri began to bounce on her heels.

“Five… Four… Three… Two… One! Happy New Year!”

Confetti rained down on them and 1990 appeared on the screens in flashing letters, and Sam grinned. He had made it another year without Dean; he was just two decades away from him now. He was coming closer every day.

Missouri kissed James’ cheek and then she turned to Sam and pulled his head down with one hand on the back of his neck. Sam bowed obediently. She kissed him firmly on the lips and beamed at him as around them the crowd cheered and blew on their noisemakers.

“You did it, Sam!” she said, releasing him and patting his cheek. “Another year.”

James was occupied with his noisemaker so Sam felt free to answer. “I did.”

“I’m proud of you.”

Sam grinned. “I’m a little proud of myself, too.”

And he was. He was closer to Dean by a year, but he wasn’t languishing in the wait. He was getting out into the world and doing things.

He was living.

xXx
On the morning of Sunday, February 11th, Sam and George sat in front of the TV in Sam’s living room while Missouri stood by the table, speaking on the phone.

“Are you watching?” she asked. “No? Well tell them to change the channel. This is important, James.” She paused then said, “Good. Now don’t move until it’s over. Nothing matters as much as this.” She smiled. “I love you. I’ll talk to you later.” She set the phone down and came to sit on the couch beside Sam.

“James is watching now?” Sam asked.

“He is. Would you believe there were watching cartoons?” she asked. “History is happening and they want to see a homicidal cat chasing a mouse.”

Sam laughed. “They’re students, Missouri. We’re all a little dumb in college.”

“You’d think it would be the opposite,” George said thoughtfully.

“Maybe not all,” Sam amended. “I wasn’t that bad, but it took a lot for me to get there, so I wasn’t wasting a moment. I knew plenty of party people though.”

“Must be nice,” George said.

Missouri pressed her lips together. “James isn’t a party boy.”

“He’s not,” Sam agreed. “He works hard, and his grades back that up.”

Missouri smiled at him and leaned back in his chair. She checked the clock on the mantle and said, “He’s late. Are you sure it’s going to happen, Sam?”

“I’m sure,” Sam said. “I remember that he was late, but I can’t remember how long. We just have to be patient.”

Missouri huffed. Sam thought it was hard for her to be patient. She was invested in what was happening. They all were. Even George had come to stay with Sam for the weekend so he could see it.

The coverage on the TV returned to the gates of Victor-Verster Prison as the world waited for its first glimpse of Nelson Mandela as a free man in twenty-seven years.

Sam had known he was going to be freed that year, but he couldn’t remember the exact date. When the news reports had come, he’d barely had time to absorb them before Missouri was calling him to share her excitement.

“Did you think of going to see it happening in person, Sam?” George asked.

“I did,” Sam said. “But I didn’t want to take time off work so soon.”

Brad had finally retired before Christmas, and Sam had taken over as foreman. He’d been nervous at first, and he’d taken ragging from some of the workers, but they’d settled down as Sam grew in confidence, and now he was settled in his role. He liked it even. He could make a difference for the workers, and he’d enabled them to get ahead of the project with some labor saving changes that he’d persuaded Vic to try. Brad had been a great foreman, but he was of the school of thought that if something wasn’t broken, it didn’t need to be fixed. Sam had seen things that could be improved, and he’d petitioned Vic to try doing things in a different way. After initial grumbling, the workers had adapted, too, and things were better for them. Sam was pleased.
George nodded. “It’s not easy being the boss, is it?”

“It’s not so bad,” Sam said.

“Have you ever been the boss, George?” Missouri asked curiously.

“I was for a time,” George said. “I left the army as a captain.”

Sam glanced at him. He hadn’t known that about his friend. He felt he was getting to know George now, but sometimes he revealed something that made Sam realize there was still so much he didn’t know. He wanted to ask more, but he sensed it wasn’t the right time. Even if they weren’t waiting for a historical moment, Sam would have waited until George was in the right frame of mind, perhaps after a few drinks.

Sam turned his attention back to the TV where the camera was panning around the faces of the crowd. There were so many of them, thousands, and they all wore expressions of varying states of excitement and hope. This day was more than historic for them; it was the result of years of campaigning and fighting. They had prayed for this day, and some of them had never thought it would actually happen.

“I think something’s happening,” Missouri said, leaning forward in her seat with her hands clasped together.

The camera had whipped back to the prison gates, and Sam saw too that there was movement beyond them. They opened slowly and then he was there. Nelson Mandela himself was walking out of the gates, hand in hand with his wife Winnie, indescribable expressions of joy on both their faces.

The crowd was wild, cheering, screaming, and crying. Sam heard a sniff and looked at Missouri in time to see her wiping her eyes on her sleeve. George was watching the scene on the TV with a somber expression. Sam felt overwhelmed by what he was seeing. The struggle of twenty-seven years for thousands of people to relieve Mandela’s suffering and grant him freedom was over and something incredible was going to happen to South Africa now. Apartheid would end in a matter of a few years, and South Africa would be changed forever because of it. Sam was alive and able to understand what he was seeing now, and that was amazing. Somewhere out there he was a child, unable to see what was changing in the world, but here and now he was witnessing it as a grown man.

Mandela raised his hands in a victory salute before he was herded to a silver sedan and he climbed inside. Though he was out of sight, the crowd still reached for him. As the car made slow progress away from the prison gates, people ran beside it, reaching out and touching the metal, wanting some connection to the miraculous man.

Missouri sighed. “I can’t believe that just happened.”

“It is hard to believe,” George said. “To think that we witnessed it. Is it always this way for you, Sam? Do you see these things and feel the same awe, or is it different as you know it’s coming.”

“It is different,” Sam said. “But only in the way that it seems to matter more. I know it coming, but I don’t feel it until I see it. It’s incredible. When I was in Berlin, I saw the suffering in the East, and though I knew it would end, it didn’t take away from the joy of the moment when it did. I lived it in a way no one else could. I appreciated it even more, as it was history to me happening right in front of my eyes. I can’t explain it very well.”
“I think I understand,” Missouri said. “It’s hard for you sometimes, knowing the bad is coming, but you also get these moments of triumph.”

“It is,” Sam said. “There is more bad to come, and I can’t stop it as I’m locked in the timeline being here, but there’s things I can do still. There’s things I plan to do, too.”

“What are they?” Missouri asked.

Sam shook his head. “It’s better if you don’t know. It can drive you crazy knowing.”

“I imagine it can,” George said somberly.

Missouri nodded. “You can tell us when you need to though. You do know that, don’t you? I know things that are coming for you personally are bad that you can’t help, but there are things you can. Anna is working with you to find a way to save the future, but if there are parts that you can’t change but need to talk about, we’re here. We can handle it.”

“Thank you,” Sam said sincerely. “I promise I will come to you if I need to.”

The worst thing coming for him personally was Dean’s death and subsequent time in Hell. There was nothing he could do about that, and it twisted in his gut like a knife to think about it. There was worse coming for the world though. In eleven years America and the world as a whole were going to be rocked by the events of 9/11, and Sam couldn’t do a thing about it. He was going to be forced to witness it. He would not tell Missouri and George about that yet though. It was a burden for him and Anna to bear alone.

“What will happen next?” George asked, following the path of Mandela’s car from the viewpoint of a following helicopter.

“He’s going to Cape Town to make a speech,” Sam said. “It’s pretty special.”

“I meant for South Africa,” George said. “Things are going to change now, aren’t they?”

“They are,” Sam agreed. “They will change massively.”

“Are you going to tell us how?” Missouri asked.

Sam considered then shook his head. “It’s better for you to experience it with the rest of the world. It’s worth the wait, I promise.”

And it was. Apartheid would end. Nelson Mandela would be elected the first black president of South Africa. The whole country would be changed, and it would be better, more memorable, for Missouri and George to experience that organically.

Missouri nodded. “That’s fair I suppose. I for one can’t wait to see what happens though.”

Sam grinned. “It’s going to be something special. As is this…” The car had just slid to a smooth stop outside Cape Town’s City Hall and was greeted by fresh crowds clamoring for a glimpse of Nelson Mandela himself. He was bustled inside and the screen was filled with an anchorman explaining that there would be a short pause before coverage of Mandela’s planned speech would begin.

Sam sat forward in his seat, waiting to hear the words he’d only studied on paper before. It seemed to take a long time before the cameras returned to the front of City Hall and Mandela was revealed standing behind a podium. The sound of the crowd was enormous, and people surrounding him
reached for him. He reached for them in return, touching hands and smiling at their faces.

He was introduced by a man that spoke with passion and then the crowd quieted to hear Mandela speak. He picked up notes, but seemed to speak more from the heart than from them.

“You, comrades and fellow South Africans. I greet you all in the name of peace, democracy and freedom for all. I stand here before you not as a prophet, but as a humble servant of you, the people. Your tireless and heroic sacrifices have made it possible for me to be here today. I therefore place the remaining years of my life in your hands.”

Missouri started to cry again, and Sam swallowed down the lump in his throat. This was the most incredible moment. He was seeing history happen once again, and it was as important as it ever could be. A country and the world were changing because of this moment, and he was there to see it.
Chapter Thirty-Two

Sam walked through his front door and dropped his keys down on the table with a sigh. It had been a long day at the site, with stupid problems that piled on top of one another until he’d been run ragged. He wanted a shower and then a beer in front of the TV while he waited for a pizza to be delivered. That sounded like the perfect end to a long working week.

He wandered into the living room and saw the light blinking on the answering machine. He wondered if it was Missouri, James or another hunter. He didn’t think it would be his father asking for hunting advice as he’d called only a few days ago for help, and Sam had set him up with the lore needed. Bobby rarely called anymore. He was growing more settled in his own role as adviser and lore expert. George had called only a week ago, so it was unlikely to be him. He usually went longer between contacts.

James and Missouri were more likely, as they had a lot to say.

The footage of Rodney King being beaten by LA cops had shown the day before, and it was as shocking to Sam as it had been the first time he’d seen it when studying the riots that stemmed from it in college. The whole country seemed to have seen it. It was all over the TV and radio. Views were polarized, and Sam had already had to shut down a scene at work between two men that shared the belief that King had deserved what he got. They were known racists and Sam had used the limit of his power to assign them grunt work for the rest of the day after breaking up the argument with a group of other workers. He would have preferred to fire them but there was not enough cause for it. It seemed unfair to Sam, but he had to admit that even if it was 2010, he probably wouldn’t have been able to get rid of them. He had to make it clear that opinions like that had no place on the site and would not be tolerated, but there was nothing else he could do.

The news had rocked James, but Missouri was unsurprised. She had lived longer and seen worse in her life. She hated it, it disgusted her, but she was aware that it happened all the time; the only difference was that someone had filmed it this time. James was full of anger and hate for it. He wanted to do something about it. Sam wished there was something that could be done, but he knew that there would be no justice for King. The cops would go to trial, but they would get off and there was nothing anyone could do about it. Nothing but riot, and that was what LA was going to do when it happened.

Sam pressed play on the message and tapped his fingers on the table as he waited. There was a hum of background noise then a woman’s voice Sam didn’t recognize spoke. “Hello, this is Gwen Lyons from St Francis Hospital, Tulsa. I am looking for Sam Taylor. We have a patient that has given this number as an emergency contact. If you could call me back at 918-494-2200 that would be great. Thanks.”

The message ended, and Sam stared down at the machine in shock. They hadn’t given a name for the patient but as Missouri was safe at home and James was in California, he could only think it was George. His heart beating fast in his chest, Sam called back the message and wrote down the number then he dialled it.

“St Francis Hospital,” a smooth voice said.
“I’m looking for Gwen Lyons. My name is Sam Taylor and I had a message from her.”

“Ah, Mr Taylor. I’m Gwen. I’m glad you were able to call back so fast.”

“Is it George?” Sam asked.

“George Collins, yes. He’s been involved in an accident.”

“Is he okay?”

“It’s better that you speak to a doctor than to me. Are you able to come to the hospital?”

“Yes, but can you just tell me if he’s okay?”

“I believe he’s in surgery at the moment,” she said.

Sam cursed and apologized quickly. “I can come, I’ll leave now. Where in Tulsa are you?”

“We’re south of the city on South Yale Avenue.”

“I’m on my way.” Sam said a curt goodbye then rushed into the bedroom to grab his hunting duffel from under the bed. It had money and clothes inside to last him a week on the road. He grabbed his keys from the table and pulled open the door and stepped outside. He locked up behind him and then strode to the car.

As he climbed into the car, he thought that perhaps he should have called Missouri to tell her what was happening, but he couldn’t stop and go back into the house. He would call her from the hospital when he had news to give her.

Right now George needed him more.

xXx

Sam roared into the parking lot of St Francis’ hospital, and scanned for a spot to park. He’d had the whole four-hour journey for his mind to run away with possibilities, and he was stressed to breaking point. He could handle stress both when working on the site and when hunting, but that was different. He was used to it, and he knew he had some measure of control in those situations. He had no control here; the situation was down to the doctors and George himself to take care of. Sam was never good when someone he loved was in danger.

When Dean had fried his heart taking out the rawhead and he’d been deathly ill, Sam had fought for him, finding a faith healer that could save him. His options were more limited this time. He didn’t have the internet available to find a healer. He would only be able to go through other hunters and hope they had come across something, but he knew how unlikely that was. In the almost five years he’d hunted with Dean, he’d only come across one healer, Roy Le Grange, and he’d not been a real healer. His wife had been using a trapped reaper to power him. He didn’t think he could do that again, knowing what he did. George would never let him if he knew, and he’d never forgive him if Sam did it anyway. There was Anna, but Sam didn’t know if she’d help him. He thought perhaps he was going to have to rely on George to get through this alone.

He saw a spot and he spun into it and cut the engine. He was out of the car in an instant and jogging towards the entrance. There was a wide lobby area with a reception desk with three women seated behind it. Sam rushed towards it and waited behind an elderly man who was asking directions to the cardiac ward. The receptionist had red teased hair and shoulder pads giving her blazer a boxy look. Sam fidgeted as she marked the route to the ward on a map, wishing she was a
little less diligent at her job so he could be helped faster.

Eventually the man moved away and Sam stepped up to the desk. “My friend, George Collins was brought in. He might still be in surgery. Is there someone I can speak to?”

“I’ll see what I can do for you.” She tapped a few keys on her computer and her eyes behind her oversized glasses moved up and down and she frowned. “Collins, Collins. Here we are. His record has just been updated. He’s out of surgery and is on the critical care ward. It’s on the second floor. If you go there and explain, someone will be able to help you further. Would you like a map?”

Sam glanced at the bank of elevators and shook his head. There was a panel with a list of departments for each floor. He thought he would be able to follow the directions himself. “No thanks.”

He patted a hand on the counter and rushed over to the elevators. He summoned a car and tried to push away the panic that the mention of critical care had brought. It had to be serious if George had needed surgery, but he still felt new worry creep through him.

The car came and Sam stepped inside with a man carrying a pink teddy, and smiling a little goofily. Sam was prepared to bet he was on his way to the maternity ward. Sam would usually have found pleasure in the happiness of the man, but now he could think only of George. He tapped the button for the second floor three times, willing the doors to close and for them to move. What felt like a long time later, the car began to move and then the doors opened a floor above. Sam stepped out and checked the signs for directions. The critical care unit seemed to be on the other side of the building. Sam walked through a door to the right, passing what looked like offices, and through double doors marked as critical care. He pushed them open and entered a long corridor with rooms and open wards leading off. There was a station halfway along with two people, a man and a woman, talking behind the counter. Sam walked towards it, and they broke off conversation and faced him.

“I’m looking for George Collins,” Sam said. “They said at the front desk that he was here.”

“He is,” the man said. He was middle aged and wearing a white doctor’s coat over a shirt and tie. “I was just filling out his paperwork. Are you family?”

“I’m his friend,” Sam said. “George doesn’t have any family.”

The doctor’s lips pressed into a thin line. “I can’t tell you much about his condition then, as you’re not a family member.”

Sam had hoped the rules would be a little more relaxed in this time than they were in 2010. He was disappointed to learn that they weren’t. He doubted George was going to be open with him, even if he was in a condition to be.

“I’m Sam Taylor, his next of kin though,” Sam said. “Mine was the name he gave as an emergency contact.”

“Actually it was given as a written instruction,” the doctor said. “The EMT found a letter in his wallet instructing personnel to contact you in the case of an emergency.”

“There, you have it in writing,” Sam said.

The doctor considered him carefully. “You could be right. I will have to consult the relevant team.”

Sam breathed a sigh of frustration. “Can you just tell me how he is?”
“Mr. Collins is very unwell,” the doctor said. “He was admitted unconscious, and his injuries required emergency surgery. That surgery was successful to a degree in that we were able to save his life, but there is a long path of recovery ahead of him.”

Sam nodded, as though hearing and accepting the words, but his mind was reeling. They were able to save his life and he’d been unconscious—just how seriously was he hurt?

“How bad is it though?” Sam asked. “What was the surgery for?”

“I can’t tell you,” she said apologetically. “If Doctor Fraser finds out, he’ll have my head. You’ll have to wait until he has cleared it for us to share Mr Collins’ condition with you.”

It was worth a try, Sam thought. It was a shame she was too careful to be obliging.

“I’ll leave you to sit with him a while. Visiting is limited to thirty minutes at a time, though, and we have to enforce it. If Mr Collins wakes or you’re concerned by anything, press this button here and we will come.”

Sam thanked her and waited for her to leave the room before pulling up a chair beside the bed and sitting down. He looked down at his quiescent friend and sighed.

“What have you done to yourself, George?” he asked, wishing there was a reply.

xXx

When Sam was commanded to leave George’s room, he found a payphone and called Missouri to tell her what had happened. She was worried, and she offered to come to Oklahoma to be with them, but Sam told her they would be fine. As much as he would have liked her company, he knew she had clients. Also, George was unlikely to want a fuss when he woke up. Sam thought having him there was going to be the limit of what George would tolerate.

He was surprised George had even carried his name and number as a contact. He’d never mentioned it before. Everything he knew of George would have made him think that George would have no number on him at all. He was pleased though; he appreciated that George thought enough
of him to have done it. Sam had Missouri’s name and number in his wallet. It was probably pointless, as he was never going to be injured again, not an injury that would require treatment at least; Michael had seen to that. It was habit to have it though. In 2010 he had Dean’s name and number.

When he’d finished his call with Missouri, he went to the cafeteria to get himself something to drink and then went back to the critical care unit to wait to be allowed to see George again. He knew he should eat something, too, but his worry had driven any appetite from him, and the kitchen was closed anyway. He didn’t want a vending machine dinner.

It was approaching eleven when Nurse Radcliffe came to him where he sat in a hard chair and told him he could go back in.

“He’s awake now,” she said, “so you can talk to him a while. Don’t overexcite him though. He needs rest and quiet.”

“I’ll be careful,” Sam said, jumping to his feet, eager to see George.

She smiled at him and gestured along the corridor to George’s room, and he rushed away from her. He hesitated outside the door, unsure of whether to knock, and decided it was better to do so for George’s old-fashioned sensibilities—at least they were old-fashioned to Sam’s 2010 self.

He heard a quiet voice bidding him to enter, and he pushed open the door. George looked better awake. He had removed the oxygen mask, probably against instructions, and had been propped up on more pillows so he was partially seated. There was more color in his cheeks, but his expression when he saw Sam was not welcoming.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

Sam sighed. He should have expected this reaction from his fiercely independent friend. It still rankled though. He had spent hours in a state of extreme worry for George, and now the relief of seeing him awake was tempered with annoyance.

“I was called,” he said.

“Who called you?”

“The hospital,” Sam said. “They found my name in your wallet as an emergency contact.”

George looked annoyed. “They shouldn’t have called you.”

“Then you shouldn’t have left my number for them.”

“That was a death contact,” George said. “I made it clear enough in the letter. I only wanted you called if I died.”

“Well that’s great,” Sam said bitterly. “I’m so glad you arranged for me to be called if you died. It would have saved me a journey. Is there any particular reason you wanted them to call me if you were dead? It would have been a little late for me to help then.”

George scowled at him. “I wanted you called so you could take care of my funeral. I thought you’d know what to do for me. I left enough clues in the letter for you to know I wanted to be salted and burned.”

There was something in his eyes that evaporated Sam’s anger. He thought George looked almost
scared. He supposed whatever had happened to him and the surgery had been tough on him, but he never imagined George to be a man that suffered fear. He always seemed to stoic.

“I’m here now,” he said calmly. “So why don’t you tell me what happened? What got you?”

“A Cadillac got me,” George said bitterly.

Sam frowned at him, for a moment wondering what monster’s name could be confused with a car in George’s mind, but then he realized George was serious.

“You were hit by car?”

“In a way. I was driving out of the forest when I was run off the road. Apparently the driver was good enough to call an ambulance, but they didn’t come back for me. People are a real treat.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said.

“Me too. It’s done though. I’m okay. They patched me up well enough.”

Sam remembered what the doctor had said about recovery, and he wondered just how good the patch up job was. Did George know the extent of his injuries, or was this another show of independence in the man he knew?

“What was the damage?” Sam asked.

“Bump on the right knee and some scrapes to the gut. My car is a write-off though.”

“Bump and scrapes?” Sam said doubtfully.

“Yes,” George said defiantly. “A bump and some scrapes.”

No bump or scrape wrote off a car and required surgery, but Sam didn’t push for more. George was a private man, and Sam knew he would share as and when he wanted to, not before.

“How are you feeling now?” Sam asked.

“Tired,” George said pointedly. “And you look it. You should get some rest and then you can head home in the morning.”

Sam frowned. He had no intention of going home until he was sure George was going to be okay. Whatever his injuries were, they were going to take time to heal, and Sam wanted to be there to support him for it. He would call Vic and tell him he needed time off. He had told him when he took the job that it might happen, and he’d only taken a few days off for a rugaru hunt since he’d become the foreman. They could do without him while he took care of George—if George allowed him to that was.

“I’ve already paid for a motel for a few days,” he lied. “I might as well stick around.”

“You don’t need to,” George said.

“I know,” Sam said lightly. “But I’ve never been to Tulsa before. I’ll take a little time to look around while I’m here.”

“As long as you’re not staying for me.”

“I’m not, but I can come by to see you while I’m here. You might need some stuff brought in:
“Pajamas and things like that. Maybe a burger. I hear hospital food can be pretty bad.”

George nodded. “I guess that would be okay.”

“I’ll come back in the morning and see what you need.”

“Fine,” George said. “Just don’t bring me grapes. I hate the damn things.”

Sam chuckled. “No grapes, check. Anything you do need?”

“You can get my car emptied,” he said. “The cops will have towed it, but the trunk is full of my gear. I don’t want them poking their noses into that.”

“I’ll handle it,” Sam said, getting to his feet and walking to the door.

He had turned the handle when George cleared his throat and said, “I suppose I should say thanks. You didn’t need to come, but it was good of you to do it.”

Sam smiled at him. “No problem. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He thought there were some big complications ahead.

xXx

In the morning, Sam went to the police to find out where George’s truck had been towed. They directed him to a salvage yard outside the city, and he drove over to empty it of weapons. The place reminded him a lot of Bobby’s yard, though there was heavy machinery that Bobby didn’t possess in this place.

Sam found George’s truck beside the crusher, and he felt his breath catch at the sight of the damage. The hood was crumpled into the cab and the steering wheel and column had been cut away. There was more blood than Sam had been expecting and raw edges of metal that encroached into the driving seat. The roof had been removed, and Sam tried not to imagine the scene of the crash and how George would have felt being cut out of the wreck.

A man in oil-stained overalls and a wide brimmed straw hat appeared around the cars and hailed Sam with a raised hand. “Can I help ya?”

“Hi,” Sam said. “I am here to clear out my buddy’s truck. It was wrecked last night and he wants his stuff from the back before you deal with it.”

“Now see that might be a problem,” the man said. “I haven’t had clearance from the cops to do anything with it yet. I’m waiting for paperwork to come through for it to be crushed. There’s nothing any good on there for me to salvage, so it’s going into Betsy.”

“Betsy?” Sam asked.

He pointed at the huge machine to their left. Sam looked at it and saw someone had stencilled the name on the side. He figured if you were going to start naming heavy machinery, Betsy was as good a name as any. He doubted the trend would spread to his site. His burly workers were
unlikely to name the machines, especially not after women. He thought if anyone was going to be christening the equipment it was Ralph, an eclectic man on the crane, and he would probably name his after a mythical creature.

“I really need to empty it,” Sam said. “Can we cut a deal of some kind?”

The man crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t know about that…”

“How about I clear the bill for the work now?” Sam asked. “It will take a while otherwise, and this is just going to be here taking up valuable space. How much does a crushing cost these days?” He asked it as if he had even had a vehicle crushed before. The closest he’d come was when the Impala had been totalled by the truck that time, and he, Dean and John had been inside it at the time.

For a moment, the man let a smug smile cross his face, but he quickly pushed it down and frowned. “It’s not cheap. You’re looking at a couple hundred.”

Sam managed to keep his scowl in check. He knew he was being done over, but he needed to clear George’s weapons out. Thankful that he’d bought his hunting stash with him, he pulled out his wallet and counted off four fifty-dollar bills. There was still a decent amount inside, and the sight didn’t go unnoticed by the scrap dealer.

“It’s going to cost to bypass the paperwork, too,” he said. “I’ll have to tell the cops it was crushed accidentally.”

Sam counted off four more bills and stuffed his wallet back in his pants with a firm look. “That should cover it,” he said.

The man stuffed the money into a pocket of his grubby overalls and curled his thumbs in the bib. Sam turned away from him and circled to the back of the truck, making the movement a clear end to the conversation. He examined the thick padlock that held the weapons hold closed, and sighed. He hadn’t thought to get George’s keys from him, though the steering wheel and column were missing, and the keys were probably still with them.

“I need a hacksaw,” Sam said.

The man made a huffing sound that Sam guessed was supposed to show amusement. “Are you sure you’re doing this for a friend?” he asked. “Maybe I’d be aiding a robbery here.”

“I am his friend,” Sam said. “And $400 of my money says you’re going to be aiding me no matter what. Hacksaw, please.”

For a moment the man stared at Sam, possibly thinking of demanding more money. Sam straightened to his fullest height and crossed his arms over his chest, showing the muscles that he’d developed further with his work on the site. He knew he made an intimidating figure, and apparently the dealer agreed as he scowled and walked away toward a shed. He came back a minute later with a small hacksaw. He handed it to Sam and said, “Anything else?”

“Just for you to go,” Sam said. “I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

“Maybe I should stay and help.”

“Maybe you should put my money somewhere safe,” Sam said. “You wouldn’t want to lose it, would you?”
The man walked away, grumbling to himself and Sam set to work on the padlock. It took a good deal of work as the padlock was thick and the saw dull, but he eventually had the shank cut and he was able to twist it out of the hasp. He threw back the heavy lid and took in the weapons there. He was glad he was alone now, as he thought that the money he’d been bribed out of wouldn’t have been enough for him to avoid a meeting with the cops if the dealer saw what was on offer.

There were two duffels on top of the pile, and Sam took them out and began to fill them with the weapons. George didn’t have as many in his store as Sam had in his, as he was part of a more frugal generation. If he could do the job with one machete, why have three in storage? Sam took all the weapons and then turned his attention to the trunk in the truck bed. It was, he knew, full of books and papers on lore that George had collected; beside that was George’s duffel, and Sam slung that over his shoulder, wondering what George had in the way of nightclothes inside.

It took two trips back to his car to empty the truck and stow away the stuff, and he left the books for last. When he went back to pick them up, he saw the dealer was watching him from a few cars back.

“I’m done,” Sam said curtly.

“You want the car crushed?”

“Do what you like,” Sam said. “You can wait for the paperwork if you like, but don’t mention me coming here to the cops.”

“Of course not, sir.” Sarcasm dripped from every word.

“Mention me and I’ll be back for my money, and I’ll be needing interest.”

He nodded and said, “I never saw you,” sounding more sincere now. Sam thought he had probably just been angling for another pay out.

Sam carried the trunk back to the car and placed in his back seat then climbed in behind the wheel. He started the engine and reversed out of the spot he’d found between two scrapped cars. He felt eyes on him as he drove away. He wasn’t worried about the dealer telling the cops he’d been there, not that it would matter too much if they knew. They probably had better things to do than chase him down. He was glad that was over with so he could get back to the hospital and see George, check in on him and reassure him that his weapons had been moved somewhere safe. Though when George was going to be well enough to need them, Sam didn’t know.

xXx

George was still lying propped on pillows when Sam got into the room, and his color was no better than it had been in the night. He was still without the oxygen mask, which had been hung haphazardly on the cot side of the bed.

Sam carried in his clothes duffel and set it down on the table at the end of the bed. “I got everything out of the truck and put it in my car for now,” he said. “I don’t know what you’ve got in the way of pajamas in here, so let me know if you need me to buy you anything new.”

“I’ve got a couple pairs,” George said. “They’ll do me, I guess. I don’t plan on being here that long.”

“Have you seen a doctor today?” Sam asked.

“Yes.” There was something in George’s tone that didn’t invite questions, but Sam thought he’d
push his luck a little.

“Did they give you any idea of when you’d be able to get out?”

“They didn’t know what they were talking about.”

Sam pulled up a chair beside the bed and sat down. “What are they saying then?”

He thought George wasn’t going to answer, and for a long time he was silent, and then he spoke in a rush. “They’re talking about rehabilitation sessions with some kind of therapist. I didn’t listen properly. I heard enough to know they were talking out of their hats. They don’t know me and what I’ve been through. I’ll be fine in a few days.”

“Good,” Sam said, deciding that pretending confidence was better than trying to argue about a medical professional’s knowledge. Then an idea occurred to him. “Do you want me to talk to them about getting you out of here?”

George looked surprised. “That would be good.”

“You’ll need to give them the go-ahead to talk to me,” Sam said. “They wouldn’t tell me anything last night.”

“I’ll tell them when they come round again.”

Sam smiled and nodded. He knew it was underhand, but he wanted to know the truth of George’s prognosis, and he needed to if he was going to be able to persuade George to take further treatment from them.

“I might need somewhere to go when I get out,” George said gruffly. “Just for a week or so. I don’t want to be in some grungy motel while my gut is still healing.”

“You can come to my place,” Sam said. “I’ve got the spare room, and I can help out with whatever you need.”

“I won’t need help,” George said. “I just want somewhere clean.”

“My place is clean.”

“I know,” George said pointedly. “That’s why I’m asking.”

Sam leaned back in his chair. “I’ll get set up for you then.”

“I don’t need much. Just a bed.”

“I just mean change the sheets,” Sam said quickly. “It’s been a while since anyone’s slept in there. The last time was you at Christmas.”

Sam relaxed back in his seat, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine,” George said. “Just a little sore.”

“Aren’t they giving you painkillers?” Sam asked.

“They are, but I didn’t want too much. I don’t like my head clouded. It makes my responses slower.”
Sam couldn’t think of anything that George needed quick responses for in a hospital, but he didn’t point it out. He supposed that George had been in a life that required him to be alert at all times for so long that to give it up was too much for him.

There was a knock on the door and Sam looked up as a doctor entered. It wasn’t the same man Sam had spoken to in the night, though he also wore a white coat and was of the same age.

“Mr. Collins,” he said, “how are you feeling?”

“I’m fine. I’ll be better when I can get out of this bed.”

The doctor frowned. “I’m afraid that is going to take some time, Mr. Collins. Your abdominal injury needs time to heal, and your knee is going to need additional time and therapy before we can think of discharging you.”

Sam glanced from George’s neutral face to the doctor’s stern expression and said, “George has said you can talk to me about his condition now.”

The doctor looked at George who nodded. “You can tell him what you like. He’s the one getting me out of here.”

“Very well. If you would like to talk now, I have an office down the hall we can speak in, or if you prefer, we can stay here.”

“Go,” George said carelessly. “I’ve already heard enough. Sam will know how wrong you are, just as well as I do.”

Sam was surprised that George was giving him free rein to ask what he wanted, then it occurred to him that George didn’t want to hear it all again.

Just how bad was his prognosis?

Sam got to his feet. “I’ll go now and bring us back some coffee, George, okay?”

“I’m afraid Mr. Collins can’t have coffee at the moment,” the doctor said. “He will be on a restricted diet for some time while his abdominal injuries heal.”

“He means they’re starving me,” George interjected.

“You are getting all the nutrition you need from your IV,” the doctor said.

“Doesn’t feel like it,” George said.

Sam cut in before the doctor could speak again and add to George’s annoyance. “Shall we go?”

The doctor looked at George for a moment and then nodded. “Yes. Yes, let’s move somewhere we can talk without making Mr. Collins uncomfortable.”

“I’m not uncomfortable,” George called after him as he left the room.

Sam shot him a smile and followed the doctor out of the room and along the hall to an office. It was decorated in dark wood and deep green, and Sam thought it was an oppressive place to spend much time. He sat down in the seat he was directed to and waited as the doctor settled himself behind the desk.

“How much do you know of Mr. Collins’ condition already?” he asked.
“Pretty much nothing,” Sam said.

The doctor looked grave. “Then I am afraid I have news that will surely be a shock for you. Mr. Collins was involved in a road traffic accident that left him impaled on a section of the steering column and needing to be cut out. There was damage to his stomach and intestine which has been repaired with surgery.”

“What does that mean?” Sam asked. “Is he permanently damaged now? Will he be on this restricted diet from now on?”

“No. In time that should heal and he will be able to eat as normal, though perhaps being careful with certain foods. It will all be explained to him as and when we know more.”

That didn’t sound so bad, Sam thought, so what weren’t they telling him?

“It’s his right knee that is the dominant problem,” he said. “The hood of the car crumpled in, and Mr. Collins’ knee was trapped. Though he was extricated as carefully and quickly as possible, the injury was great. Mr. Collins’ knee was damaged beyond repair, and it was necessary to replace his patella with a prosthetic patella. That alone would not impinge on mobility too much, but the damaged to muscle, cartilage and ligament will. He is going to have greatly reduced mobility in future.”

Sam swallowed hard and asked, “Will he be able to walk?”

“With the necessary physical therapy and aids, he should be able to walk, but his mobility will never be the same. He has a long road of recovery ahead of him that will be much harder if he doesn’t accept the treatment plan we have created for him. He is refusing mention of any form of therapy and won’t discuss his prognosis at all. I have tried to speak to him twice today already, but he is adamant that the subject remains undiscussed. Now that he’s given me permission to speak with you, I am hopeful that perhaps you’ll be able to persuade him to discuss his treatment.”

Sam huffed a wry laugh. “You don’t persuade George of anything.”

“You need to try. If he refuses therapy, his condition will not improve much past what it is now. He will probably suffer some pain in the joint from now on, but it will be worse without treatment. He needs to be made to understand the truth of his situation.”

Sam raked a hand over his face. He had no idea how he was supposed to get George to talk to him about this, to listen at all. He didn’t want to be the one to deliver this blow to him—the fact that his life was changed forever now. This was about more than him being able to get around unaided; it was the complete loss of everything George had known for almost forty years.

“I am sorry that this falls to you,” the doctor said, “but you should speak to Mr. Collins as soon as you can. We need to move on with his treatment and make arrangements for him.”

“Yeah, sure, okay,” Sam said dully. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, Mr…”

“Taylor,” Sam said. “My name is Sam Taylor.”

“Thank you, Mr Taylor. I will be on the unit for the next few hours, unless I am called away with an emergency, so find me if you need to.”

“Okay,” Sam said getting to his feet. “I will.”
He left the office like a man in a daze, walking to a room marked visitor’s lounge. When he entered, it was empty, and at first all he did was sink down onto a chair and sit with his head in his hands, thinking about what he’d heard. He had no idea how he was supposed to tell George any of what the doctor had said. He couldn’t come at it without a solution for him, too, which is what made it possible for him to raise his head and say. “Anna, it’s me. I am in the visitor’s lounge, St Francis Hospital, Tulsa, Critical Care Unit. I need help.”

There was a moment in which the only sound was Sam’s breaths and soft footsteps outside the room, and then Anna appeared.

“Sam. What happened?”

“It’s George,” Sam said in a rush. “My friend that was there when you killed Chronos. He’s been in an accident and he’s really hurt. I need to you to help him.”

Anna frowned. “Is he dying?”

“No, but he’s in a bad way. He’s got this gut injury that will heal, but his knee is trashed. It’s never going to be the same, and he’s a hunter. He needs to be fixed.”

Anna sighed. “I can’t do that, Sam.”

Sam frowned at her. “Why not?”

“Because it would reveal my presence, and that would put us both in danger. When someone is healed, there is an awareness in Heaven that is monitored by a special angel. There has not been an authorized healing in millennia, not since we walked the earth. An angel called Abner healed someone without orders centuries ago, and he was jailed for it.”

“But you can hide it somehow, or hide yourself.”

“I am already hiding. If I do this, if they find me, I will be captured, and since I am Fallen, they will jail me again or worse. I will be no use to you. I need my freedom to find a way to defeat Lucifer.”

“There has to be something you can do!” Sam said desperately.

“There isn’t. I cannot help without risking revealing myself, and if I do that, the world will pay as well as me. Would you really want that just for the healing of one friend?”

Sam bowed his head. He couldn’t do it. He wanted George to be healed, but he knew Anna was the only one with a chance of finding something to stop Lucifer. It was George or the world, and as much as Sam hated it, there was no contest.

“I’m sorry, Sam,” Anna said, seeing his defeat.

“Thanks anyway,” Sam said dully, getting to his feet.

Anna disappeared without a word, and Sam opened the door. With a heavy heart, he walked along the hall and paused at George’s door and took a breath. He wasn’t sure George would even speak to him at all about this, but he had to try. It sounded like the longer they waited the worse the situation would be.

He knocked and entered when he heard George beckon him in. Keeping his eyes down, he walked around the bed and sat down, only looking up when George spoke.
“You weren’t gone long. Did you get your coffee?”

“No. I’ll get some later. I spoke to the doctor.”

George grumbled inarticulately. “I’m sure he had plenty to say.”

“He did,” Sam said. “And we need to talk about it. He said you won’t talk to him.”

“He’s a quack. I don’t need to listen to anything he has to say.”

“You do,” Sam said. “I can get him now and he can tell you what’s going on if you like. He might be able to explain it better than I can.”

George looked him in the eyes, seeming to be weighing something up. When he spoke, it was in a voice so quiet it was almost inaudible. “I’d rather hear it from you.”

Sam nodded and cleared his throat. “He told me about the accident and the injury to your gut. He thinks that will heal in time and not cause you too much trouble.”

“That sounds okay. What’s got you looking like that then?” He hesitated. “Is it my knee?”

“Yes,” Sam said sadly. “The wreck did a lot of damage. They needed to give you a replacement kneecap.” He drew a deep breath. “It’s more than the kneecap though. Your muscles, cartilage, and ligaments were damaged. You’re going to need a lot of physical therapy and…”

“And that will take care of it,” George said decisively.

Sam shook his head dolefully. “He thinks you’re always going to have trouble getting around. You’ll need an aid, a cane maybe.” Or worse, a walker.

“A cane,” George said in a dead voice.

“Yes,” Sam said. “Something like that.”

“There’s nothing they can do?” George asked.

Sam shook his head. “I called Anna, but she can’t do anything without risking the whole plan. She needs to be free to find a way to end Lucifer, and if they find her, they’ll kill her or lock her up. There’s nothing we can…”

He tried to find words to express how sorry he was, but George held up a hand to silence him. For a long time there was silence but for the sound of breathing—George’s a little ragged—and the beep of the heart monitor.

“It’s over for me, isn’t it?” George said.

Sam knew what he was referring to, hunting, and he nodded.

George drew a sharp breath and then his expression became a neutral mask. “Then I guess it’s down to the kids now. I’m out of the life so someone new will step in. I’ve done my bit.”

“They will,” Sam said. “New hunters will come in and take over. Dean’s only a few years away from starting properly now.”

“Then it’s down to him. You can take my books and weapons. I’ve got some stuff that will be useful for you. I have a few books you’ve not seen yet. There’s some blessed knives that will be
good, too.”

“Thanks,” Sam said quietly.

George coughed and said, “I think I need some sleep now. Maybe you should get yourself off home. I’ll call you.”

It was a dismissal, and Sam heard it as such. He saw the pain in his friend’s eyes and knew his heart was breaking. He got to his feet and said, “I’ll stick around another night. I’ll come see you tomorrow.”

“You don’t need to do that,” George said. “You should get back to work.”

“I’ll drive home tomorrow,” Sam said. “I’ll be there for Monday.”

He walked to the door and pulled it open then stopped. He felt he needed to say something, but no words came to him. George needed time and space to feel his loss, just as Sam had needed it to deal with the loss of Dean all those years ago. He wished he could do more though. George was suffering and Sam couldn’t help. No one could. Perhaps if this had happened in 2010 there would be more medicine could do for him, but it was 1991 and the technology and knowledge just wasn’t there. Because of that, George’s life was changed so much it had to feel like it was destroyed.

He was never going to be able to hunt again.
When Sam returned to the hospital on Sunday morning, George was quiet and didn’t make any attempt to conceal from Sam the fact he wanted to be alone. After trying and failing to engage his friend, Sam didn’t stay long, merely enough time to drop off new pajamas he’d bought for George and to speak to the doctor again.

As he left the room for the last time, George roused himself enough to extract a promise from Sam that he was going home. Sam didn’t want to leave, but he didn’t think his presence was helping his friend. He promised to go home but also said he would come back the next weekend to see him again. George grumbled that he might not need to be there another week, but Sam knew better. Even without the therapy needed for his knee, he was going to need to stay at least a couple weeks to recover from his abdominal surgery.

Sam spent the next five days at home in a state of tension. He wanted to be with George, but he knew his presence wasn’t welcome. It was made clear when he called the hospital to speak to George and received monosyllabic answers to his questions. He wished he knew how he could help, but there was nothing he or Missouri could think of. All that they knew George needed was time. Missouri wanted to come with Sam to the hospital, but Sam persuaded her to stay home. He was sure George wouldn’t want to see anyone at all; he knew he could handle George’s hostility but he wanted to shield Missouri from it.

When Sam stepped onto the critical care unit, he felt a twinge of discomfort in his gut at what he was doing there. He didn’t know what state he was going to find George in. He didn’t recognize the nurses at the desk, and there was no doctor in sight, but when he introduced himself as he passed their station, they’d heard of him and were apparently expecting him. He didn’t ask them how George was, wanting to discover for himself if there was any improvement. He just thanked them when they told him the strict visiting hours were relaxed now he was healing, though they still warned him not to overexcite George.

He knocked on the door and entered, nervous to see how George would react to his arrival. He was relieved that George looked at least physically better. His color was good and he was sitting more upright now. The IV port was still in the back of his hand, but it wasn’t hooked up to anything now. There was a wheeled table across George’s lap with a half-eaten plate of eggs and a small pot of pudding. He watched Sam circle the bed and pull up a chair without a word, though, and his expression wasn’t welcoming.

“Hey,” Sam said. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. I didn’t expect to see you.”

“I told you yesterday I was coming.”

“And I told you not to bother,” George said.

Sam tried not to let George’s lack of welcome bother him. He smiled and patted the duffel at his feet. “I brought you some clean pajamas and books. I figured you might be getting bored.”
“Hope you didn’t waste your time bringing lore books. They’d be a waste of time since I’m out.”

“I brought some Zane Grey,” Sam said. “I saw a couple in your duffel and figured you might like to read some more.”

“Thank you,” George said grudgingly.

Sam sat back and smiled. “I see you’re eating now. That has to feel better.”

“It would if I could eat anything besides eggs and pudding. They say they’re being careful of my gut, but I think they’re just enjoying seeing me suffer.”

“Are you suffering?” Sam asked. “Is the pain any better?”

“It’s not so bad,” George said. “My knee is the worst, but what do you expect when it’s mangled beyond repair?”

Sam grimaced. He couldn’t imagine what his friend was going through. It wasn’t just the loss of his hunting life; it was the pain and lack of independence while he was in the hospital. And there was no knowing what the future held. Was he going to be able to live an independent life after? Sam hoped he was still going to come to stay with him in Lawrence, but how much help was he going to need? Sam would do whatever he could for him, and Missouri would, too, but whether or not George would accept it, Sam didn’t know.

“I spoke to the doctor,” George said in a tone of forced indifference.

“Yeah? What did he say?”

“Basically the same as you told me, though perhaps a little worse. He made it clear that I wasn’t going to be the same again.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. He says I need this physical therapy nonsense. They’ve already started some of it. A man comes in once a day and gets my knee moving. Hurts like hell, but apparently if I don’t do it, it will be worse.”

“It’s good that you’re doing it then,” Sam said.

“I guess. I asked how long I’ll have to be in here. They couldn’t give me an answer. I’m moving to a less high-dependency unit later.”

“That’s great,” Sam said, relieved George was improving enough that they thought they could move him.

“It’ll free the room up for someone that needs it. Maybe they’ll have a chance at a life when they get out of here.”

“You can have a life, George,” Sam said. “There’s things you can do. You could…”

George held up a hand to silence him. “You don’t need to lie to me, Sam. You may be chock full of future knowledge for the world, but I know what’s coming for me.”

“You don’t though,” Sam said. “You don’t know what your limits will be.”

George fixed his eyes on Sam and asked, “Do you think I’ll be able to hunt again?”
Sam wished he could say yes, to give his friend what he needed, but he couldn’t lie to him. George would not be able to hunt, no matter how much Sam wanted that for him, so he told the truth. “No, I don’t think you will.”

“Then whatever other limits I have don’t matter. I can’t do what I am supposed to do, so what is there? The doctors made a mistake saving me. I should have been left to die.”

Sam sucked in a breath. “You can’t mean that!”

“Why not? Wouldn’t you feel the same if it was you?”

“No,” Sam said. “I have things and people to live for.”

“You’re going to save the world,” George said, nodding. “I know. But I don’t have that comfort, Sam. I’m just waiting for death now.”

Sam hated that he was saying this, and he wished more than anything there was something he could say to help, but there was nothing. He was at a loss.

“It wasn’t supposed to end this way,” George said. “I was a soldier then a hunter. If anyone deserves to go out in a blaze of glory, it’s me. I was supposed to die to save someone else. I am 67 years old and I am done. I might have another twenty years in me, but they’re going to save no one. I will be a cripple, relying on other people.”

Sam thought of Dean and how he wanted to go out the same way. Sam wanted his life to mean something, too. If dying was what it took to stop Lucifer, he would do it without hesitation. That would be a good end to his life; he would finally be making amends for his great mistake in trusting Ruby. There was no prospect of something like that for George. He was right. He had nothing but years of waiting ahead of him, unless Sam could find something else for him to live for that was.

“You could take over for me,” he said. “Since I’m working full time again I can only run the phones on the evenings and weekends. Hunters call me needing lore and help, but they have to wait for me to get back to them. That’s wasting time. If you were there, they could get help straight away. You know as much as I do, and there’s a ton of books in my office with more lore in them. You could make a real difference, George.”

George’s eyes narrowed. “You want to me to be a lore man?”

“Why not?” Sam asked. “You will still be helping to save lives. You can trace hunts, too, and direct them to other hunters.”

“I’m supposed to go from being out there, hunting and saving, to sitting by a phone and looking in the newspapers for leads to hunts?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “If you want something to do, that’s it. You can still be a part of the life.”

“Leave,” George said quietly.

“What?”

“Leave!” George shouted. “I thought you of all people would understand loss, what with your brother and family, but you don’t see what this is for me. I saved lives, Sam! I made the world better, and you expect me to be satisfied directing other hunters, the ones with the use of both their legs, to save in my place. You don’t understand at all. You have no idea what I’ve lost. Leave now
and don’t come back!”

Sam felt completely taken off guard. He’d never seen George like this before. He was always calm and dignified. He was out of control now, and angrier than Sam had ever seen.

He got to his feet, “I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

“The hell with your sorry,” George said. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Sam walked to the door and pulled it open. “I’ll check in next week.”

“Save yourself the gas money,” George said. “I won’t see you.”

Sam shook his head dolefully and left the room. He was leaving his friend behind, angry and hurt, and it was his fault. He should have known it was too soon to talk to George about this. The difference in his life was already too much for him to handle. To be reminded of what he was going to be limited to in future was cruel.

Sam knew though, that George needed to accept this future sooner rather than later if he was going to have any fight in him for what was coming. Sam didn’t know how long the PT was going to take, but George needed something to aim for. Without it, he was going to have nothing left.

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Sam obeyed George’s wishes and didn’t visit him again. Missouri went in his place, and she dealt with his anger and depression with her usual calm grace. After each visit she would come to Sam and tell him about it, and Sam gleaned some reassurance from what she told him. George was doing the prescribed PT and improving slightly. He was able to walk around his room with a walker at first, though after the last visit, she said he’d graduated to a cane. He was obviously still in pain, but Sam suspected that was something he was going to live with for the rest of his life. His mood was still dour, though Missouri said he would now hear Sam’s name without ending the meeting abruptly. It was little improvement, but Missouri advised Sam against trying to visit George himself.

Sam hated that it had come to this, that his friend wouldn’t even see him now, especially when he was hurting and needed all the support he could get. He wished he could see him, apologize again, but there seemed to be no chance of that happening any time soon.

Which was why he was so surprised when he came home from work a month after George’s accident to find the man himself sitting in Sam’s living room.

He was late getting home as there had been a problem on site and he’d had to stick around to take care of it, and he was tired. He’d picked up pizza on his way back, and was looking forward to a beer and dinner before crashing. When he got to the door and tried to unlock it, though, it was already open. He went inside, calling for Missouri. Though her car wasn’t there, she was the only other person with a key. There was no answer, and he wondered if maybe James was there. He was supposed to be in California still, but something could have happened.

He rushed into the living room and came to a dead stop when he saw George sitting in the armchair with a book open on his lap. “You’re late,” he said, snapping the book closed.

Sam was completely taken off guard by his presence, even more so by the way he was speaking, as if this was a prearranged meeting and he hadn’t ordered Sam away from him and barred all contact after.
“I didn’t know you were coming,” Sam said, trying to keep his shock from his tone.

“That’s because I didn’t tell you.”

“Did Missouri bring you?”

“To a fashion. I got the bus to Kansas City and she picked me up from there.”

Sam wondered why Missouri hadn’t warned him George was coming, but he had a more pressing concern.

“Are you supposed to be out of the hospital?”

George scowled. “If you ask me, yes. There was nothing else they could do for me since my gut healed. They made me sign out AMA though, so I guess they disagree.”

“What about your PT?” Sam asked.

“I’m done with that,” George said. “It wasn’t helping anyway. My knee is as crooked as it was before they started making me jump through hoops.” He cleared his throat. “If you don’t want me here, I’ll get out of your way.”

“No!” Sam said quickly. “I want you here. You can stay as long as you like.” He could stay forever as far as Sam was concerned. He would prefer that even. George would need help and he wanted to be the one to give it; he couldn’t bear the idea of him stumbling around a dingy motel somewhere, alone.

“Thank you,” George said stiffly.

“I got pizza,” Sam said lamely.

“I can see that,” George said.

“Do you want to eat in here? I can get you a table.”

“I can make it into the kitchen, thank you very much. I’m only half a cripple.”

Sam had no response to that, so he carried the pizza into the kitchen and set it on the table. He took two beers from the fridge and set them down as George stomped into the room, leaning heavily on a cane. Sam had imagined how bad the aftermath of George’s accident was going to be, and it wasn’t the worst thing he’d thought of, but it still wasn’t good. George was unsteady, and the lines on his brow told Sam that the pain was bad. When George fell into a chair and propped his cane against the table, Sam had to force a smile for him, as if he wasn’t horrified by what his friend was living with.

He flipped open the pizza box and said, “Do you want a plate?”

“No thanks,” George said, reaching for a slice. “I can manage without.”

Sam twisted off the cap of his beer and took a swig before grabbing a slice and taking a bite. They ate in silence for a while, a silence that was more uncomfortable than any they’d shared before, and then Sam said, “Did they give you painkillers?”

“Yes, and I have a prescription to get filled for more.”

“I’ll go into town tomorrow and pick them up for you,” Sam said.
George scowled down at his beer for a moment and then he nodded. “That would be appreciated.”

Sam could tell from the strain in his voice that it cost George something to say it, to accept help, and he was pleased that he was. Things would be easier if he would let them do for him the things he couldn’t do for himself.

“No problem,” Sam said. “I’ll get the bed ready for you, too.”

“I don’t need a fuss.”

“I’m not fussing, just putting on clean sheets.”

“That’s okay then.”

Sam reached for another slice and tried to come up with something to say without aggravating him. He didn’t know how much assistance George needed with regular things, like bathing. He couldn’t ask, but he wanted to be there to help when it was needed. He decided on a roundabout way of asking.

“If there’s anything you need,” he said, “anything at all, just ask. Is there anything at the hospital that helped you that would be good to have here?”

George shook his head. “There’s nothing. I can manage everything with my cane.”

“Good,” Sam said then hesitated. “I’m glad you’re here, George.”

George stared into his eyes. “Are you, Sam? Are you really?”

“Yes,” Sam said honestly.

“Thank you,” George said gruffly, taking another slice of pizza and chewing it slowly.

Sam suspected that neither of them was going to allude to their last meeting, and that was okay. Sam was just glad George had come to him now.

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Sam was woken in the early morning by a crash. He threw himself out of bed and rushed towards the sound. It had come from the living room, and when he entered, he saw George sprawled on the floor on a broken end table. Beside him was a whiskey bottle. He took less than a second to surmise what had happened and then he walked forward to help George.

He hefted him up with his hands under his arms and set him on the chair. All the while George was growling that he didn’t need help.

“You do need help,” Sam said flatly when George was leaning back against the chair and breathing heavily. “You were on the floor, and you had no chance of getting up on your own.”

His tone was sharp as this was the third time he’d found George drunk and on the floor in the night. Another time he’d come home from work to find that he’d fallen down, and George refused to tell him how long he’d been there.

“I would have managed,” George said.

“How?” Sam asked, picking up the whiskey bottle and gathering the pieces of the table. He dumped them on the couch and then dropped down beside them.
“I’d have found a way.”

Sam sighed. “This has got to stop, George. You can’t keep drinking the way you are. One of these times you’re going to hit your head or something and I’m going to find you dead.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” George said.

“It might not seem like it to you, but it is to me,” Sam said. “Not just me either. Think what it would do to Missouri.”

“So I’m supposed to stick around for you two?” George asked, with a harsh laugh. “That sounds fair.”

“You’re supposed to stick around for yourself! Your life isn’t over because hunting is. There’s still more for you out there.”

“Exactly,” George said bitterly. “It’s out there. Problem is I can’t get to it since I’m stuck here with this damned knee.”

“I understand how you feel.”

“No! You don’t!” George snapped. “You’re never going to be ruined like this, Sam. You’ll never be injured permanently. Thanks to that angel, you heal. You’ll never get old. You’ll never die. You live this life, knowing the future and seeing history happen, and it’s incredible. I don’t have that. I have been hurt. I will die. I know the future, too, and mine’s a damned one. I’m old. All I have to wait for now is death.”

Sam breathed deeply, trying to push down his anger. “You have more than death waiting. You can have a life.”

“What would you know?” George asked. “You have plenty to look forward to.”

“I do,” Sam agreed, spurred into speech by his anger. “I have an apocalypse waiting for me when I get back to my own time. I have things to see before then that will tear apart the world. There are tragedies coming, losses, wars, and I can’t do a thing to change it! The damned Devil is waiting for me!”

George just looked at him, seeming surprised that Sam was standing up to him after weeks of taking his snide comments and anger in stride.

“I don’t know what it’s like to live your life,” Sam said. “But you don’t know what it’s like to live mine either. I know you’re not really living yours though. You still have so much to give, so give it! Stop wallowing and do something!”

George’s face colored. “And you’ve never wallowed. You handled the fact you were trapped here wonderfully. You didn’t lose yourself at all.”

“I lost myself,” Sam said. “I fell so far that I thought I would never find who I was again. I lost my brother and time and that felt like the end of the world. It wasn’t though. That’s what I am trying to tell you. There is still life for you like there was me. Missouri made me realize that, and I want to do the same for you. Don’t make my mistakes.”

“And what am I supposed to do?”

“Take over the phones,” Sam said. “Help people.”
“That’s it?”

“Help save lives? Educate other hunters, give them the benefit of your years of experience, so they can go on and kill these things? Yes. That is it.”

George looked like he was struggling for words, but before he could speak the phone rang. Sam checked the time and saw it was too early for anything but an emergency. He strode over to the phone and reached for it, but before he could pick it up the machine clicked in. The recorded message played and then John Winchester’s voice came through the speaker.

“Taylor? Are you there? It’s John Winchester. I have something snatching children, and I have no idea how to kill it. I’ve caught a glimpse and it’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before. Hairy and skin like leather. Clawed hands and damned nasty eyes. I filled it with silver bullets but the thing kept coming. Get your ass up and tell me what it is and how to kill it.”

He reeled off a phone number and then the message ended and George and Sam stared at each other in silence for a moment.

“Did you arrange that call?” George asked. “Did you ask your father to call with some monster to get me into the life again?”

“Yeah, of course,” Sam said sarcastically. “I knew you were going to fall on your ass tonight and we were going to have this conversation. Don’t be stupid, George.”

“I’m not stupid,” he growled.

“You’re acting like it. Do you know what he’s hunting?”

George nodded stiffly.

“Are you going to do something about it?”

“What do you expect me to do?”

“I expect you to call him back and share what you know.” He replayed the message and jotted down the number. He carried the phone over to George and set it and the paper with the number down on the arm of the chair. “Make the call.”

His eyes fixed on Sam with something like hatred, George picked up the phone and dialed in the number. It was obviously answered quickly, as he said, “No, it’s not Taylor. It’s George Collins. I heard your message, and I think I can help. What you’ve got there is a rawhead. The only way to kill it is with electrocution. You want to be careful though, don’t shock yourself, too.” John obviously said something as George scowled. “No, I don’t think you’re stupid. I think you called here for help and I’m giving it. If you don’t like my tone, call someone else next time.”

Sam ran a hand over his face and sighed. It was the perfect meeting of two damnably stubborn and ornery men.

“Good,” George said. “I wish you luck… Yes, you can call again if you need. I’ll be on this number for a while… Yes, Taylor is alive. I’m just taking over the phones for him now. Goodbye.”

A smile curved Sam’s lips. George was taking over. This was what he’d hoped for since the accident.
“You’re going to do it?” he asked.

“Yes,” George said. “I don’t see I’ve got much choice. You’re not going to give up until I do, and there are people out there that I can help.”

Sam grinned. “There are.”

“I’m glad you’re happy.”

“I am,” Sam said. “Very.”

“Good,” George said curtly. “Now get me some coffee. If I’m going to be hitting the books today, I need something to wake me up.”

“No problem,” Sam said, making for the kitchen with a heart lighter than it had been in two months.

“Oh, and, Sam,” George said.

Sam stopped and turned. “Yeah?”

“Your father is an ass,” George said conversationally.

“He is,” Sam agreed. “He’s not the only one.”

John and George were both asses, but they were important to Sam, and now they were each doing their part in their own way.
When Sam walked into the living room, showered and dressed for work, George peered around the doorway that led into the kitchen and said, “Breakfast?”

“Thanks, but just coffee,” Sam said.

“You need more than coffee. I’ll make you bacon and eggs.”

“I haven’t got time,” Sam said. “I’ll grab a bagel.”

George huffed unhappily.

In the year since he’d come to live with Sam, he’d taken over more than the phones. He was the one that had taken it upon himself to keep an eye on Sam. He had made a place for himself in Sam’s life in a way Sam could never have expected. He scolded Sam’s dietary choices, saying a man needed more than salad and the occasional pizza, and made sure he was taking care of himself with regular meals. Sam had thought he was doing a good job of that before George moved in, but apparently he was wrong. It was a strange sensation, being taken care of like this. Dean had raised him as well as he could, but there hadn’t been the same kind of concern. If Sam chose salad as a meal, he was teased, but Dean didn’t lecture him on the need for a more balanced diet with protein as well.

George also made a lot of the meals. His knee had healed to the point that he could usually stump around the house without his cane, and there was often a dinner waiting for Sam when he arrived home from work. Sam was amazed a man that had lived without a real home most of his life was such a good cook, but George had bought a couple cookbooks and learned from them.

Sam liked having him there. It was company that he’d not realized how much he missed when he came back to 1978, after years spent living in Dean’s space. There was someone around when he wanted to talk, and someone to share the silence when he didn’t.

George had done more for other hunters, too. Now that they knew there was someone always there, they called more often. George helped more people than Sam ever had. He took it seriously too. He studied the books in Sam’s library first, and then started looking around for more. Sam liked to imagine George’s reaction when the internet was a viable option. He would have the world at his fingertips.

George set a coffee down on the table and the bag of bagels. Sam sat down and began to slice one as George retrieved cream cheese from the fridge. When his breakfast was ready, he took a bite and checked his watch.

“Anything special today?” George asked.

“We’re finishing the brick work on the north side,” Sam said. “In a couple days we should be able to get inside and start with the dry wall.”

“And the world?” George asked.
Sam set down his mug. “The verdicts will be read this afternoon.”

George scowled. “And it’s not the guilty verdict those monsters deserve.”

Sam had already warned George what was coming for LA when the trial of the officers that had beaten Rodney King came to an end. The riots that would engulf the city for days would start that night, and people were going to die.

“No, it’s not,” Sam said dourly.

George sighed. “It’s hard to know, isn’t it?”

“It’s impossible,” Sam said. “I hate what’s coming. And this isn’t as bad as some of the things that will come. This is going to hurt James and Missouri so much.”

“James especially,” George said.

Sam nodded. James had taken to the Rodney King cause with passion. He was in California right now, confident that the time was coming for the tide against him and other black people to turn. Sam wished he could do something for him. He couldn’t even warn him as he had Missouri. James was in happy ignorance, not seeing how the verdict could be anything but guilty. Sam didn’t understand it either. The country had seen the video evidence of what happened. How could anyone not see it for the vicious assault it was? Apparently twelve jurors couldn’t.

“He’s probably going to call when it happens,” Sam said. “If I’m not home already, give him my number at the site office. I want to talk to him.”

“I will,” George said. “But what will you say?”

Sam shrugged and pushed away his half-eaten bagel. “I don’t know. There isn’t really anything I can say. He’ll just need someone to listen.”

“I’ll give him the number,” George said.

Sam got to his feet and picked up a napkin from the counter. He wrapped it around his bagel to eat in the car and told George he’d see him that evening before grabbing his keys and leaving.

He unlocked the car and climbed in, seeing George appear in the door as he reversed. He raised a hand in farewell as Sam reversed and turned onto the track that led to the road.

He wasn’t anticipating a good day, but he could have no idea that it would end with him having raced to LA to save James from himself, leaving them both caught up in the LA Riots of 1992.

xXx

Sam had barely arrived at work when a call came in for him. It was too early for the verdicts, so he was confused when Irene, the site secretary, came to him where he was supervising the stud work and told him he had an urgent phone call.

He followed her out of the partially constructed building and into the grandly named site office, which was in fact a port-a-cabin near the parking lot. He picked up the phone and said, “Sam Taylor.”

“Sam!” Missouri said desperately. “You have to help! He’s gone to LA!”

Sam felt a brick of horror thud into his gut. “James went to LA?”
“Yes! I called the dorm this morning to speak to him, to try to prepare him for the news, but he wasn’t there. His RA said he and a few of his stupid friends left the night before to drive down for the verdicts.”

Sam took a breath. “Okay. I’ll fix it.”

“He’s going to be killed, Sam! He’s got no idea what’s coming.”

“It’s okay,” Sam soothed. “I’ll go there and get him out.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“No,” Sam said. “It’s not safe, Missouri. We both know I’ll be okay.”

It was the safest way. If Sam got caught in the middle of the trouble, he’d be safe, and he’d have a better chance at keeping James and his friends safe if he didn’t have to watch out for Missouri, too.

“Call George and ask him to put my Taurus in the flight case. I’ll pick it up and my stuff and get the next flight out.”

“What if there isn’t one?”

“There will be,” Sam said. “There’s a lunchtime flight. I’ll get there in time with the time difference. It’ll be okay.”

“Get him out of there, Sam. Please. Get my boy somewhere safe.”

“I will,” Sam promised. “I’ll call you when I can.”

He said goodbye and set down the phone. Irene, who had been hovering at the door, said, “Is everything okay?”

“I have a family emergency,” Sam said. “Call Vic and tell him I’ve had to leave the site. I’ll put Ray in charge.”

“I will,” she said. “Can I tell Vic you’ll be back tomorrow?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “I’ll call him when I can.”

“Where are you going?” she asked.

Sam took off his hard hat and tossed it down onto the desk. “I’m going to LA.”

xXx

Sam went straight to the bank of pay phones when he’d collected his bag and then joined the impatient queue of people wanting to call home and business people in suits needing to check in at the office. He tried to stay calm among the people that were clucking their tongues and grumbling as people fed money into the slots to extend their calls. He was just as impatient to call Missouri as they were to call the people they needed, but he knew that voicing his impatience was only going to add to the tension in the air around him. He took a deep breath and waited.

A man in a grey suit hung up the phone and picked up his briefcase. Before he was even a few steps away, a woman had taken his place and was dialing. Sam took one step closer to the booths and calmed himself with the thought that the real trouble didn’t start until evening and it was still early afternoon. He had time to call Missouri and track James down.
The queue moved slowly until Sam was at the front. He watched a woman in a pantsuit hang up the phone and walked away before he darted forward. He set down his bag and put his coins onto the shelf, searching through them for dimes. When he had them, he fed in a couple and dialed Missouri’s number. He doubted they’d talk long, as Missouri was as anxious for him to get to James as he was, but he made sure he put in more than needed to cover the call.

There were clicks on the line and then Sam heard it ringing 1000 miles away. It was answered quickly, and Sam guessed Missouri had been staying close to the phone for this call.

“Sam?” she said breathlessly, abandoning her usual professional telephone manner.

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m at the airport now.”

“Thank goodness. How is it?”

“It’s calm right now. Things aren’t going to get… complicated until later today,” he said carefully, not wanting anyone to overhear him talking about the riots that hadn’t yet been set into motion. “Have you heard from him?”

“Yes! He’s gone to the courthouse. He and his stupid friends want to be there when the verdicts come in.”

Sam cursed under his breath. That was where everything was going to start. He remembered reading that the first crowds were formed within an hour of the verdict being read.

“Okay, I’m going there now,” he said. “I’ll call you as soon as I have him somewhere safe.”

“Please take care of him, Sam. Take care of my son.”

“I will,” Sam promised. “He’s a smart kid. When he sees what’s happening, he’ll come away, then we just have to get out of town. It’ll be okay.” He checked his watch. “I have to go. I’ll call as soon as I have him somewhere safe.”

“Thank you, Sam. And be careful.”

“I will,” Sam promised. “Try to stay calm, okay. I’m going to fix this.”

They exchanged quick goodbyes, each eager to have Sam off the phone and with James already, and Sam set down the phone. He scooped the remaining coins from the shelf and tucked them back into his pocket then picked up his bags and walked across the airport to the car rental office. It would have been easier and quicker to get a cab, but he would need a car to get James, and hopefully his friends, out of the city when he found him.

There was a couple already at the desk, wrangling through the details of insurance for their hire. Sam took another calming breath and then rushed forward as a second clerk approached the desk and caught his eye.

“How may I help you, sir?” he asked.

“I need a four door for a week,” Sam said.

“Any preference for make and model?”

“None at all,” Sam said. “Just something fast. I am running late for an appointment.”

He nodded. “I have a Honda Civic.”
“That’s fine,” Sam said, pulling out his credit card and handing it over. “And I’m going to need full cover insurance.”

In the unlikely event he was unable to get out of the city unscathed, he didn’t want to have the bill for a car dropped on him.

“Of course, sir. If you could just fill this out for me…” He handed Sam a clipboard and pen and then tapped some keys on his computer keyboard.

Sam quickly filled out the form and handed it back. It took a minute for the clerk to run his credit card and for Sam to sign the slip before he was handed a set of keys.

“It’s in Lot D, space 122,” he said. “Would you like someone to show you?”

“No thanks,” Sam said. “I’ll find it.”

“Thank you, sir. Our phone number on the key fob if you need any help.”

“Thanks,” Sam said, quickly turning away and making for the exit.

He hoped he didn’t need help. He wanted to get James and go, but he wasn’t oblivious to the fact it might be a little more complicated than that.

The city was calm now, but he was about to head into the center of LA on the day the riots would start.

xXx

Sam parked a couple blocks away from the courthouse and jogged toward the building. He’d remembered that the verdicts were going to be read at three o’clock, and he was cutting it close to get there. He wanted James away before that happened, before he could be caught up in the outrage of the moment. If that happened, Sam knew it would be much harder to get him away, and it wouldn’t take long before the violence started.

There was already a large crowd formed around the courthouse, and the atmosphere was one of excitement. These people thought they were there to witness justice being served. They wanted to be a part of the history of the moment. Sam wished it was a different kind of history for them, that it could be guilty verdicts and a celebration afterwards of justice. It wasn’t going to be though. It would be fury and frustration that would boil over into four days of violence and destruction that would cost lives. Sam would not let James be one of them.

Sam looked over the heads of the crowd, searching for a sign of James. At the very front of the courthouse was a row of cops, protecting the building and its occupants. They were watching the crowd carefully, searching for any sign of unrest, Sam was sure. They wouldn’t have to wait long to see it. In front of them were the reporters, cameras trained on them and microphones in hand. The rest of the space was taken by regular people. Some were Sam’s age with world-weary expressions. Some were younger, James’ age, with the fire of excitement in their faces. There were as many men as there were women, and Sam even saw a couple women with strollers towards the back of the crowd.

He needed to find James, but he wanted to help them, too. He abandoned his search for James for a moment and made his way over to them. In the strollers were toddlers dressed in shorts and t-shirts. The woman caught sight of Sam’s approach and one looked at him appraisingly while her friend pulled the stroller a little closer to her.
“Ladies,” Sam said. “How are you doing today?”

“We’re just fine,” the bolder of the two said. “And you?”

“I’m a little worried to be honest,” Sam said. “This crowd is already pretty excited, and I’m concerned you and your children might be caught up and hurt in something.”

The smaller woman looked around. “It all seems calm right now.”

“True, but maybe you’d do better watching this all happen on TV. It’d be safer for the children.”

“This is history. I want my baby here to see it.”

“It is history,” Sam said. “But it might not be the kind you’re looking for. This crowd isn’t going to stay calm if the verdicts aren’t what they want.”

The taller woman laughed. “How can they be anything other than what we want? We all saw the videotape. There’s no way those cops are coming out of this not guilty. We’re going to have justice at last.”

Sam saw that it wasn’t just about Rodney King. This was about all of them and the way they were treated. They thought this was the turning of the tide.

“The world isn’t right,” Sam said. “Please, just take your children home. It’ll be safer.”


Sam knew he was defeated. All he could do was come back and make sure they had safe passage out when the verdicts had been read and before the real trouble started.

He walked away and leaned up over the crowd again, looking for a sign of James. He couldn’t get a clear enough view, so he walked around the crowd to a raised flowerbed and stepped onto the wall lining it. He saw four men standing together, wearing the same blue shirts with gold accents. He recognized them at once as he had seen James playing in these colors for his college team. The idiots were wearing their football jerseys.

“James!” he shouted over the burble of voices. “James!”

The men turned and Sam caught sight of James in the middle of them. His eyes widened as he caught sight of Sam and then a huge smile broke over his face. He said something to his friends and they all pushed their way through the crowd towards Sam. Sam stepped off the wall and waited a little back for them to come to him.

James pushed out of the crowd and came at Sam with his arms outstretched to hug him.

“Sam!” he said ebulliently as they embraced. “You came! I can’t believe it, dude. You’re here!”

“I’m here,” Sam said as he pulled back. “And you’re all idiots.”

James’ smile faded. “What?”

“Look at what you’re wearing!” Sam tugged on the front of James’ jersey. “Why don’t you just quit college now and save them the trouble of kicking you out?”

“We’re not doing anything wrong,” one of James’ friends said. “We’re not even missing any
important classes coming here.”

“And we’re studying,” another said. “This here’s a history lesson.”

Sam ignored them and looked at James. “What if there’s trouble? The four of you are going to stick out dressed like this. The cops won’t even need your names. They can just write down your jersey numbers and call the college, causing all kinds of trouble for you. For God’s sake, take them off.”

James crossed his arms over his chest. “Call the college? You think they’ll bother with that when they can just beat us up like they did Rodney King?”

“You’re smarter than this, James,” Sam said, and then included the other boys in his look. “You all are. Take off the shirts.”

James shook his head. “This is our armor. They’re not going to be as likely to beat on us if they know where we’re from.” He sighed. “You wouldn’t understand Sam. You’re white.”

Sam had always seen the differences between his life and James and Missouri’s. He was aware his life as a white man meant he didn’t have to deal with some of the things they did. He could walk around a store without being followed in case he was shoplifting. He could walk past a cop without their eyes following him. He was treated with respect that they weren’t always afforded. He didn’t pretend to know what their life was like as he only saw it; he never had to live it.

“I probably wouldn’t understand,” Sam agreed. “But if there’s trouble here, they’re going to use you to accuse because they’ll be able to identify you easily. You’ve all worked hard to get where you are. Don’t throw it all away over something as stupid as a shirt.”

He thought he had reached one of the kids as he toyed with the hem of his shirt as if he was going to pull it over his head, but then there was the crackle of a tannoy system and they all flinched as feedback whined.

“It’s happening,” James said excitedly.

He jumped up onto the wall Sam had stood on and his friends climbed up beside him. Knowing what was coming, Sam looked over the heads at the man in a suit that was standing at the top of the stairs behind a podium. The cops were standing close at his sides; they already know the verdict.

“The jury has returned their verdict,” he said without preamble. “In the case of Sergeant Stacey Koon, the verdict is not guilty.”

There was an outcry of fury among the crowd and fists were raised to the sky. Sam watched James’ face as he reacted to the news. His eyes were wide and stunned, and his lips parted with shock. Sam tried to imagine how it felt for him, to have prepared for this moment of victory, the turning of the tide of race against them, only to be so bitterly disappointed. He couldn’t. He had never been part of a mistreated race.

“In the case of Timothy Wind, the verdict is not guilty.”

Again, the angry outcry rose, and Sam flinched at the look on James’ face. He wanted to help him, but he couldn’t do anything for him in that moment. James might not see the man he was; he might just see the face of someone that couldn’t understand.

The third verdict of Theodore Briseno was met with the same anger and the fourth result of Laurence Powell in no verdict was met with more, even though it was the closest thing to justice
they were going to get. He at least hadn’t been acquitted like the others.

There was another whine of feedback as the microphone was switched off and then the sound of people venting their fury at the situation at the police filled the air. Sam stepped down from the wall and walked around the crowd to the women he’d spoken to before. The smaller, quieter woman was now shouting and pumping her fists like the crowd, but the taller woman was bent in front of the strollers, trying to soothe the crying children.

Sam touched the shoulder of the smaller woman. She seemed surprised to see him at first, and then angry. Sam thought he knew what she was seeing—an interfering white man.

“You need to leave now,” Sam said.

The woman soothing the children straightened and said, “He’s right, Halley. This is going to get bad.”

“This is already bad,” she hissed. “They let the animals off.”

“I know,” Sam said quickly. “And it’s not fair, but these people are angry and it’s only going to get worse. Take your children home and keep them safe.”

The taller woman took the handle of her stroller and nodded at Sam. “We’re leaving, aren’t we, Halley.” Though it was phrased as a question, it delivered as an order.

Halley glared at Sam and then nodded. “We’re leaving.” She took her stroller and they walked away together quickly.

Sam knew there was nothing he could do to disperse the rest of the crowd as nothing had been done. It was unchangeable. All he could do was get James and his friends away.

Sam panicked when he turned back and saw they were no longer on the wall, but he found them quickly standing at the back of the crowd, trying to force their way forward.

Sam grabbed James and pulled him back to talk. “We need to leave now,” he said. “You’ve heard the verdicts. There’s nothing to stay for.”

James yanked his arm free. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Think about it, James,” Sam said. “This is a powder keg. People are going to be hearing these verdicts on the TV and radio now, and they’re going to be angry. They’ll be coming here. It’s going to get ugly. You have more to think about than most. If you’re involved in trouble here, you can kiss goodbye to law school.”

“How will they know?” James asked. “The college thinks we’re all home sick with the flu.”

“They’ll know because there are a dozen news cameras here and they’re all going to be training on the crowd as soon as they’ve reported the verdicts. You and your buddies are going to stand out dressed like this, kids from a good college, and they’ll make you famous.”

“Maybe that’s what we need,” one of his friends said, coming to join them. “Maybe they can’t make us disappear like all the others. We can make our voices heard.”

“People all over the country are all thinking that right now,” Sam said. “But if a man getting beaten half to death by cops on videotape isn’t enough to make voices heard, what makes you think your stories will be?”
“You wouldn’t understand,” he said dismissively.

“I understand enough,” Sam said. “I understand you’re putting your entire futures on the line for this, and it’ll do no good for anyone.”

Though he knew he couldn’t without changing their whole lives, he wished he could tell them the truth, make them see what was coming and how dangerous it was going to be. They might not just lose college and careers, they could lose their lives. People were going to die in the next four days, and thousands would be injured. It could be any one of them. For all his future knowledge, Sam didn’t know their fates. Missouri hadn’t even mentioned a son when Sam met her before. Sam didn’t know whether he was still alive in that time.

The idea he might not be felt like a shard of ice in his heart. He loved James. He was like the son Sam would never have a chance to have. He had watched him grow from a child to a man and he wanted to see him keep growing. He couldn’t imagine his life without him in it. The world needed James, and Sam needed to keep him safe.

James’ friend turned away and pushed back into the crowd, his fists raised to the sky, and James stared at Sam.

“Please, James. Just come away. I’ll take you back to school. It’s better for you there.”

“You have no idea,” James said scathingly. “You don’t know what my struggle is, how much harder I have to work because I’m black. This means something, Sam. I am here because it’s where I belong. You go home. Go tell my mother I am doing the right thing. She’ll understand.”

“I’m not leaving you here,” Sam said.

“Then I guess you’re stuck,” James said. “Because I am not going anywhere.”

He turned away from Sam, his fists raised to the sky and his face twisted with anger.

Sam knew he couldn’t do anything but watch him and try to protect him and his friends, so he followed him into the crowd and tried to ignore the glares coming at him. Were they seeing his color only or were they seeing someone who clearly wasn’t a part of their fight from his reactions?

He couldn’t bring himself to add his voice to theirs though. He was right when he told James this was a powder keg, and he didn’t want to be a part of the reason it blew.
Chapter Thirty-Five

Within thirty minutes, the crowd had swelled by hundreds and things were getting worse. People were pushing forward now, wanting to be at the front, and Sam was sure people were going to start to be hurt soon. James and his friends stayed at the edge of the crowd near the flowerbeds, for which Sam was grateful. If there was trouble, they could escape through them.

A chant had begun of, “No Justice!” and James had taken it up freely. His friends seemed to be cooling down now, for which Sam was thankful; they had been amping James up with their anger before.

Sam stayed back and just watched out for James and his friends, ready to act at a moment’s notice to protect them but not wanting to draw attention to himself more than he needed to. He had left his gun in the rental car, not wanting to bring a weapon to what was already a heated situation.

Things were on an even keel of rage and protest when something changed behind them. The cops that had been guarding the courthouse had thinned out, and Sam thought he knew why. They would need to get the accused cops out of the court at some point, and taking them out of the front would be madness. He thought perhaps they’d been relocated to the back door to escort their fellow officers away. Sam tried not to draw attention to the theory by looking around, but someone was clearly on the same track as him as a cry went up from the back of the crowd and the people turned as one.

“The pigs are escaping!!”

Like a pack of wolves that scented blood, people surged away, following the voice away from the courthouse, and into the road. Sam grabbed for James, but they were pulled apart by the crowd. When Sam had shoved his way through the people to him, he saw James was only a few rows back from the surrounded police cars.

Sam didn’t know the faces of the officers that had beaten Rodney King well, but he thought that they were probably not the cops in full uniform driving the patrol cars away from the courthouse. He guessed they were regular officers that had been called to duty from a different part of the city as chaos came to LA.

The crowd either didn’t see what Sam saw or they didn’t care though. They were pressing around the patrol cars, slapping their hands on windows shouting abuse. One man was trying to climb onto the hood.

Sam pushed forward, using his bulk to part the people, and grabbed James’ arm. “Do you see now?” he shouted over the crowd. “We need to get out of here!”

James shook his head and pulled away from Sam. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Sam closed his eyes for a moment and tried to summon patience. He tried to put himself in James’ position, to understand how he felt about this, but he couldn’t. The color of his skin meant he had never been in James’ position, and he couldn’t imagine it properly.

James tried pushing forward, towards the cars, but Sam noticed his friends pulling back. Hoping
this portended a return to sense, Sam pushed back against the crowd to let them pass and then watched as the last one grabbed James and tugged him back with them. James didn’t pull away from him, and Sam realized the way to get through to him was to get through to his friends first.

He followed them back to the space behind the angry crowd and stepped close as they spoke among themselves.

“I’m going,” one said. “This is getting crazy.”

The others nodded, leaving James looking at them incredulously. “You’re leaving! What about making a difference?”

“The only difference we’re going to make here is to our grad school admissions. It’s going end bad, James; we can all see it. I’m getting out of here now. You can be smart and come with us, or you can be dumb and stay. Either way, I’m taking my car with me, so if you don’t come with us, you’ll be stuck.”

James glared at him. “I don’t care about being stuck. I care about doing the right thing!”

“This isn’t the right thing,” Sam interjected. “It’s not just here; things are going to be bad all over. We need to get out of the city. You aren’t helping anything by staying. You’re adding your anger to the problem. There are other ways to make a difference.”

James crossed his arms over his chest. “Like what, Sam?”

“Like not getting kicked out of college. Like really becoming a lawyer and defending people like Rodney King properly.” He sighed. “I wish we lived in a world where things like this didn’t happen, where everyone could have a fair trial, but we don’t. You can’t fix the world by shouting at it, but you can maybe change it by protecting the right people and hoping everyone else does the same.” He looked James in the eyes. “This isn’t about King anymore. This is about you—all of you. You’re all angry, and I don’t blame you for that; I would be, too. Don’t let that anger destroy you though. It doesn’t end in anything but pain.”

James’ friend, the one that was taking the others home, looked at him. “You really understand that part, don’t you?”

Sam thought of Lilith. His anger and hatred toward her had almost ended the world. He had let it overpower him and it cost lives. He couldn’t fix that, as much as he wanted to, but maybe he could stop James from making the same kind of mistakes in his own life. “Yes, I do. I have made my mistakes.”

He nodded. “I’m going. James, are you coming?”

James shook his head jerkily. “No. I’m not a coward. I’m seeing this through to the end.”

“I’ll see you when you’re packing up your dorm room then,” his friend said.

James’ expression darkened, and Sam thought he was going to throw a punch, but he merely glowered as his friends walked away.

When they were out of sight, James turned back to the crowd and started his chant of ‘No Justice’ again.

Sam heard the siren of a police car start up and people began to push backwards. He grabbed James’ arm so they wouldn’t be separated, and he peered over the heads of people to make sense of
what was happening. It looked like the cops were driving slowly through the crowd, forcing their way out. Sam could hear people slapping their hands down on the cars again, and he willed the cops to keep their heads and not barge their way out with speed, hurting people.

He and James were forced backwards by the retreating crowd and Sam used the moment to drag James to the side to talk again.

“People are going to start getting hurt now, James.”

“Yeah, because the cops are driving into them!”

That wasn’t technically true, but Sam didn’t correct him. “It’s all on camera,” he said.

“Like that made such a difference last time,” he spat.

“That’s not what I mean,” Sam said. “The news crews are probably going to be streaming this tape soon. Your mom is going to be sitting at home watching the news and she’ll see what’s happening, maybe see you here in your jersey. How do you think that will feel for her?”

“She’ll know I am doing the right thing,” he said, though he didn’t sound so certain now.

“She’ll be scared for you,” Sam corrected. “Let’s at least get away and call her, let her know you’re okay. There’s nothing happening here but anger. You’re not achieving anything. Call your mom and then we can think about what comes next.”

“I’m coming right back,” James said. “I don’t care what you do, but I am coming back here and adding my voice to the fight.”

The fact he was willing to leave at all was enough for Sam for the moment. He would make his case for leaving properly when they were away from the fire of the crowd, when it would be easier for James to think straight.

“Fine,” he said. “Let’s get out of here now before you get hurt. I’ve got a car a few blocks away.”

James stared back at the shouting crowd again for a long moment and then he nodded.

Sam walked briskly away, glancing back to make sure James was with him. When they’d turned a corner, he waited for James to fall into step at his side and then slowed slightly. He wanted James to calm down slightly before they called Missouri.

“Why did you come here, Sam?”

“I came to save you from destroying your future,” Sam said.

“But why would you think I needed saving? How did you know the verdicts were going to be not guilty?”

“I didn’t,” Sam lied. “But I figured trouble was coming either way. It would either be anger or celebration, but I knew it was going to get ugly. I didn’t want you to be a part of that, so I came.”

James sighed.

“You’re disappointed by that?” Sam asked.

“No, I just figured you were expecting the outcome because you realized how under the heel of White America we are.”
“Would that have been easier for you?” Sam asked.

“Yes. It would have told me you were closer to understanding how it is for us.”

“I don’t understand,” Sam said. “I’d be insulting you if I pretended I did. I see how unfair it is and how you’re mistreated, but I’ve never been treated like that, so I can’t know how you feel.”

James nodded thoughtfully. “At least you’re not pretending.”

Sam stayed silent, having no answer to give.

When they reached the lot where he’d parked the rented Honda, Sam led James over to the payphone on the corner and took the change from his pocket and dropped it into James’ hand.

“Make the call. Tell her you’re okay.”

James picked up the phone and fed in coins and then waited before adding in more. After a moment his expression twisted with regret and he said, “Yeah, Mom, it’s me.”

Sam turned away to allow him a little privacy, but he couldn’t block out the words James was speaking.

“No, Mom, I’m not leaving. Don’t you see how important this is for us?” He listened for a moment then sighed. “I have to do this, don’t you see? This is for all of us. We have to make it clear we’re not going to take this lying down.” There was a long pause and then he said, “I don’t know, but I have to be a part of it. Sure. Talk to him.”

He tapped Sam’s shoulder and Sam turned to see him holding out the phone. Sam took it and held it to his ear. “Missouri?”

“What are we going to do, Sam?” she asked. “He’s not budging.”

“I noticed. I don’t know that we can do anything. Legally, he’s an adult now.”

“You have to stay with him. Don’t let him go off alone. If he feels he has to be there, he’s going to need someone taking care of him.”

“You know I will,” Sam said. “And I’ll call when I can.”

“You do that. I’ve never been so scared in my life, Sam. You have to take care of him and yourself.”

“I’ll be fine,” Sam said easily. “You know that.” He was the invincible one after all.

“You may not be able to die, but you can still be hurt plenty,” she said. “Be careful, Sam. I want both of you safe.”

“We will be,” Sam promised. “We’ll speak to you soon.”

He handed the phone back to James and listened to him reassure her that he would be okay and say his goodbyes. When he set the phone down, he turned to Sam and said, “Mom says you’re staying with me.”

“Well, since you’re too stupid to admit that this is going to end badly, I don’t think I have a choice.”

James glowered. “I’m not stupid. I am doing the right thing.”
“I thought that once, too,” Sam said. “And a lot of people were hurt because of it. I had someone that stuck with me though, so I am going to be that someone for you.”

“Good,” James said. “Because I know where we’re going.”

“Where?” Sam asked.

“Downtown,” James said. “I figure all the people that matter have left the courthouse now, so no one is hearing us. They’ll have to listen to us at the Parker Center. That’s the police headquarters.”

Sam remembered the Parker Center from his essay and he knew what was going to happen there.

“That’s a bad idea, James,” he said. “There’s going to be even more people there, and more cops. People are going to be hurt.”

“Then we’ll be there to protect them,” James said.

“Dammit, James!” Sam said. “You could be hurt.”

“I’m going anyway.”

He made to walk away but Sam grabbed his arm. “Listen to me, this is a bad idea! We’ll stay in the city if you need to, but I’m not letting you go there.”

“That’s the thing,” James said angrily. “You don’t let me do anything. You’re not my father, Sam. You never have been. I am a man now and I can decide what I do. If you want to come, I won’t stop you, but don’t think you have the right to tell me what to do. You’re not him.”

Sam felt like he had been punched. He had never pretended to be Richard. He knew James had a father, even if he was gone, and he hadn’t ever tried to take his place. He loved James like a son, but that was something he had always kept to himself. He had never allowed himself to infringe on Richard’s place in his life.

He pushed down the hurt and retaliatory anger and took a breath. “I never tried to be your father, James,” he said calmly. “I only ever wanted to be your friend.”

“Well you’re doing a crappy job of it,” James said. “Now, are you coming with me?”

Sam knew James would go there with or without him, and he had promised both himself and Missouri that he would protect James, so he nodded and said, “Over here,” as he led him to the car.

James climbed into the passenger side and Sam got in behind the wheel. He started the engine and glanced at James before pulling out of their spot. He could see in the set of James’ jaw that he wasn’t going to be able to persuade him out of what he was planning. All he could hope was that James would come to his senses when he saw what was happening around him and that they would be able to get out without more trouble.

xXx

It wasn’t a long drive from the courthouse to the Downtown district, but Sam saw the signs of what was coming almost at once. People were running down the streets towards the courthouse, ready to join the remaining crowd, and others were piling into cars going in the other direction, wanting to be in the thick of the action like James. Some were armed with guns. Others just had planks of wood and tire irons. They all had destruction on their minds.
The deeper they got into the city, the more people there were. Sam saw their first real sign of damage on the edge of Koreatown. Someone had set a liquor store on fire. There were no fire crews in attendance. Outside the store was a man and woman, clinging to each other and watching it burn.

James, who had been sitting silently in his seat, staring out of the windshield, watched them as they passed.

“Do you want me to stop?” Sam asked him.

“No,” James said. “We can’t help them.”

There were a lot of people they wouldn’t be able to help, Sam knew. The sixty people that would be dead before the end were beyond their help. As long as James was okay, Sam could live with anything else, but he hated it. He didn’t want to be here. He wanted James safe in his dorm room and himself back home watching this all unfold on the news with George. He was scared for James.

As they drove farther into the city, he began to see outright crime. People were running across the street with arms full of things they’d looted. There were windows to stores smashed and people climbing into the openings and coming out with stolen things.

“This is crazy,” James said.

“This is a riot,” Sam said. “Are you ready to turn around and go home yet?”

“No,” he said determinedly. “I’m going to play my part.”

Sam sighed and drove them on into the chaos.

After a long time of silence, James sat up straight in his seat and said. “They’re white.”

Sam frowned as he looked out of the window. There were people of all races and colors in the streets. Some were watching what was happening with curiosity whereas others were actively fighting and looting.

“I know,” Sam said.

James turned to his and his eyes were wide. “Don’t you see? We’re fighting together. It’s changing.”

“No,” Sam said regretfully. “This isn’t about Rodney King or the verdicts for most of these people. It’s about anarchy. Have you seen any cop cars since we left Simi Valley? I haven’t. People are taking advantage of the fact the city is unguarded. This isn’t political for them. It’s self-serving. And it's going to get worse.”

“How do you know?”

“I know people,” Sam said. “Are you ready to turn back now?”

He saw James’ hesitation, and he hoped it was finally time for him to see this was beyond them, but James eventually shook his head and said, “Keep driving.”

Sam did as he was told, driving along the streets and watching the chaos happen around him. He noted the lack of sirens, even though there were other sounds. A crowd was approaching. Sam
could hear them chanting, “No justice, no peace!” The protest chant from before had become a threat.

He slowed down as the crowd turned the corner and suddenly rushed forward toward a storefront.

“What are they doing?” James asked as they began to beat at the window.

“Looting,” Sam said.

“That’s a gun store,”

Sam looked at him. “They apparently feel that they need to be armed for this party.”

There were the sounds of gunshots, and a new group raced around the corner with guns held over their heads. One of them seemed to stare right into Sam’s eyes as he shouted, “Race traitor!”

Sam reacted instinctively. He grabbed James by the back of the neck and pulled him down in the seat so he was out of sight. He slammed his foot down on the gas, but he wasn’t fast enough. The acceleration had caught the attention of the armed men. They turned their guns on them and James shouted with shock as a bullet smashed the rear window.

He struggled to straighten up but Sam pushed him down. “Stay down,” he growled.

“Are you okay?” James asked desperately.

“I’m fine,” Sam said. “Don’t move.”

“Did it get you?”

“No. It hit the back, but we have to get out of here. Stay down and hold on.”

He gunned the engine and tried to turn the car. There was another crack and the windshield smashed. The bullet pierced the headrest of James’ seat.

James cursed loudly, and Sam reassured him, “It’s okay. We’re getting out of here.”

There was another crack and Sam felt the car swerve as one of the tires was shot out. Sam gripped the steering wheel tight and said. “This is going to be rough, James, brace yourself.”

He heard a small noise in return, and he knew that the reality of their situation had finally settled over James.

He knew what he should do—let the car coast to a stop—but he couldn’t do it. He needed to get them away from the people that were shooting at them. He put his foot down, swerving slightly, and made a turn into a street to the right.

There were no more gunshots, but Sam didn’t slow. He needed them as far away as possible, even though he knew it was dangerous to drive like that. They were a few hundred yards down the street when he felt the car jostle and bump as the rim gave way.

“Brace yourself!” Sam shouted as the car careened towards the side of a building. He threw himself down over James as the car slammed to a stop with a crunch.
Chapter Thirty-Six

There was silence for a moment and then James groaned. Sam sat up quickly and said, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” James said weakly, straightening up.

Sam looked through the broken windshield for a place to hide. There was a hotel a couple buildings away and there was a man in the doorway, staring at them.

“Are you going to be able to walk?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. I’m not hurt.”

“Okay. On the count of three, I want you to get out of the car and run toward that hotel. I’m going to be right behind you. Ready?”

“Yeah.”

Sam leaned between the seats and grabbed his two bags from the back footwell where they’d landed in the crash. He reached for the door handle and opened it. “One… Two… Three!” He threw open his door and almost fell out. James was on his feet and, at Sam’s command, he began to run at the hotel. The man in the doorway seemed too stunned to react, but when James reached him, he started to close the door. Sam got his foot in the way to block it straight away and then he shouldered it open, sending the man sprawling back.

“You need to leave!” the man said. “Get out!”

“No can do,” Sam said. “We’re checking in.”

“I’m closed. Everyone is gone.”

“You kicked people out?” Sam asked scathingly.

“They ran when it started,” he said. “You need to run, too.”

Sam ignored him, turning his attention to James. He looked scared but Sam could see no sign of blood. “Are you hurt at all?” he asked. “Don’t lie to me. This is important.”

“My ribs ache,” James said. “But that’s all. I’m really okay, Sam. I’m sorry for—”

“Later,” Sam said curtly. They could deal with apologies and explanations later. He turned his attention back to the hotelier. “You, we need a room. Somewhere on the ground floor. Whatever’s nearest to the fire escape.”

“You can’t stay here. I’m closed.”

Sam stepped closer to him. “We’re staying here until this is over. You can work with me and get paid, or you can fight me and get nothing.”
The man threw up his hands. “Room twenty-two.”

“Thank you,” Sam said, pulling out his wallet. He took three bills out and handed them to the man. “This should cover it.”

The man snatched the money and went behind the desk to fetch them a key. He handed it to Sam and then hesitated before asking. “Do you think they’ll come for my hotel?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said honestly. “If I were you, I’d find a place to hide. That’s what we’re going to do.”

He nodded. “This hotel was my father’s. If they destroy it, he’ll never forgive me.”

“What’s your name?” Sam asked.

“Anton.”

“Well, Anton, I’m Sam and this is James. You have probably saved our lives letting us in. I think your father will be proud of that more than he’d be angry about a hotel.”

Anton shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“Then it doesn’t matter what he thinks,” Sam said. “You’re a hero, and I have a feeling that’s just the start of your story.”

Anton didn’t look comforted. He seemed scared still. So did James. It was as if all the fire of before had left him, and now he was just a kid again. Sam needed to get him somewhere he would feel safer.

“Which way to our room?” Sam asked.

Anton pointed at a door to the right and Sam gripped his bags and led James by the arm towards it. James’ muscles were bunched and hard.

They walked along the hall to their room and Sam unlocked the door. He gestured James in ahead of him and shut the door behind them. There were two beds and James staggered over to one and sat down. Sam set his bags on the second bed and pulled his case out of the larger of the two.

“What’s that?” James asked.

Sam unlocked the box with the combination and flipped open the lid, revealing his Taurus 9mm. “It’s protection.”

James looked startled. He already knew Sam had a gun, so Sam guessed it was the reminder of what was happening to them that had made him react.

“You need to call your mom,” Sam said.

“What do I say?”

“Tell her whatever you feel you need to, but make sure she knows we’re safe now.”

James nodded. “Okay.” He sounded very young again and made no move toward the phone.

Sam picked up the card beside the phone that told them how to make an external call and dialed nine before Missouri’s number. When it rang, he handed it to James and tried to give him privacy
by occupying himself loading his gun. He still heard James’ voice though as he said, “Mom, it’s me… Yeah. I’m okay. We’re somewhere safe now.” He listened for a moment and then said, “I know. I’m really sorry…”

xXx

The only way Sam was able to persuade James to go to bed that night and try to get some rest was by promising he would, too. They each lay in silence for a while before Sam heard James’ breaths fall into soft sighs of sleep. Sam crept out of bed and walked to the window. He pulled open the curtain and looked at the street outside. The darkness was broken by the streetlights, and he could see people moving around outside. Some were in rowdy groups, making their way along the street with the looted goods in carts and in their arms. Others were more occupied with rioting, and they were armed.

Sam hated what he was seeing. People were completely without order, just doing and taking what they liked. The worst part was he knew it wasn’t nearly over. There were four days of riots before the police and military took back the city and the death count would be high before the end.

He wished there was something he could do, but he couldn’t think of anything. One man alone couldn’t bring order, no matter what invincibility tricks Michael had done to him. Even if he was able to try, it wouldn’t work. The city raged for days and that was fact; it was one of the things he couldn’t change, no matter how much he wanted to. All he could do was take care of James and make sure he made it out safely. For now, that meant keeping him inside. The fact they had been attacked already on the road made him see they couldn’t steal a car to escape. They had to sit it out here. Still, it burned Sam. He was a hunter, he saved lives, and lives were going to be lost out there and he couldn’t stop it.

He looked across the room at James where he slept with just a tuft of hair above the bedclothes. What did he feel about what had happened? Sam understood his need to be at that courthouse in a way, the need to fight back against something, because he had felt that same kind of fury in his life. Though he wasn’t fighting the injustice that had dogged James’ life—his was about Lilith and what she had taken from him—it had ended worse than James’ presence here had. They had each made their mistakes.

He turned back to the window and looked out at the street. A woman was stumbling along in the middle of the road, and there was blood on her face and jacket.

Sam quickly crossed the room and eased open the door, careful not to wake James. He slipped out of the room and ran along the hall and through the door to the lobby. Anton was nowhere in sight. Sam unbolted the front door and rushed into the street. The woman had passed the hotel now, but when he called to her she turned back with a look of horror and began to run.

“Stop!” Sam called. “I’m not going to hurt you, I swear. I can help you.”

She slowed, and Sam caught up to her and touched her arm gently. She flinched away, and Sam circled her until he was facing her. Her lips were pressed into a tremoring line and her eyes were glassy with tears.

“It’s okay,” Sam said gently. “I can help. My name is Sam.”

“Chrissy,” she said quietly.

“What happened to you, Chrissy?”
“They were breaking into the liquor store, and I was cut by the glass.” She reached a hand to the bleeding cut on her cheek and Sam gently caught her wrist.

“Don’t touch it unless you can’t help it,” he said. “Your hands are dirty. You need to keep the wound as clean as you can. Will you come with me? I can help you clean it up.”

“Come with you where?” she asked.

Sam was pleased it wasn’t an outright no. He pointed back at the hotel and said, “In there. My friend and I have taken a room. There’s no one else there but us and the manager. You’ll be safe.”

“Okay,” she said uncertainly. “I guess I don’t have a choice.”

“You do,” Sam said. “You don’t have to come anywhere with me if you don’t want to. Are you close to home? Can I get you there instead?”

“I live in Highland Park. I came with my friends for the party.”

Sam wanted to sigh, but he held it in. The fact she and others were obviously thinking of this as a party was a dangerous theme of the riots.

“I can’t get you back there,” Sam said. He pointed to his wrecked car. “That’s my ride. It’s not safe for us to try to steal something else either. Will you come with me?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “I guess.”

Sam starting walking back to the hotel and she fell into step at his side. When they were inside, he bolted the door closed behind him and then went behind the desk. He took the key for room twenty from the hook and then searched under the desk.

“What are you looking for?” she asked.

“This,” Sam said triumphantly, pulling out a first aid box. “Come with me.”

He led her through the door and towards the room beside his and James’. He didn’t want James waking up to a stranger in the room, especially an injured one, and he thought Chrissy would do better with privacy, too. He unlocked the door and went in and flipped on the light. Like Sam and James’ room, there were two beds, and Sam gestured her towards one. She sat down, seeming grateful for the rest.

Sam set the box down on the second bed and opened it. He hadn’t been hopeful about its contents, but it was a comprehensive kit. There were butterfly bandages and a small bottle of hydrogen peroxide.

“This is good,” he said, attempting to reassure Chrissy as he held up the hydrogen peroxide. “I can clean the wound, but it’s going to sting. Can you handle that?”

She shook her head jerkily. “No! That stuff hurts. My mom used to use it when I skinned my knee. Please, don’t do that.”

“Okay,” Sam said soothingly. “We don’t have to. I’m going to need to clean around the wound, though so the bandages will stick. We can leave the disinfectant until we can get you to a hospital.”

“Thanks,” she said.

Sam opened a pack of gauze and drizzled it with sterile saline. “This might sting,” he said. “Do you
“You do it,” she said. “I don’t want to see it.”

“You want to do it yourself?”

“Okay,” Sam said. He dabbed at the drying blood on her cheek around the wound, and flinched with her as she hissed between her teeth. “Almost done. You’re doing great.”

When the area was clean and dried, he unpackaged the butterfly bandages. He apologized as she squeezed her eyes shut and then he pinched the edges of the wound together with one hand while he used the other to stick the bandages in place. He used three to be sure it would hold, and then patted her fisted hand.

“You can open your eyes now,” he said. “It’s done.”

“How does it look?” she asked.

“It’s not so bad now. It’s mostly covered, and it wasn’t that big to begin with. Those kinds of wounds always bleed a lot. Do you want some painkillers? There’s some Tylenol in here.”

“Yes, please.”

Sam opened the bottle and shook two into her hand then he went to the bathroom to fill the toothbrush glass with water for her. She took it from him and swallowed the pills.

“Thanks.”

“No problem,” Sam said. “It’s good to be able to help someone.”

“I was so scared,” she said. “We all saw it on the news and we thought it was finally time to take a stand. It wasn’t what I expected when I got here though. People were just trashing the place.”

“They are,” Sam agreed.

“They’re angry.”

Sam nodded. “They have good reason to be.”

Chrissy started to speak but she cut off abruptly as James’ voice echoed along the hallway outside. “Sam! Sam!”

She froze, her eyes wide with fear.

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “It’s my friend. I’ll be right back.”

He crossed the room in long strides and opened the door wide. “James, I’m here.”

James spun around to face him and Sam saw he looked terrified. “Oh, thank god,” he said. “I thought you were gone. What were you doing?”

Sam stepped back and gestured him in. James came into the room and stopped dead.

“Chrissy, this is James,” he said. “Chrissy was hurt during the looting so I brought her back here to help her.”

“You went out!” James’ tone was accusing.
“Only out front,” Sam said. “She needed help.”

James looked annoyed for a moment and then he released his pent breath in a sigh and looked past Sam to Chrissy. “It’s nice to meet you, Chrissy.”

“You, too,” she said quietly. “Your friend saved me.”

“He does that,” James said wryly, turning to Sam. “You won’t go out again, will you?”

Sam winced. He couldn’t make that promise. If he could help someone else, he would. There were other things they needed if they were going to be here until the riots were over. Like food. Sam needed to investigate the hotel to see if it had kitchens. If not he was going to need to get stuff in for them.

“Sam…” James said in a warning tone.

“We’ll see,” Sam said.

James shook his head. “You remember when Mom used to say that when I was a kid? She always meant I wasn’t getting when I wanted then, too.”

“You’re not a kid anymore, James,” Sam said. “You know what I’m saying.” He softened his tone. “Go back to bed and get some more sleep. You, too, Chrissy. You’ll be safe here.”

Chrissy nodded and looking longingly at the bed.

“We’re just next door,” Sam said. “I’ll leave the door open in case you need us.”

“Thanks,” she said.

Sam towed James out of Chrissy’s room and back into their own. James looked annoyed still and, as Sam went to the window to check the street, he said, “I promised my Mom that I would take care of you. You’re going to make it real hard, aren’t you?”

“I’m going to do what I have to do,” Sam said. “There are people out there in danger that we can help. You mom knows that, and she’d expect me to help them.”

“She’d expect you to help yourself, too,” James said.

“That’s what I am doing,” Sam said, turning back to the curtain.

Missouri would expect him to help people as she knew what he was trying to atone for.

xXx

In the morning, Sam went to Chrissy’s room to check on her and then went in search of Anton to find out about food. He found a door marked private on the fifth floor and he knocked loudly. There was a pause and then the sound of many bolts disengaging. Anton was dressed in the clothes from the night before, and the haggard look on his face showed Sam that he’d had no more sleep than him. He didn’t look pleased to see Sam. He scowled at him and kept the door half closed as a barrier between them.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“We need food,” Sam said. “We can’t go out to find food while the riots are happening. Do you have a kitchen here?”
“No, I do not,” he said.

His reply was a little too quick and a little panicked for Sam to believe him. “Where is it?” Sam asked.

“I don’t have a kitchen.”

Sam crossed his arms over his chest. “I know you’re lying, and I understand why. But I also know I have already given you enough money to cover food for us for a week at least, so I’m not going until you tell me where it is.”

Anton sagged. “Downstairs. To the left of the office is the restaurant. There is a door through there that leads to the kitchen.”

“Thank you,” Sam said, “I appreciate your honesty. I’ve got some for you. There’s another woman staying here now, too.”

He looked aghast. “You are bringing in more!”

“She was bleeding on the street. I brought her in and helped her.”

“You cannot do this. It is my business. My home. You can’t just let people take it over.”

Sam sighed. “I am bringing in anyone that needs it, but I will do you a deal. Whatever it costs you in food and rooms, I will pay for it. I might not look like it, but I have money. I will give you my credit card and you can charge what you like to it.”

Sam had plenty of money to cover the bill, and the credit limit wasn’t so high that he would be cheated of too much. If it kept himself, James, and Chrissy safe—and anyone that came after—it was worth it.

“I have no choice, do I?” he asked.

“No,” Sam said. “You really don’t. You can fight it, be a asshole, or you can help people and be proud of yourself.”

Anton narrowed his eyes. “How do I know I can trust you?”

Sam pulled his wallet out of his pocket and handed over his credit card. “There. Do what you like with that, but don’t interfere with what we’re doing. Understand?”

His fingers curled around the plastic card and a greedy look came into his eyes. Sam knew the argument was over. As long as the man could make money from them, he would be satisfied.

Sam left him standing in his doorway and walked back to the stairs. He went to the ground floor and through to the restaurant. The tables were polished wood with place settings already laid and small vases in the center of the tables. Sam passed through them into the kitchen and smiled to himself. It was a large industrial looking space. Sam went straight to the huge fridge and opened it to find neatly boxed and labeled foods. At the bottom of the fridge were large bottles of juice. Sam picked up one of orange juice and closed the door. He would get some sugar in them all and then they could come back to make real food. He had something else he wanted to do, too.

He went back to the bedroom, pausing outside Chrissy’s to see if she was awake. The door was closed, and he could hear no movement within. He thought he would take care of James first and then see how she was doing. When he opened the door to his own room, though, he saw Chrissy
was in there already. She and James were sitting opposite each other of the edges of the beds. Both looked up as he entered, and Sam thought James looked relieved.

“I found the kitchen,” he said. “And Anton has been taken care of.”

“What did you do to him?” James asked.

“I paid him,” Sam said. “He shouldn’t give us any more trouble.” He went into the bathroom and brought out the two toothbrush glasses then he took a mug from beside the coffee maker and poured them each a juice. “Here. Get some sugar in you and then we’ll sort out some real food.” He grinned at Chrissy. “If we ask him nicely, James might make some of his scrambled eggs for us. They’re pretty good.”

“Eggs in a riot,” Chrissy said. “It seems crazy that this is actually happening.”

“It does, but it is,” Sam said. “All you can do is take care of yourself right now. Is there anyone back home you can call to let them know you’re okay?”

“My mom,” she said.

“Maybe do that,” Sam said. “And you should call home, too, James. Let your mom know you’re still here and okay.”

James nodded vaguely. “Yeah. I will. What about you though?”

Sam frowned. “Your mom will let George know what’s happening. He’s the only other person to think about.”

“That’s not what I meant. You said all me and Chrissy can do is take care of ourselves. What are you planning?”

Sam should have expected him to pick up on it. James was smart. The truth was that he had a plan for himself. Chrissy had made him see that there were people out there that weren’t just here for the chaos. They had come expecting something else, and they had been caught up in the riots. He had this huge hotel that he could use to protect people. The ones that didn’t want to be a part of what was happening out there anymore, the ones that were hurt, could be brought in and kept safe. He couldn’t stop the riots. He couldn’t save lives in the usual way, but he could still help.

“I’m going out again,” he said.

Chrissy’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open, but James looked like something had been confirmed to him.

“I figured,” he said. “You want to bring more people in, don’t you?”

“I do,” Sam said. “There are more people out there like us that stumbled across this thing and are trapped now. If I can find them, I can help. People could be hurt.”

“Mom said you’d be a superhero,” James said with a wry smile. “Seemed like she knew more than me since I’ve never seen you do anything heroic before, unless you count giving men time off work for their kids’ recitals.”

Sam laughed. “Yeah. I’m a regular Superman. But I need to do this. If you’re uncomfortable with it, we can keep you safe in here and I’ll spread everyone else out on the other floors, but people do need help.”
“I think we should do it,” James said. “It’s my fault you’ve been dragged into this, so if this what you need, I’m down.”

“I’ll help,” Chrissy said, though she sounded nervous.

“Only do what you can,” Sam said, wanting to give her an out. “You’ve been hurt already. You might be better off staying in here and resting.”

She looked relieved for a moment and then a shadow crossed her face. “No. I’m helping. If you hadn’t come out and got me, I don’t know what would have happened. I owe you.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “I am going to get some supplies and see who I see out there. You two get yourselves some food—make some for me for when I get back—and start unlocking the rooms.”

“I could come with you,” James offered.

The idea almost made Sam shudder. He couldn’t let James go out there. It wasn’t safe. “No. You stay here and prepare the place. And take care of each other. If I’m right, things are going to be busy here for a while. Do what you can for yourselves while you can.”

“Okay,” James said. “You be careful out there though.”

“I will,” Sam promised.

He went to the chair where he had draped his jacket and tucked his gun into the back of his pants and concealed it with his jacket. He didn’t want to openly carry for fear of drawing trouble, but he wanted it for protection. There were a lot of people armed out there, some that would shoot at two men in a car just because they happened to be of different races.

He smiled at each of them and then walked out of the door.
Chapter Thirty-Seven

Sam felt nervous out on the streets. There was a smell of smoke in the air, and when Sam looked up at the rooftops, he saw billowing black clouds. The city was burning. Homes and businesses were being destroyed. Sam imagined Missouri and George watching the news and knowing that he and James were trapped there. He hoped they had faith in him to get them back home safely.

People were everywhere, but none of them looked like they needed help. They were happy smashing windows and slugging back bottles of liquor. Sam went left up the street, past his wrecked rental, and searched the storefronts for what he needed.

He had decided that he was going to concentrate on preparing the place before bringing people in. Once they were there, it would be harder for him to go out again. He didn’t want to leave James and Chrissy vulnerable without him. He needed to get everything he could on as few trips as he could and then hope the rest came to him.

He turned a corner and saw a drug store. Sighing with relief, he checked around for people looking at him then ducked up the alley beside the store. He wanted what was inside, but he didn’t want people following him in and looting if he could help it, though he supposed a drug store would be lucky if it made it out of this without being plundered.

He found a door that was reinforced with kick plates, but the lock looked standard, and he bent down and inserted his picking tools. It took him a minute to find the catch, and then the door clicked open and he slipped inside. He had come into what looked like a staff break room. There was a small kitchenette and table and chairs. Sam walked through it and into a larger space. There were shelves upon shelves of boxes and packages, all labeled and neatly lined up.

Sam saw everything that he could need on offer, and he breathed a sigh of relief that caught in his throat as he heard the click of a gun’s safety being disengaged. A light flipped on above him and a cold voice said, “Put your hands up and turn around.”

Sam obeyed slowly, turning on his heel to face the woman aiming her revolver at him. She was older than Sam. Her dark hair was pulled away from her face in a braid that fell over her shoulder. Her blue eyes were fixed on Sam, and the hand that held the gun was shaking.

“I’m not here to hurt you,” Sam said.

“No, you’re just here to rob me.”

“It’s not like that,” Sam said. “I am here to take stuff, yes, but I have money. I was going to leave it by the register for you. I just need some supplies.”

“I don’t have the kind of drugs you’d want,” she said.

“I’m not here to steal drugs.”

Sam stared into her eyes, trying to communicate his sincerity. He felt vulnerable with his hands held up. He was fast, but he wouldn’t be able to pull his gun before she got a shot off, and going back to the motel covered in blood would freak James out, perhaps more than ever when he saw
Sam had no wounds for it to have come from.

“Let me explain,” he said.

“You have thirty seconds, and if I don’t like what I hear, I’m pulling the trigger,” she said.

Sam swallowed hard. “Me and my friend are in a hotel around the corner. We were shot off the road and so we hid there. I saw a woman in the night going along the street, bleeding. I took her in and cleaned her up. She’s okay now. I want to help others, too. There are people trapped in the city because they came into something they didn’t understand. If I can get them inside somewhere safe, I can protect them. I need supplies as people are going to come in injured. I only have a basic first aid kit and—”

“Time’s up,” she snapped.

Sam held his breath, waiting for the shot to come. It didn’t. For a long moment, she just stared at him and then she lowered her gun.

“I believe you.”

“Thank you,” Sam said fervently, slowly lowering his arms.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Sam Taylor. I’m from Kansas.”

“So, what are you, Sam Taylor? Cop or fire fighter?”

Sam smiled slightly. “I’m a foreman for a construction company.”

“How did you end up here?”

“My friend came for the verdicts and I was worried about him so I came, too. He just wanted to see justice done, but he got caught up in this whole thing. I think a lot of people did. Those are the people I want to help.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “We better get you set up with what you need then.” She set her gun down on a counter and walked around a set of shelves, coming back with two blue plastic crates. She set them down and began to gather things from the shelves. “You’re going to want bandages and gauze,” she said. “And some painkillers might be helpful.” She stopped and turned to him. “Come on then. You want to help these people, you’re going to need supplies. Just load a crate with whatever you need.”

“No need,” she said. “I have insurance. You can be a looter. Save your money for what matters.”

Sam could have explained he had plenty of money for both, but he didn’t. The fact she was willing to do this for him was more than he could have hoped for, and he didn’t want to take the generous gesture away from her.

He grabbed packs of dressings from the shelves as she sorted through boxes of medication and tucked them into the crates. Sam felt like a kid in a candy store, free to take whatever he needed, and he took what he thought would help. He had no idea how many people he would find and what injuries he would face, but he was going to take as much as he could in case there were a lot.
When the crates were loaded with things, she stacked them and gestured to Sam. “Load up. We’ve got people to help.”

“We?”

“I’m coming with you,” she stated as if it was obvious.

“No,” Sam said. “You should stay here and guard your store.”

She shook her head. “My father was an army medic. He wouldn’t be able to look at me if he knew I was protecting money when there were people out there that needed me. We’ll go to this hotel of yours. Besides, like I said, I’m insured, and now I’ve been looted by you, maybe that’s my lot.”

Sam lifted the crates in his arms and nodded. “Let’s go then.” He walked through the break room and out of the back door to the alley. She followed him out and then closed the door tightly behind her.

As they set off along the alley toward the street she said, “By the way, I’m May Thurston.”

“Nice to meet you, May,” Sam said. “And thank you for this.”

“You’re welcome,” she said. “Let’s go save some lives.”

Sam was feeling positive as he turned the corner to the hotel and moved along the street without people approaching him, a feeling that disappeared entirely as turned the corner and saw the hotel door held open. Anton was just inside, gesticulating wildly at James and Chrissy who both looked upset. Sam rushed forward and set the crates down.

“What’s going on here?” Sam asked.

“He wants us to leave,” James said.

Sam turned his glare on Anton. “We’re not going anywhere.”

“This is my hotel. I demand that you leave. They say you’re bringing more people here. I heard them. You cannot bring rioters into my hotel. They will destroy the place. You must leave.”

“We will not,” Sam said firmly.

“I have to defend my business!”

“You have to defend people first!” James said angrily. “I already said I’d make sure you were paid for any damage. This isn’t about money. This is about you being scared. Being scared doesn’t make you bad, but kicking us out and stopping us helping people that need it does.”

Anton flushed with color. “I am not a bad man.”

“Then don’t make a bad man’s choice,” Sam said.

“You cannot stay,” he said, though his voice was quieter now.

Sam didn’t know what to do. They needed the hotel both for themselves and for others. If they were kicked out, they’d be unprotected, and they wouldn’t be able to help anyone.

“The hell with this,” May said. She pulled her gun and aimed it at Anton who paled and held up his hands. “I know you Anton Rose, and I know the kind of man you are. I fill your prescriptions for
you, and you always complain about the price. These people are trying to help others, and they’re willing to pay you for it. Do something good and help them. Do it by choice and we’ll make this hotel famous as one that saved people when the riots came. Make us force you, I will make sure every one of your neighbors knows you are a coward that refused to help people that were desperate.”

Anton was defeated, and they all knew it, but he obviously still had pride and he looked at Sam and asked. “You will pay?”

“I promise we will pay,” Sam said. “You already have my credit card. I told you to charge what you wanted on that, and I will make good on anything that doesn’t cover.”


“Good,” May said, tucking her gun away again. “Stay and help if you can, Anton. If you can’t, find somewhere out of the way to hide. We’re going to be busy.” Without waiting for him to obey, she turned to Sam and said. “You get out there and start finding people. We’ll get everything set up.”

Sam nodded. “Thank, May.”

“Sam…” James said quietly.

“I’ll be fine,” Sam reassured. “I’m not staying out long. I have another idea.” Without giving James further chance to argue, he walked away along the street and turned right toward the main road through the city.

xXx

The damage in Sam’s street was minimal compared to what he saw deeper in the city. People were running amok. Stores were burning, most had busted windows and there were burned out husks of cars in the middle of the road, some still smoldering. There were people all across the streets, running, fighting, standing in groups, some even sitting on the curb and sharing a bottle of vodka. Most of them were armed. Sam had never seen anything like it. In one night, they had turned LA into a war zone. The worst part was that this was a war they were enjoying. This was their own city they were burning, and there could be no victor. It would carry on until the police and military took control again, and the damage would cost over a billion dollars to repair.

He looked up and down the street for what he needed, his eyes falling on a hardware store. Keeping his head down and not making eye contact with anyone, he made his way over to it, skirting a crowd of men and women that were jostling each other and joking around.

The store had already been looted, and Sam climbed through the broken window and into the store. There was a smell of chemicals in the air, and the floor was puddled with what looked like water but Sam guessed was something more sinister. He stepped carefully around it and walked along the aisles, looking for what he needed.

There was a rack of spray paints near the register, and Sam grabbed one in bright red then carried it back to the window. He climbed out and started along the street. He passed the crowd and one of the men turned to look at him. “Hey, look at that,” he said, pointing at the can in Sam’s hands. “Bama’s gonna tag the city.”

Sam ducked his head and made to walk away.

“You too good to talk to me, Bama?” the man asked, following him and grabbing his arm.
Sam allowed himself to be turned. He didn’t want to fight. Even though he knew he could defeat his man in a hand to hand or with weapons, even if his friends joined in, since Michael had made him essentially untouchable, he wanted to get through this calmly.

“I just want to help people,” he said. “I’m going to set somewhere up for first aid. That’s all. I don’t want trouble.”

“You’re in the wrong city if you don’t want trouble,” the man said, running his hand over his shorn head. “LA is all about trouble right now.”

“I’ve seen,” Sam said. “People are being hurt. I want to help them.”

The man laughed. “Bama wants to be a hero.”

“Don’t be a dick, Drew,” one of the other men said. “Maybe he can help Rhiannon.”

Sam turned to him. “You’ve got someone here that needs help?”

“Yeah. My girlfriend got burned when the car went up. I’m worried about her.”

Sam would have pointed out that he couldn’t be that worried if he was here on the street with his buddies instead of taking care of her, but he didn’t want to anger them. He just wanted to get to the girl that needed his help.

“Where is she?” Sam asked.

“In the diner,” he said, gesturing down the street. “I’ll show you.”

Sam nodded and followed him down the street to a diner that was emblazoned with the name ‘Wally’s Waffles’. The door had been broken open, but the windows were still intact. Sam went inside and saw three women sitting at one of the booths. One of them was cradling her arm against her chest, and her face was tear streaked.

“Rhiannon?” he asked as he approached.

She looked at him suspiciously. “Yeah?”

“He’s here to help you,” her boyfriend said.

“At least someone is, Theo,” one of the girls said with heavy emphasis, glaring at the man that had brought Sam in.

The man, Theo, scowled, but didn’t speak.

Sam fixed his attention on Rhiannon. “I’m Sam. Can I see your arm?”

She held out her arm and Sam saw the skin was reddened and sore. It hadn’t blistered, though, and he thought that, while it would be painful, it wasn’t too serious.

“Okay,” Sam said. “Have you cooled it?”

“I held it under the water for a few minutes,” she said.

“That’s good,” Sam said. “We’ll cool it a little more though. It will feel better.” He turned to Theo. “Can you go to the kitchen and see if they have any Saran wrap?”
“Saran wrap?” he asked doubtfully.

“Trust me,” Sam said.

“Okay,” he said slowly, turning and walking away.

Sam thought he was making a good show as a boyfriend now, despite the fact he had left her before.

He turned to one of the women. “I need a cold compress. Can you find me a clean towel or cloth and soak it in cool water?”

“Sure.” She patted Rhiannon’s shoulder and then got up from the table and went through to the back.

“I’m going to wrap it and cool it here, and then I’d like you to come with me to the place we’re setting up. You can lie down there and rest. You’ll be safe. We have painkillers, too.”

“Painkillers sound good,” she said.

“I bet.”

“Here. I got it,” Theo said in a voice that made Sam think he was expecting praise.

Sam set the paint down on the table then took the roll of plastic wrap from him and pulled off a long piece. “Okay, Rhiannon, this may hurt a little at first, but once we’re cooling it down, it will feel better. I’m just going to wrap it around the burn.”

“You’re going to put that around me?” she asked doubtfully.

“It’ll help,” Sam promised. He took her wrist gently and stretched out her arm then carefully wrapped the plastic around the burn. She flinched and a tear slipped from her eye, but she didn’t pull away from him.

Her friend came back with a wet towel and gave it to Sam with a short laugh. “Wow, Rhiannon, you look like leftovers.”

Rhiannon laughed wetly, and Sam smiled.

He handed her the towel and said, “Hold this against the burn. It will keep it cool, and that’ll take away some of the pain. Now, what are the rest of you planning next? Are any of you close to home or a safe place you can go?”

“No,” Theo said. “We bussed in.”

“Okay. There is a place I can take you where you can be safe, but it you’re coming, you’ve got to leave any weapons you have outside.”

The girls nodded but Theo looked unsure. “What about the heat you’re packing?” he asked Sam.

“I trust myself to only use it if I have to,” Sam said. “I don’t trust you.”

“I’m coming,” Rhiannon said. “I don’t have any weapons.”

Sam nodded. “And the rest of you?”
The girls all nodded, but Theo continued to look mutinous.

“It’s your choice,” Sam said. “You can come with me and be safe, or you can stay out here and enjoy the riot.”

“I’ll stay, thanks,” Theo said.

One of Rhiannon’s friends scoffed and Rhiannon looked hurt. She quickly schooled her features into an indifferent expression and raised her chin. “Fine. But you and me are over, Theo. I don’t want an idiot that wants his knife more than he wants me.”

“Good for you,” one of the girls cheered while the one that had brought the towel wrapped an arm around Rhiannon’s shoulders.

Theo’s cheeks flushed, and his tone was bitter as he said. “It’s your loss, bitch.”

“Let’s go,” Sam said, picking up the paint can and gesturing for them to follow.

He led them outside and along the street. He stopped on the corner and pointed down the street. “It’s the Hotel Montefort. Tell them Sam sent you and I will be there soon.”

The three girls walked along the street, Rhiannon nestled between them. Sam watched them go and then turned to the wall. He uncapped one of the cans of paint and sprayed the wall of the building with a large cross. He overlaid it and extended it, making it as large and obvious as he could, then he added an arrow pointing towards the hotel. He hoped people would see it and know where to come for help.

He did the same on the wall opposite the corner and then walked back to the hotel. He painted the cross on the wall by the hotel door, not caring about Anton’s reaction when he saw it, and added the words: Help Here.

He opened the door of the hotel and followed the voices to one of the rooms. Rhiannon was sitting on the edge of a bed and her friends were sprawled out around her, seeming perfectly at ease. May was lifting the wet towel from the wound and looking at the burn. She turned as Sam cleared his throat from the door and said, “Saran wrap, Sam?”

“It’ll keep it moist and clean,” Sam said.

“It’s a new one on me,” she said. “But I’ll trust you.” She turned her attention back to Rhiannon and said. “How about we get you some painkillers?”

“Yes, please,” she said quietly.

Sam nodded and smiled at May and then went in search of James. He found him in the kitchen with Chrissy. They were making a pile of sandwiches. As Sam entered, James’ eyes brightened and he smiled. “You’re back.”

“Only for a minute,” Sam said. “I need to go out again, but I brought someone back. May is taking care of her. It’s just a minor burn, but she’s jumpy. Her friends are with her. I need you to make sure she drinks plenty. It’ll help the burn heal.”

“On it,” James said.

“Thanks,” Sam said. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”
“Sam…” James said tentatively.

Sam turned back and smiled. “I know. I’ll be careful.”

“That too,” he said. “But I was going to say thank you. You’re doing awesome.”

“You, too,” Sam said with a wink. “See you soon.”
Chapter Thirty-Eight

Sam’s simple plan to help and shelter people developed over the next two days into something much bigger than he’d imagined. People came alone, in pairs, and in groups. Some were unhurt but scared; others came with injuries. They brought them all in, found them rooms in the rapidly filling hotel, and then Sam and May tried their best to take care of them. They had lost no lives yet, but the injuries coming in were growing more severe, and Sam was worried that there would be someone soon that they couldn’t save. He didn’t want James to experience that.

Sam was proud of how James was reacting to all he was dealing with. He was doing his best to help. He made sure people were eating and drinking with Chrissy’s help. He fetched and carried for Sam and May, and sometimes sat with the injured that had come in alone when no one else was there. On the whole, people were good about taking care of each other. Though Sam and May were leading the work, everyone had a part in it. People were showing the best of themselves. Many were young, people that had come into the riots expecting something different to what they’d got. Some were older, and they were more reserved, ashamed that age was no protection for this kind of mistake. There was even a man that Sam guessed was homeless before the riots started that brought a trash bags full of belongings with him. He was now ensconced in a room, and Sam had instructed James and his helpers to make sure he had plenty to eat. Sam wondered what would happen to him when the riot was over and the hotel’s ownership had been returned to Anton. It wouldn’t be long. When the sun rose again, it would rise on the last day of the riot. The police and military would be moving in soon to restore order.

Sam was glad. It was getting worse out there. Rather than people’s energy burning out, it seemed to be growing worse. There were even more fires. In places the sky was black with smoke that blocked out the sun and smuts of ash rained down. Sam knew he was doing what he could for his part of LA, but he wondered about the people that wanted to flee outside of their immediate area. Did they have somewhere they go hide until it was over?

They made regular contact with Missouri, though they would not be able to speak to her again now until they saw her. She was flying to Berkeley that morning to meet James and Sam when it was over. They were going to take James back to college and help him deal with any fallout from what he had done. Sam was pleased they had found something meaningful to do instead of just hiding and waiting for it to be over, and not just because of the people they were helping. James might take heat for skipping classes to come to LA for the verdicts, but Sam would be able to show he hadn’t been a part of the riots. He was fighting for people’s safety here, working tirelessly. Sam knew James was just as exhausted as he himself was.

None of them had slept properly since it started. Even James’ first night of rest had been interrupted by his search for Sam. They were in bed now as May was taking a shift at triage with her group of helpers, but Sam couldn’t sleep. His mind was too full of everything that was happening.

“Sam?” James said quietly. “Are you awake?”

Sam rolled over and leaned up on his elbow, facing James, seeing his eyes catching the glow of the streetlight outside the window.
“Are you okay?” Sam asked.

James sat up and leaned against the headboard. “I can’t sleep,” he said. “I keep thinking about all the people out there, the ones that haven’t found us. How many of them do you think died because they have nowhere to go?”

Sam could have told him the final death count would be more than sixty. So many lives lost to the anarchy and anger that fed the riots. So many families mourning. It was tragic.

“I don’t know,” he lied. “Too many.”

“I really thought I was doing the right thing coming here,” James said. “I thought it was going to be great, and when those damn verdicts came through, I wanted to make a difference.”

“I know you did,” Sam sighed. “This isn’t down to you and people like you. It’s the few that started this thing and it snowballed. You came here for a good reason, and you have helped people by being here.”

“Not like you,” James said. “You’ve been out there. You’re a hero. They all say it. You saved lives.”

Sam looked away. “I’m not the only one. There are a lot of people doing what they can.”

James sighed heavily, and Sam looked at him.

“James?”

“I lied before, when I said I hadn’t seen you do anything heroic. You used to be a hero before, too. When I was a kid, I used to wish my mom and you would get married,” he said quietly. “I wanted you to be my real dad. You were so good, and Mom was happy when you were there. She was so sad after Dad died, and you made her happy again. That made you my hero.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Sam said. “Your mom saved me. When I met her, I was in a mess. She took care of me. All I did was give her something else to focus on other than her grief.”

“But you love her,” James stated.

“I do, so much, but not in that way. You mom is my best friend. She’s like a sister to me. I will never be able to repay her for what she has done for me. She’s an amazing woman.”

“She is,” James agreed. “And you’re an amazing man. I think you would have been a good fit for each other. I really wanted it.” He sighed again. “I told you that you weren’t my father the other day because I was angry, and I’m sorry. I did love my real dad, and I miss him every day, but you have been like a dad to me all this time, and I forgot that for a moment.”

Sam swallowed hard. He had never imagined he would hear these words from James. They made him feel a swell of emotion that he fought not to release, as it would embarrass James.

He took a breath, calmed himself in the way he had spent years perfecting, and said, “You’re like a son to me, James. You and your mom both gave me something I didn’t realize I needed until I had it. I’m never going to be a father to anyone else, but that doesn’t matter to me because I have you.”

James smiled. “You could be a father still. You’re not that old. You’re only, what, fifty?”

Sam sat up and threw his pillow at him. It caught him in the face. “I’m forty, you ass.” It was his
birthday that day, not that there was anything to celebrate with the city burning.

“You don’t look it,” James said. “What’s up with that? If you shaved your beard, you could probably pass for thirty still.”

“It’s good genetics,” Sam said with a pang of guilt for the lie. “My dad didn’t age fast either. I got lucky.”

“I guess. But you could be a dad.”

“I can’t,” Sam said. He had known that for a long time. In truth, he had known it since he lost Jess. His future with children and a wife had been lost that day. She was the only one he’d ever truly wanted to create a new life with. He was satisfied now with James, as he’d never thought he would even have that.

“Okay,” James said, seeming to sense the finality. “We should get some more sleep. We need to spell May in a few hours.”

“You sleep,” Sam said. “I’m going to get some coffee and then check in on the others.”

“You need rest, Sam. We don’t know how long this is going to last.”

“It’ll be over soon,” Sam said. “The authorities have had time to prepare themselves now. I think they’ll act soon.”

“You think?” James asked hopefully.

“Pretty confident,” Sam said, turning away to hide his smile. “It’s almost over.”

xXx

Sam stood at the door of the hotel and watched the group approaching. There were seven of them, men and women, and they looked wrecked. Their clothes were ragged and their faces smudged with soot. Sam suspected they’d been in the thick of the action. That didn’t worry him; he’d refused no one a place as long as they dumped their weapons before coming in. Now the fourth day had dawned people were exhausted and just wanted somewhere safe to hide until it was over. The shine of the riot had worn off.

The oldest looking person in the group came forward as another faltered and said, “Is this the hospital?”

“It’s a lot of things,” Sam said. “We have rooms if you’re looking for somewhere to shelter through. Are any of you hurt?”

“No,” he said, and his friends shook their heads.

“Good. You need to dump your weapons if you’re coming in.” He pointed at the mailbox on the corner where people had been depositing guns and knives. “Put them in there if you want to come in.”

He waited to see if they’d argue. Some people did at first, and a few had refused to do it, so Sam hadn’t let them in. This group all exchanged a glance and nodded though. They went to the blue mailbox and one by one posted weapons inside. One man had more than anyone else. He kept pulling guns from pockets and even a flip knife from his boot. When they were all unarmed, they walked towards the hotel. Sam stepped back to let them in and then registered a man standing back
from the crowd with a large zoom lens camera in his hands.

He raised it and pointed it at Sam standing in the doorway.

“Hey,” Sam said, holding a hand to his face to block the camera. “What are you doing?”

“Making you famous, buddy,” he said. “Can I get a quote?”

“What? No."

“But you’re the man in charge, right?”

“No, that’s someone else,” Sam said. “I’ll get him for you.” He thought if he could get James on camera doing good, it would stand as evidence that he hadn’t been a part of the violent riots when they got him back to college.

He gestured the group inside and said, “There are rooms on the fourth floor that are still empty, and there’s food in the kitchen. If you want to help, find me or a woman called May and we’ll tell you what to do. If not, stay out of our way and let us work. No fighting or you’re out. Understand?”

“Yeah, sure,” the man that had spoken before said, making for the elevators.

Sam sighed and raked a hand over his face then started as he turned and saw the photographer standing behind him.

“Is it okay if I take some photos around the place?”

“No,” Sam said. “People here are hurt. The need rest not a photo shoot.”

“How many would you say you’ve saved so far?” he asked, leaving his camera to hang from his neck and pulling out a notepad and pen.

Sam shook his head and walked away, stopping abruptly and turning for the door when he heard a voice crying outside, “Help!”

He sprinted out of the door and ran towards the voice. Two people were staggering along the street, a boy that looked like he was still in his teens and a girl that was the one shouting. She had the boy draped over her shoulder and was trying to lead him toward the hotel. The boy’s face was starkly pale and there was blood soaking down the sleeve of his t-shirt and arm. He looked like he was barely keeping his feet.

Sam ran at them and scooped the bleeding boy into his arms. He felt the blood slick against his skin as he jogged back to the hotel and through the door. His vision wavered a moment and the flashbulb of the reporter’s camera clicked, and he cursed at him as he shoved past him and inside.

“May!” he shouted, running towards his and James’ room. The only other ones free were upstairs, and Sam wanted to get the kid down fast so he could start taking care of him.

People peered out of doors as he passed, shouting for May, and Sam caught sight of Chrissy standing with a bloody cloth in her hands.

“Chrissy, find May. I need her,” he commanded.

She darted away, and Sam carried the boy into his room and set him on his bed. The kid’s eyes fixed on Sam and then rolled back in his head as he passed out. Sam tore back the sleeve of the kid’s shirt and saw the small circular wound with raw edges.
“He was shot,” a shaky voice said behind him. “They shot him.”

Without turning, Sam clamped his hands down around the kid’s thin arm and said, “In that blue crate there’s packs of gauze. Get some opened up for me and a roll of bandage.”

She obviously obeyed as a moment later a wad of gauze was held in his line of sight. He took it and pressed it hard against the small wound and then lifted the arm to check the back. There was a wound pulsing blood from where the bullet had exited, and it was larger than the entry wound.

Sam slapped a wad of gauzes on it and turned to the girl beside him. She was holding a roll of bandage in her shaking hands.

“Can you help me?” Sam asked.

She nodded. “Tell me what to do.”

“I’m going to move my hands out of the way and you’re going to tie this bandage around his arm, holding the gauze in place. You want to make it tight enough to hold, but not so tight it cuts off the circulation. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” she said, unravelling the bandage with fumbling fingers.

“That’s enough,” Sam said when she had a good length. “Don’t worry about cutting it yet. We just need to get it in place.” He moved his hands slightly so he was still holding the gauze but she could lay the gauze over it. “That’s right. Just like that,” he guided. “Now tie it off. Perfect.”

He moved his hands to check the bandage wasn’t too tight. It wasn’t, but blood was already soaking though it. He needed to do more than staunch the bleeding. The kid needed stitching up.

“What’s you name?” Sam asked, unthinkingly laying a bloody hand on her shoulder.

“Rachel,” she said.

“And what’s your friend called?”

“Paul. He’s my brother. Is he going to be okay?”

Sam couldn’t make promises. For all he knew Paul could be one of the sixty-three dead from the riots. “I’m going to do what I can,” Sam said.

He looked to the door to see if May was coming and registered the clicking at last. The reporter from outside had followed him in and was snapping pictures of them. Sam glowered at him, but his attention quickly moved on as May shoved past the reporter and rushed into the room.

“What do we have?” she asked.

“Gunshot wound,” Sam said. “It’s a through and through, but he’d losing a lot of blood. Did you bring any suture kits in the crates?”

“No!” she said, aghast. “I didn’t think.”

“But you have them in the store?” Sam asked.

“Yes. I supply a clinic. I will go get them.”

“No!” Sam said quickly. “I’ll get them. You stay here and keep an eye on him. He lost
consciousness when I got him in, and it may be kinder to let him stay out for now, but watch him closely.”

“How bad is it, Sam?” she asked.

Sam dropped his voice so he wouldn’t be overheard by Rachel and said. “It’s not good. The exit wound’s nasty.” He raised his voice again. “I’ll come right back.”

“Sam, wait.” She rooted in her pocket and pulled out a set of keys. “This is the doors and this small one’s for the drug cabinet. We’re going to need morphine. Bring me some of the syringes from the middle shelf, too.”

Sam nodded. “On it.” He pushed out of the room, past the reporter and the people that had been drawn to the room by the noise, and to the lobby.

He caught up with James at the door, and his eyes widened as he saw Sam. “What happened?” he asked.

“We’ve got a pretty bad gunshot wound,” he said. “I’m going back to the drugstore to get supplies for them.”

“I’ll come with you,” James said.

“No!” Sam said, then he softened his voice. “I need you here taking care of the others. May is going to be busy with this new one. Keep the door shut while I’m gone.”

“What if someone comes and they’re hurt?” James asked.

“I’ll be quick,” Sam said. “I have to go James. You stay in here.”

“Why is it okay for you to risk your life out there but not me?” James asked. He wasn’t hostile; he just wanted an answer.

“Because you matter so much more,” Sam said, gripping the back of his neck and tugging him into a brief hug. “I’ll see you soon.”

He dashed out of the door and ran along the street. The real chaos from the main drag had spread to their street now. Buildings were burning, and people were attacking the windows that had not yet been smashed. Only the hotel was untouched. Sam didn’t know whether it was because of the number of people defending it or if the rioters were respecting the makeshift hospital for what it was. Either way, he was grateful.

He felt eyes on him as he ran down the street and turned the corner, but no one confronted him. Perhaps the sight of the blood on his shirt but the fact he was still upright made them think twice; perhaps they were just happy with the trouble they were already making.

When he got to May’s store he stopped and cursed. It had been looted. The window at the front had been broken and the door was hanging off its hinges. Sam felt a wave of sorrow for May. She was insured, but she was still going to have to deal with the destruction of her business. It would take her time to rebuild it.

There were people around, and Sam didn’t want them following him inside and perhaps getting access to the drugs May kept locked up, so he slipped down the alley and let himself in through the rear door. The break room didn’t look as though it had been touched, but Sam saw that the stores room had been ransacked. There were boxes of supplies and bottles of medication spread over the
flood, and some of the pill bottles had been emptied to lay in colorful puddles.

Sam went straight to the middle shelves and looked for suture kits. He found them on among a pile of dressings that had been tipped onto the floor. Grateful that they were well packaged, Sam picked up a few and set them down on the counter then searched through the middle shelves for syringes and needles. He found them and scooped a handful into his pocket.

He looked around for where May locked up the powerful drugs. He saw three cupboards on the far wall, and he opened them one by one, seeing a gunmetal cabinet inside the last. He unlocked it with the key and sighed with relief as he saw the rows of boxed drugs. He took one out and tipped it into his hand. It contained a glass vial marked as diamorphine. With a rush of relief, Sam took three more and stuffed them in his pocket. He was sure they wouldn’t need that many, but he didn’t want to have to come back again for any reason. He grabbed a few more marked penicillin, too, then locked the cupboard again, knowing it was dangerous for people to have access to these kinds of drugs, and snatched up the suture kits from the counter. If someone saw him carrying them, they would probably not be interested, especially given the proximity to the hotel.

He rushed outside again and locked the door behind him, then ran along the alley into the street. No one seemed to notice where he had come from, but as he turned the corner, a group of men began to shout at him.

“What you got here, huh? You found anything good?”

“Just medical supplies,” Sam shouted, not slowing. “Someone has been shot.”

“A pig?” someone shouted hopefully.

“A kid,” Sam said.

He heard a pursuit behind him and he stopped. He wanted to get back, but he didn’t want these people following him to the hotel, especially not when he saw the guns they had in their hands.

Swallowing hard, he said, “Someone has shot a kid. He’s got to be sixteen, tops, and his sister brought him to us. I need to sew his wound closed before he bleeds out.”

One of them men looked suspicious, but another grabbed his arm and said, “Let him go, Jake. He’s one of those medics. We don’t want a kid dying.”

“Please,” Sam said.

“Fine, go save the kid. Wouldn’t want to interrupt your good work,” the man sneered.

“Thank you,” Sam said, turning and running back to the hotel.

As instructed, James had kept the door closed, but when Sam hammered on it, calling his name, it was ripped open and James looked at him with an expression of exquisite relief. Sam cast him a quick smile then ran along the hall to his room. May was standing by the bed, taking Paul’s pulse.

“How is he?” Sam asked.

“His pulse is fast,” May said. “But the bleeding has slowed.”

“Good,” Sam said, dropping the suture kits onto the bed and emptying his pockets. “Give him the morphine.”
May unwrapped a syringe and jabbed the needle into the vial to draw up the drug.

Rachel shifted nervously as she watched, and Sam touched her shoulder. “This is going to help him. We’re going to take care of his pain then we’ll sew up the wounds.”

“He’ll be okay?” she asked, watching May inject her brother with the painkiller.

“We’re going to do what we can,” Sam said, in lieu of what could be a lie.

May straightened up and turned to Sam. “I’ve never done sutures before.”

“I have,” Sam said. “I can do it.”

“You’ve done it?” James asked from the doorway.

Sam glanced at him but didn’t answer. He shouldn’t have slipped. James would have questions that Sam couldn’t answer now. He wondered if he could get away with a lie about a military tour. He didn’t want to tell a lie that big, but he wanted to tell James the truth even less.

“I need a little space,” he said gently to Rachel and opening one of the suture kits. “Sit on the other side of the bed if you like. You can hold his hand. May, I need you to keep the other side padded.”

Rachel moved around the bed and sat down. She picked up Paul’s hand and said, “It’s okay, Paul. They’re going to help you.”

Sam went into the bathroom and scrubbed his hands clean then dried them carefully. In one of the crates was a box of gloves, and he pulled on a pair then sat down beside Paul on the bed.

Feeling all eyes on him, he picked up the pre-threaded needle and took a breath. He hadn’t done stitches for a long time, but he knew what he was doing. He pinched the edges of the wound together and whispered, “Don’t look, Rachel,” before pushing the needle through Paul’s skin. He didn’t flinch, which made Sam think he was deeply unconscious. He was glad he felt no pain, but he would rather see a reaction that told him Paul was still strong.

He made the stitches as small and neat as he could, trying to keep his breaths steady so he didn’t worry Rachel more than she already was. When he was done, he wiped around the wound and held out a hand to May. “Dressing, please.”

She unwrapped one and put it in his hand. He covered the now closed wound and took a breath. He still had the exit wound to do, and that was going to be more complicated, but he was feeling more confident now. The calm of training had descended over him and he was in the mindset of a hunter again. He could do this.

He was so focused on what he was doing that he didn’t notice the clicking of a camera behind him.
Chapter Thirty-Nine

Sam was clock watching as he dashed around. He had no idea how long it would be until help arrived, but he hoped it was soon. Things outside were getting worse, and not a minute went by without the thrum of a helicopter overhead. He hoped it was the police, preparing for their assault on the city, but it could just as easily be the press filming the scene.

The press presence in the hotel was absent for now, but Sam wasn’t confident he had left. He thought it was just as likely that he was somewhere within still, interviewing people to create his story of the LA Riots.

Sam had no time to search him out though. He was busy moving between Paul and the other injured people, monitoring them and checking wounds.

He was on the second floor helping a woman with a burn injury when he heard a ruckus outside the room. He reassured the woman he’d be back and then walked outside, a frown on his brow and feeling of dull anticipation in his gut.

“What’s going on?” he called as he walked toward the sound.

“Sam!” someone called back. “You’ve got to help!”

Sam quickened his steps and saw a girl he thought was called Jemma with a few others gathered around a person lying on the floor.

“What happened?” Sam asked, moving her aside and sucking in a breath. Chrissy was on the floor, her eyes closed and her body still but for fast breaths.

“She just collapsed,” Jemma said. “She was looking for you and then she just dropped. What’s wrong with her?”

Sam bent to examine her. He checked her pulse and found that it was fast, and her skin was slick with sweat and far too warm. He lifted her into his arms and said, “Come with me,” to Jemma. “We need to get her downstairs.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Jemma asked, rushing along at her side.

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “Maybe an infection.” An idea occurred to him and he gasped. Her face. He hadn’t cleaned the wound. She hadn’t wanted him to, and it had seemed fine, but she was showing all the signs of an infection now. Had he done this to her through his negligence?

Jemma pressed the button to summon an elevator and the doors slid open. Sam carried Chrissy inside and Jemma rushed in after him, pummeling the button for the first floor. The doors closed frustratingly slowly, and they began to descend. When the doors opened again, Sam rushed out and nodded at the door. “Get the door for me.”

Jemma held it open for him and Sam rushed through, calling for May. People lining the hall pressed back to let him pass, and May peered around his bedroom door.
She gasped. “Oh!”

“She just collapsed,” Sam said. “She has a fever and her pulse is fast. I think she has an infection.” He hurried into the room and set her down on James’ bed.

May came to them quickly and took her pulse. “That is far too fast.” She pressed her fingers to her throat and said, “Her lymph nodes are swollen too. I think you’re right about the infection.” She eased away one of the butterfly bandages from Chrissy’s cheek and said, “This seems okay though. Did she have any other injuries?”

“None that she told me about,” Sam said, fighting to keep the defensive note from his voice.

“She needs antibiotics,” May said. “Find me the wound so we can clean it.”

She went to the table where Sam had left the vials of morphine and penicillin and began to draw up penicillin into the syringe.

“Help me, Jemma,” Sam said. “We’re looking for any kind of cut or wound.”

Jemma came to the other side of the bed and pulled up the hem of Chrissy’s shirt, revealing her stomach. Sam pulled up her sleeves and checked her arms, finding nothing.

“Here,” Jemma said. “Oh. That looks nasty.”

Sam glanced down at Chrissy’s exposed calf and sucked in a breath. There was a small wound, not even an inch long, but it was swollen and red lines were stretching from it up her leg.

“May,” he said nervously.

“I know,” May said tersely. “She needs help.”

“What can we do?” Sam asked.

“Load her with penicillin and hope she’s not allergic,” she said. “Clean and bandage that wound. Try to get on top of her fever.” She looked up and met Sam’s worried eyes. “And we hope for help to come soon.”

Sam checked his watch. It was noon. Help had to come fast for both Chrissy and Paul. He felt sickened at himself for not checking if she had more injuries. He’d had her dashing around the hotel taking care of other people when she should have been taking care of herself. He had failed. He knew the thoughts weren’t helpful but try as he might he couldn’t banish them.

May touched his arm. “They will be okay, Sam. They’re both young and strong.”

Sam wanted to snap at her, but he knew she didn’t deserve it. He bit down hard on his tongue and nodded. “Will you be okay here? I’m going to man the door a while.” He needed just a moment to get himself together.

“Sure. I’ll call you if anything changes.”

“Thanks, May,” Sam said gratefully. “Really.”

May smiled sadly at him. “Thank you, Sam. You’re the one that’s done all this.”

She was right. He was the one that had let Chrissy down.
Sam was standing by the door. There had been no one new to come in, though things outside were bad. There was a lot of damage and it seemed there were more people than ever out there. Sam tried not to catch anyone’s eye as he stood just inside, waiting for people that needed help.

He heard voices behind him, people discussing normal things like getting food and who was staying where, but he paid little attention to them. His thoughts were with Chrissy and Paul, their most critical cases. They needed more help than they had to give in the hotel—like a real hospital with doctors and equipment. With each sound that he heard, Sam listened for anything that might mean the police and military were coming for them.

“Sam?” Someone touched his arm and he started. “Sorry.”

Sam turned and looked at James. He looked pale, tired, and scared. He had clearly heard about Chrissy. She had become his friend as they’d worked together to help people, as they’d both overcome their fear for others.

“You’ve heard,” Sam said.

“Yeah. I just got May some ice from the kitchen to try cooling her down. May says she seems stable though. That’s got to be good, right?”

“It is,” Sam said, not sounding as convincing as he’d hoped. “And real help will be here soon.”

“You really think so?”

“I’m sure,” Sam said. “I bet they’re moving in already.”

“I hope so,” James said quietly. “What are you doing out here?”

Sam frowned. “Does someone need me?”

“Everyone needs you. But that’s not what I meant. You’ve hardly stopped since this thing started; you’ve barely slept. Why are you out here now instead of doing the rounds?”

“I’m being a coward,” Sam admitted. “I just need a minute to get myself together before I try to help the others.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” James said firmly. “I know what you’re thinking, and you couldn’t have known Chrissy was hurt more than she said. I didn’t know either. I’ve spent most of the last few days with her, and I didn’t notice either. She hid it well.”

Sam blew out a breath. “She did, but I didn’t even ask, James. I should have cleaned the wound on her face, too. It’s a miracle that one isn’t infected, too.”

James shrugged. “It’s rough that it’s happened, but you’ve got to think of all the people you have helped. Paul is probably alive because of you. You stitched his arm up, stopping the bleeding. I couldn’t have done that.”

“You’d be surprised what you can do when you have to,” Sam said.

“Is that how you did it?” James asked. “Because you had to?”

“Something like that,” Sam said distractedly. He was listening to what was happening outside. There was more shouting than before, and he thought he could hear someone in pain.
“What’s going on?” James asked.

There was a cry of pain outside and a scream, and Sam snapped, “Stay in here. Don’t come out for anything,” then ran outside.

A little along the street, just out of sight of the hotel door was a group of men dragging another with them by the arms. As Sam approached they dropped the man to the ground and began to beat him with the butts of their guns. The man was already bloodied and beaten, but they weren’t stopping.

Sam felt sick at the sight, and he ran at them, shouting for them to stop. They all straightened and looked at him, and Sam cursed at them. “Leave him alone!”

“Make me,” the short man at the front of the group said.

Sam was incensed, and it made him lose caution. He had seen too much, done too much, and he was at his limit. He was thinking of Paul, a kid that had been shot, Rachel who was scared for her brother, and Chrissy who could be dying from an infection Sam should have spotted. He pulled his gun and aimed it at the short man.

“I will,” he said.

He wasn’t scared. There was nothing they could do to him that would kill him, and he was angry enough to enjoy a fight. The fact they were beating the man rather than shooting him made him think they were out of ammo, and he knew he wasn’t.

The man laughed. “Going to shoot me, big guy?”

“Not unless you force me to,” Sam said. “But I will unless you don’t run now. Your guns are empty. Mine isn’t.” To emphasize his point, he pointed it at the air and pulled the trigger.

Some of the men looked afraid, but the man at the front laughed. “You’re right. Most of our guns are empty. But I saved a bullet for a special occasion, and I think this counts. He raised his gun quickly and fired off a shot. The bullet impacted Sam’s right gut and he stumbled back. The pain was searing, but there was no weakness following as there should be. Michael’s protection had saved him.

Someone shouted his name behind him, but Sam didn’t respond. His attention was on the man that had shot him. “You shouldn’t have done that,” he growled.

He aimed his gun and pulled the trigger, shooting the man in the upper arm. The man cried out in pain and clapped his hand to his wound, trying to staunch the rapidly flowing blood.

“What the hell are you?” one of them men asked.

“Angry,” Sam said, pointing his gun at him. “Get out of here before I decide to vent my anger on you.”

One of the men broke ranks and ran. It seemed to be the permission the other men needed to join him. Only one stayed back to help his injured friend away, though they still moved fast. Sam watched them go, panting, and then other senses returned to him. Someone had an arm around his shoulders, and they were speaking through gasping breaths.

“Sam! Oh, God, Sam! What did he do to you? We have to get you inside!”
“I’m fine, James,” Sam said.

“You were shot!” James said, pulling at his shirt where the small stain of blood had wet his shirt and the neat hole of the bullet had torn the fabric.

“It missed,” Sam said, pulling away from him and walking toward the man that had been beaten.

“You’re in shock,” James said. “Come inside. We need to get you fixed up.”

“I’m fine,” Sam said again.

The man that had been beaten was bloodied and his face was swollen from the attack. One eye was open, but it seemed to stare through Sam. He knew before he bent to check for a pulse that it was too late, one blow had been too many, but he had to be sure. There was no thrum of life beneath the skin though. He was dead.

Sam straightened up and shook his head. “Go inside, James,” he said.

“Is he dead?” James asked weakly.

“Go inside,” Sam said again. The reality of the moment settled over him and he spun to grip James’ shoulders. He had just shot what looked like the leader of a gang that had beaten a man to death. They could come back at any moment, and they could retaliate. James could be hurt.

“Get inside now!”

James didn’t move, so Sam grabbed his arm and dragged him to the hotel. People were at the door, staring out, and Sam shoved them aside to get James in to safety. He led him all the way to their room where May was watching over Paul and Chrissy, only releasing him when he was inside.

He grabbed his jacket from the chair it was draped over and pulled it on to hide his shirt.


“A man is dead,” Sam said. “There was a gang beating him to death. I shot one of them and they ran, but it was too late for their victim.”

“Are you okay?” May asked.

“Fine,” Sam said. “They shot at me but missed. Right, James?”

He turned to his surrogate son and implored him with his eyes to agree.

“Yeah,” James said hollowly. “We were lucky.”

Sam mouthed ‘thank you’ and asked May, “How are we doing here?”

“Stable,” May said. “Chrissy seems to be tolerating the penicillin fine, and Paul was conscious for a while earlier. I think he’s rallying. It’s shock for him as much as the blood loss.”

“Good,” Sam said, casting Rachel a smile which she returned tentatively.

“Sam, can I talk to you?” James asked stiffly.

“Sure,” Sam said. “Let’s go check on the others.”
He walked out of the door and carried on the hall all the way to the lobby. There were two girls holding the doors open, and Sam watched as two of the men that had come in the day before carried in the beaten man’s body.

“Where do we take him?” they asked Sam. “Should he go in the kitchen, in the freezer so he doesn’t… you know.”

“No,” Sam said. “Help will be here soon. Just find a room for him. Clear someone out if you have to.”

“Okay.”

They carried him away and Sam continued along through the restaurant where people were eating at the tables. They smiled at Sam and James as they passed through the kitchen and looked away as Sam closed the door behind him.

James stood silent for a moment, watching Sam carefully, then he said, “You’re not in shock.”

“No,” Sam said.

“You’re not hurt.”

“No.”

“I need to see it.”

Sam knew he had to give James what he needed. He had seen enough not to need some kind of explanation, though Sam needed time to think of what explanation he could give that wouldn’t completely open James’ eyes to the real world.

He pulled up his jacket and James fumbled with his shirt, pushing it aside to see the bloody but perfect skin.

“I saw him shoot you,” he said.

“I know.”

“How are you alive?”

Sam closed his eyes for a long moment. “I’m different, James. That’s all I can tell you right now. I will explain properly, but not here. There are other things we have to do.”

“What are you?” James asked.

Sam winced. The question was asked in a neutral voice, but it was the meaning of the words that hurt him. James had said he was like a father, and that had been perfect, but now he was looking at him with distrust. It was only going to get worse when he knew the truth. Sam had ruined what they’d had.

“I’m not dangerous,” Sam said. “You don’t need to be scared of me.” It hurt him to say it.

“I’m not scared,” James said.

Sam heard the lie but didn’t acknowledge it. “Good.” He drew a breath. “We should get out there again. Help will be here soon.”
“How do you know what?” James asked. “You keep saying it, but it’s still chaos out there.”

“I just know,” Sam said. “It’s part of my story.”

Leaving James standing staring after him, Sam walked away, going back to the other people that needed him.

xXx

Sam was just checking in on Paul and Chrissy when he heard the sounds of shouting in the hall. Wondering what new nightmare was coming, Sam nodded to May and hurried out of the room. Some people were shouting and clapping each other on the back while others wiped at tears, looking scared.

“What’s going on?” Sam shouted over the din.

“They’re here, Sam,” Jemma said excitedly. “Marines. We heard them outside. They’ve come to take back the city.”

Sam let himself feel the wave of relief for a moment and then he pushed through the crowd to the door. People were gathered around it, looking out, and Sam shouted at them to move. They cleared a path for him and he ran outside.

He could hear it now, too. A man’s voice was speaking over a loudhailer. “This is the First Marines Division of the United States. You will lay down your weapons and clear the streets. Return to your homes. I repeat, this is the First Marines Division…”

Sam ran outside, through the people that were crowding the street, running both toward and away from the approaching Marines. A Humvee was driving along with a man standing up in the back. He had the loudhailer in his hand and he was repeating the message. Around him were troops of armed Marines in fatigues with stony looks on their faces. Sam ran through the crowd facing them with his hands raised in front of him.

“Help!” he shouted. “We need help!”

One of the Marines broke rank and came to Sam. “Yes,” he said curtly.

“We have a medical clinic set up,” Sam said. “There are two critically injured and many more with minor wounds. Please help.”

“Master Sergeant,” he shouted over his shoulder. “We’ve got casualties.”

A man in fatigues with a red and yellow insignia badge on his sleeve came over and said, “What’s this?”

“I have two critically injured people and more minor injuries,” Sam said. “We set up a clinic in a hotel.”

He looked surprised. “You did? What’s your rank, Soldier?”

“No rank,” Sam said. “I’m a construction worker. We have a pharmacist taking care of them, but they need a hospital.”

The sergeant turned to the Marine that had approached Sam and said, “Take a Humvee and medics and collect these people. Get them to St. Vincent’s and tell them there’s more coming.” The Marine
ran for the Humvee and he turned back to Sam. “These minor casualties. Are they peaceful?”

“All of them,” Sam said. “They all gave up their weapons before they came inside. They’re just scared and in pain.”

He nodded stiffly. “We’ll take care of them. Show my men where to go.”

Sam ran back to the corner and gestured to the man driving the truck. They drove slowly after him, dispersing the crowd through sheer intimidation, and followed Sam to the hotel. They pulled up outside and jumped out of the back and doors. Sam led them inside, calling for people to clear the way. At the sight of the Marines following him, they vanished inside rooms and doors snapped closed behind them.

Sam took them to his and James’ room, and answered May’s unspoken question as she looked up from Chrissy’s wounded leg.

“Help is here,” Sam said.

“Oh, thank God,” she whispered.

Sam smiled and turned to the Marine medics that were carrying their kits to the beds. “Paul has a gunshot wound that we’ve sutured, but he’s been unconscious off and on since he got here. Chrissy has a wound from broken glass on her leg that’s infected.”

“It’s in the blood,” May said. “We’ve treated with a dose of penicillin, and she seems to be stabilizing.”

The medic with Paul unwound the bandages and looked at his wound. “You stitched this?” he asked May.

“Sam did,” she replied.

The medic looked at Sam and said. “Nice work. You’ve probably saved his life by stopping the bleeding.”

Sam forced a smile. He didn’t feel much like celebrating with what had happened.

“Yes, Sam,” a voice said behind him. Sam turned and saw James giving him a tentative smile. “Nice work.”
As Paul and Chrissy were loaded onto stretchers, Sam handed Rachel a scrap of paper with his number on it and asked her to let them know how Paul was doing. She agreed distractedly, watching her brother being handled by the Marines, only giving him complete attention when Paul was settled on the stretcher and halfway out of the door. “Thank you, Sam,” she said fervently. “You saved his life.”

Sam didn’t point out that it had only been saved so far. He wasn’t out of the woods yet. He had more confidence in Paul’s recovery than Chrissy’s though. Paul had showed no signs of infection, and they’d treated him with prophylactic penicillin. His biggest concern was the blood loss and shock. Chrissy on the other hand was battling a severe infection.

Apparently she and James had exchanged numbers early on as when she was loaded onto the Humvee and on her way to the hospital, James told Sam he needed a minute. Sam was distracted for a while speaking to the Marine that had taken charge of the scene, and so didn’t have a chance to speak to him again for another thirty minutes.

“Where did you go?” he asked.

“I called Chrissy’s mom. I thought it was okay to tell her now as she’s on her way to the hospital.”

“That was good,” Sam said. “I didn’t even think of that.”

“You’ve had enough on your mind,” James said.

Sam raked a hand over his face. James was right. There had been so much happening and Sam had been on high alert throughout that he had barely slept. Now control had been taken out of his hands by the military, he was suddenly exhausted. He wanted to eat and sleep, but there were still people to take care of. He had to go around the hotel, persuading the people to open their doors and prepare to leave. Most didn’t want to be in the city while the Marines were there, fearful of reprisals and prosecution for what they had done, but Sam told them none of the Marines were looking to prosecute. They just wanted to return order to the city. He eventually agreed that they could stay one more night and leave in the morning when the city should be under control again. As James pointed out, there was still no safe way for them to get from the city to their homes. As they were peaceful inside the hotel, the Marine sergeant Sam spoke to didn’t argue. He had more important things to do.

Anton, who had been out of sight for days, made his presence known after the hotel had calmed, and Sam saw him speaking to the Marine in charge. Sure that a skewed version of what had happened was being shared, he slapped on a smile and hurried towards them.

“You’ve met,” he said happily. “Sergeant Brooks, this is Anton Rose. It’s his hotel. He’s the one that let us bring all these people in here, creating a safe place for the injured.”

Sergeant Brooks looked skeptical. “Mr. Rose says he was forced to allow you to stay when a gun was pulled on him.”
“A misunderstanding,” Sam said. “He helped us save lives. In fact,” he looked around pointedly “I think that reporter is still around somewhere. He’ll want to speak to you, Anton. You can tell him how you opened your business to the needy and helped them.”

The sergeant’s lips twitched as Anton’s eyes widened. “I should speak to him,” he said. “Do you know where he is?”

“He was on the fourth floor,” Sam said. “You should go look for him.”

“I will,” Anton said eagerly, rushing towards the elevator.

“That was clever,” the sergeant said. “He’s not what you’d call a born hero.”

“He was scared,” Sam said. “I get that. A lot of people were.”

The sergeant adjusted his gun on his shoulder and said, “If you’ve got things under control here, I should fall in.”

“We’ll be fine,” Sam said. “Most people are going to stay one more night and head home when it’s calmer out there.”

“Good idea. Someone will come back tomorrow to check that you’re vacating the premises. We can’t push Mr. Rose too far.”

“We’ll be gone before noon,” Sam promised.

Sergeant Brooks nodded to him and walked to the exit. Sam watched him go and then headed to the kitchen. James was in there, preparing some sandwiches, and he looked up at Sam. “I figured you’d be hungry,” he said.

“I am. Thanks.” Sam pulled up a stool at the counter and took the sandwich James slid over to him. He ate hungrily, not aware of the tense atmosphere at first. Only when he’d finished his first and was eating his second did he realize James was watching him carefully. “Something you need?” he asked.

“How did you survive that bullet?” James asked. “How are you not even hurt?”

“Not now, James,” Sam said.

“When?”

Sam sighed and pushed away his plate. “My story is a long one, and I think it’s better if your mom is there for the telling. Part of it is her story, too. She’s waiting for us in Berkeley. We’ll go there tomorrow when things are taken care of here, and we can explain together.”

“My mom’s not like you, is she? She’s not special?”

“Your mom is very special, but not in the same way I am.”

James nodded. He didn’t look happy, but he seemed to accept that Sam needed time before they could talk about this.

Sam wanted Missouri there for James, and for himself. It was an incredible story to tell, and he needed her evidence to support it. More than that, he wanted her there to temper James anger if he reacted the way Sam thought he might. It was a lot to accept, and it was possible James would flare up at the fact they’d hidden it from him for so long.
Sam slid from the stool and went back to his bedroom. He was thinking of cleaning it up so he could get some rest, but May had already started. One of the crates was full of the soiled dressings and gauze they’d used, and a box contained the used needles and syringes. The other contained the surplus equipment they’d not needed to use. The beds had been stripped of their bloody bedding and she was in the process of remaking them with clean linens she must have found somewhere.

“You don’t have to do that,” Sam said. “James and I can clean up.”

She smiled. “I think you and James have done enough.”

“So have you,” Sam said.

“I feel wide awake though. I think I am still running on the adrenaline. You, on the other hand, look exhausted. You should sleep now it’s over.”

Sam planned to do just that. The only people left in the hotel were capable of taking care of themselves, and the crisis was over. He could rest at last.

“I am going home,” she said. “I want to secure the store and then sleep in my own bed. I’ll need to contact insurers tomorrow, and I think it will take much energy to deal with them and what are sure to be imaginative reasons for them to refuse my claim.”

“I’ll come help,” Sam said.

“No. I can do it alone. I’d rather. You really do need to sleep, Sam.” She laid the blanket over the bed and said, “It’s ready.”

“Thanks,” Sam said.

“I’ve given James my number,” she said. “And you can call whenever you need.”

Sam nodded. “You can call me, too.” He took a pen and notepad emblazoned with the hotel name and address from the bedside table and jotted down his number. He handed it to her and said, “Anytime you need, anything you need.”

“I will,” she said, tucking it into her pocket.

Sam saw something in her eyes that told him she wouldn’t though. He thought this would be the last time he saw or heard from May Thurston. Their relationship had been forged in crisis, intense and short-lived, and he thought that it would always be marred by what had happened. They wouldn’t be able to see each other without remembering the dead and injured. They would see Chrissy and Paul with them each time, and they would remember how it felt to fight to save them with no guarantees they would succeed. Perhaps it was better to try to forget.

“Thank you, May,” he said. “We couldn’t have gotten through this without you.”

“Nor could we you. Remember what you did here, Sam, and be proud.”

Sam smiled. He thought he would try, but pride might not be something he could take from it. He had done too much bad for this to make it good.

May picked up the crates and said, “Goodbye, Sam.”

He watched her go and then collapsed onto the bed fully clothed. He needed sleep before he took on his next challenge: telling James the truth.
Late the next morning, Sam closed the door on the last person leaving the hotel and sighed. He needed to deal with Anton still, and then he could finally leave. He thought the conversation with Anton was going to be harder than the ones he’d had with the people leaving. They’d all been full of thanks and guilt for their part in the riots, whereas Anton was going to be angry about what had happened to his hotel. As he’d been unable to find the reporter to give an interview—owing to the fact he’d disappeared around the time the Marines arrived—he’d not been able to make his claim to heroic fame. He was going to be very unhappy.

He found the hotelier at the door, watching people walk away from the hotel with a scowl on his face. When he saw Sam, his expression darkened further. “You!” He pointed an accusatory finger.

“We should talk,” Sam said.

“No credit card is going to pay for what you have done to my hotel,” he said.

Sam had seen no damage apart from dirty sheets, some blood stained, and he knew there was plenty on the credit card for that, but he decided not to argue the point. “I’ll give you my address and you can bill me,” he said.

“You think you have enough to pay for this?” he asked skeptically.

“Pretty sure, yeah,” Sam said. He took his driver’s license from his wallet and handed it over. “Let me know what I owe you and I’ll send a check.”

Anton snatched it out of his hand and walked around the desk to find a pen and paper. He wrote down Sam’s full name and address and stabbed the page with a period that tore the paper.

“I’ll take my credit card back, too, please,” Sam said.

Anton handed him both cards with a glare. “You are leaving now?”

“We are,” Sam said. “All the rooms are empty; everyone else is gone.”

“Good,” Anton said savagely. “I can begin to clear up the mess you left.”

“You can,” Sam said. “I don’t think it will take you long.”

“Sam? Is everything okay?”

Sam turned and saw James standing behind him with Sam’s bag and the flight case with the Taurus inside in his hands.

“It’s fine,” he said. “I was just sorting some stuff out with Anton.”

James glared at him. “Do we have a problem?”

“Not anymore,” Anton said. “Now things will be paid for, it will be fine.”

James opened his mouth to answer, but Sam caught his arm and he snapped it closed again. Sam took his bags from him and walked to the door with James following.

When they got outside, they saw the police and military presence was still strong, with armed men standing at the ends of the road.
“Where did you leave your stuff?” he asked James.

“In Dan’s car,” he said. “He’ll have taken it back with him.”

“That’s good. One less thing to pick up. Let’s find a cab. I want to get the next flight back.”

They set off onto the street, searching the sparse traffic for a sign of yellow. James spotted a cab and held out a hand. It stopped in front of them and they climbed in.

“LAX, please,” Sam said.

The driver nodded and pulled them away from the sidewalk.

“Have you called your mom?” Sam asked.

“Before we left the hotel, yeah. She’s going to meet us at the airport.”

“Okay.”

As much as Sam would rather have somewhere private to tell his story, he knew Missouri would need to see James as soon as she could. He could maybe get them a room at one of the airport hotels so they could talk.

The drive to the airport didn’t take long and soon they had pulled up to the curb and paid the fare. They walked into the departures lobby and Sam went straight to the American Airlines desk to find them tickets while James hung back with the bags.

There was a flight due to leave in about two hours, and Sam got them seats. He paid and then walked over to the Hertz desk to report the wrecked car while James wandered into a store. There was a man free, and Sam approached.

“Hey,” he said. “I rented a car a few days ago, and I need to report it lost.”

“It was stolen?” the clerk asked, sounding disappointed. Sam guessed it was the mess of paperwork he was going to need to fill out for the claim.

“It was shot off the road and was totaled,” Sam said.

The man blanched. “You were a part of those riots?”

“An unwilling part,” Sam said. “We were trapped in a hotel downtown while it was happening.”

The man looked like he wanted to say something, but Sam spoke first, handing over his driver’s license.

“I need to catch my flight, so can we do this fast? It’s outside a hotel called The Meridian on West Third Street. I can give you the address.”

He took a piece of notepaper from the counter and a pen and wrote down the address to Anton’s hotel. He slid it across and said, “You already have all my details on record. I need to go now, but call me if you need to know more. I think seeing the car will explain what happened well enough though.”

“Did you get insurance?” the clerk asked.

“Full cover,” Sam said calmly.
He nodded. “Did you manage to bring the keys back with you?”

“Afraid not. I left them in the ignition when we were running from the men with guns.”

“Okay.” He handed back Sam’s license and took the address. “I’m sure someone will be in touch.”

“I’m sure they will,” Sam said, turning away and walking toward the shop James had gone into.

“Sam,” James called, and Sam saw him sitting on a bench with a newspaper in his hand and two more on the seat beside him. “You need to see this.”

He held out the newspaper, open to the second page. Sam took it and saw the headline: Angels Of The Riots. Below the headline was a series of pictures. Sam was featured carrying Paul in his arms and there was another of him stitching his arm. Below that was one of James helping a woman wrap a bandage over a gash on her arm. May was pictured with a handful of supplies with Chrissy and Paul in the background. There were interviews, too, and heavily altered stories from the reporter of what he had witnessed. He even had their full names—in Sam’s case fake—as he spoke of the makeshift hospital they’d set up in the hotel.

Sam cursed. He didn’t want his name and face out there. It was good that James’ face was though. With his Berkeley jersey, he cut an impressive figure helping people. If there was any reprisal from the college about what James had done, they would be able to use this article as evidence that James had been there to help people.

“Hold onto that,” he said. “We’re probably going to need it.”

“What for?” James asked.

“Your future,” Sam said simply, walking away to security. He hoped they wouldn’t need it, but with how hard James had worked for his future, Sam wasn’t going to let him lose it because of one bad decision. He deserved better.

xXx

Missouri was waiting for them at arrivals, and she burst into tears at the sight of her son. James was obviously overwhelmed as she took him into her arms and cried onto his shoulder. Sam thought he was seeing the personal cost of what he’d done going to LA in his mother’s tears; she had been so scared for him.

When she had calmed somewhat, she greeted Sam, whispering thanks to him for what he had done. Sam didn’t feel he had done that much for James. He should have been able to get him out of the city before the trouble had started. So much would have been avoided if he had, though perhaps lives would have been lost. Would anyone else have been there to save Chrissy and Paul?

They went to the Hyatt and Sam booked them into a room. He knew James would need to go back to college after they’d spoken, but he wanted to get the conversation done sooner rather than later. James needed answers; he deserved them.

Sam let them into their room and sat down on the couch, waiting for Missouri and James to seat themselves. They did, Missouri sitting close to her son, and Sam said, “I was shot, Missouri, and James saw it.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh.”

“Yes, oh,” James said, accusation in his voice. “Sam wouldn’t tell me anything before, but I need
to know now. How is he unhurt? How is he alive even?”

“What have you told him?” Missouri asked.

“Nothing,” James said bitterly. “He said you needed to be here.”

Missouri took a breath and locked eyes with Sam. Sam saw the questions in her eyes, and he answered her. “I think we need to tell him all of it, my story at least.” He wouldn’t tell James the story of the apocalypse, but he could know the rest.

Missouri nodded. “Okay then. James, this is all going to sound incredible, unbelievable, but remember it’s us speaking. We would never try to trick you and we wouldn’t lie about this. You need to listen to it all before judging.”

“Okay,” James said.

Sam drew a breath. “Your mom met me for the first time in 1978, but I met her for the first time in 2006.”

James frowned. “That’s impossible.”

“Let him speak,” Missouri said.

“I was twenty-two when I met your mom, and I am forty now. I was twenty-six when I left my time. I came from 2010 to 1978.”

“You’re a time traveler.” Though James’ tone was neutral, there was annoyance in his face. He thought they were lying to him.

“In a way,” Sam said. “But it wasn’t anything I did that made it possible. It was a friend that helped me, a special friend with special powers.”

“An angel,” Missouri supplied.

James looked at her with narrowed eyes. “An angel?”

“The world is bigger than you know,” Missouri said gently. “I have tried to shield you from this as long as I could, I thought I could forever, but you need to know the truth now. You are old enough to know.”

“If you want to,” Sam interjected, “Once you know, you can never forget. Your whole world will be changed. If you’re ready for that, we’ll tell you, but you can understand my story without knowing it all.”

James considered for a long moment then shook his head. “I don’t want to know it all. I just want to know about you.”

“Okay,” Sam said, relieved by the answer. He didn’t want James to spend the rest of his life scared of the things that went bump in the night. “Angels are real, though the odds are you will never meet one in your life. They can heal and fly and time travel, and they’re extremely powerful. One of them was a friend of mine and my brother’s, and when something happened that we needed to stop in 1978, he brought us back.”

James nodded. “Right, Okay. So you came back, and you stayed?”

“Not by choice; I was trapped,” Sam said. “I told you about my brother once. Dean. He was with
me, but when he was taken back to 2010, another angel made sure I was left behind. He stuck me here, and I have to live right through to 2010.”

James nodded slowly. “What’s that got to do with why you were able to survive being shot?”

“The angel that trapped me did something to make me invincible, too. I can’t die. I can’t even be hurt properly. I heal almost straight away.”

Sam could see he didn’t believe, he was probably trying to think of some other explanation for what he’d seen in L.A. and Sam thought a demonstration was in order. He got up and picked up a glass from the tray on the dresser. He dropped it on the floor and stamped on it hard. The glass broke and Sam picked up a piece and cut across his plan. It stung and blood dripped before it healed again, leaving bloodied but unharmed skin.

He dropped the piece of glass onto the dresser and bent to pick up the other shards.

“Do you see?” Missouri asked.

“I see that,” James said. “It’s impossible, but I see it.”

“I’m impossible, too,” Sam said setting the shards down on the tray and sitting down. “It’s why I don’t age either. I am the same man physically as I was the day I arrived in 1978. Do you believe me?”

James narrowed his eyes. “I believe that you’re different. I get that. I’ve seen proof, but I don’t believe you’re a time traveler.”

Sam sighed. “You think I’m lying to you?”

“I think you’re ill.”

“He’s not ill, nor is he lying,” Missouri said. “I have seen proof. Sam knows about things before they happen. It’s why he went to Berlin when the wall came down. He knew it was coming and he wanted to be there for it.”

James shook his head. “Coincidence. You just saw the political changes coming.”

Sam was disappointed in what he was hearing, but at the same time he thought he should have expected it. James was a man of facts and physical proof. He couldn’t allow himself to believe something that he hadn’t seen. He was a scientist at heart, and time travel was supposed to be impossible.

“He didn’t,” Missouri said. “He knew because he remembered it.”

“Prove it,” James said truculently. “Tell me what’s coming.”

Sam considered. “Bill Clinton will be the next president.”

James shrugged. “Anyone could know that. The polls tell us that much. Tell me something else.”

“I don’t know everything,” Sam said. “I don’t remember it all. I didn’t study much history. I just remember the big stuff.”

“What’s the next big thing then?” James asked.

Sam riffled through his memory. He could think of nothing at first that was close and big enough
for James to believe, and then he remembered. “February next year. I can’t remember that exact date, but there will be an attack on the World Trade Center.”

“That’s a long time to wait for proof,” James said.

“It’s the best I can do. It’s the next big thing I remember. You’ll have to trust me until then.”

“I don’t trust you,” James said. “I can’t. This is too big a lie to believe.”

“He’s not lying!” Missouri said fiercely.

Sam held up a hand to her. “It’s okay, Missouri. He’ll see eventually.”

James got to his feet. “I think it’s better we keep our distance for now, Sam. I’m not forgetting all you’ve done for me, but I can’t be with you knowing you’re ill and not getting help. Or, worse, you’re lying to me.”

Missouri gasped. “James!”

Sam shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not forever.” He knew that James would see the truth one day, and if he needed space until that day, Sam would give it to him. He was going to miss him terribly, as it was months before the proof would come, but he would accept James’ choice. He would perhaps do the same in his position.

“I’m going,” James said.

“Take the newspapers with you,” Sam said. “Show them the pictures. They’ll probably still give you a hard time for skipping out, but you can show them you were doing good there.”

“I will, thanks,” James said, picking them up. “Mom, are you coming with me?”

Looking miserable, Missouri stood and said, “Of course.”

“I’ll wait here for you,” Sam said.

She patted his cheek and then followed her son out of the room. Sam watched them go and then buried his face in his hands. James would see the truth eventually, he knew, but until then, Sam had lost him. He had gone from being like a father to James to being someone he couldn’t trust, someone ill.

He was going to have to wait a long time for things to be right again.

xXx

Sam had heard the news that day at work when Missouri had called to tell him it had happened. Now he was home, sitting in the living room with George, a glass of whiskey in hand, waiting for the call. They weren’t talking. George knew the story of what had happened, and he knew what was was—hopefully—coming. It had crossed Sam’s mind that this still wouldn’t be enough to convince James.

He had missed him. He’d missed James’ college graduation, which he had been looking forward to, and he hadn’t been able to celebrate his admission to Berkeley Law. Thanksgiving and Christmas had been celebrated with George alone. James hadn’t contacted him at all since they’d parted in LA.

Sam was pouring himself another measure when the phone rang. George’s eyes snapped to him as
he lurched to his feet and crossed the room to the phone.

“Hello.”

“How did you know?” James asked.

“I already told you,” Sam said. “I remembered it.”

“Did you try to stop it?”

“I couldn’t, James. It’s impossible,” Sam said, his tone steeped in guilt.

“How do you know if you don’t try?”

“Because I tried before. I tried to save my mom, but I couldn’t. The fact I am here and remember it means it had to happen.”

“That doesn’t seem right. Why are you here if not to help?”

“Because the angel that left me here wanted to break me. I have to know what’s coming and just watch.”

“How do you do it?”

“I have to suffer,” Sam said. “I deserve to suffer for what I’ve done. I saw my mom die and my family be destroyed, and there was nothing I could do for them. This isn’t a gift, James. Knowing and waiting is my punishment. I am going to lose more people I love, and I can’t change that. I did terrible things and this is the price I have to pay.”

“I believe you now,” James said unnecessarily. Sam already knew that when he’d called. “I’m sorry I didn’t before.”

“I understand,” Sam said. “I’ve missed you, though. I’d like to see you. Do you have a weekend free if I come?”

“Next week,” James said. “My coursework should be light. Call me when you know a time and we’ll arrange somewhere to meet.”

“Thank you,” Sam said fervently. “I’ll call you soon.”

“Okay.”

“James, I…” Sam struggled to say the words, but James knew what he was saying.

“I know. Me too. I’ll see you, Sam.”

“See you,” Sam said,

“Bye.”

There was the click of a disconnected call and Sam pressed the receiver to his forehead, breathing a sigh of relief.

James knew the truth now. Sam was going to be able to see him. After all these months he could be with the man he loved like a son again.
He was happier than he had been in a long time.
Chapter Forty-One

Sam lifted the little girl into the cab of the truck and tucked a blanket around her. In the time it had taken him to carry her from the farmhouse into the truck, she’d gotten soaked. When they got to the relief center set up at the high school, she’d need to change out of her wet clothes.

Sam was soaked, too, but he wouldn’t bother drying off until they’d finished evacuating people from the houses and farms that lay by the river.

They’d been expecting the floods to come for them for weeks now. Half of the Midwest had already suffered some form of flooding since May, and the rain kept coming now into July. George’s knee, always sensitive to damp, was giving him hell, and when Sam was home he often needed to get George a heating pad to hold to the joint. When Sam had left, George had been in his chair with his leg elevated and his expression pained. Sam wanted to get back to him but he wanted to make sure people that needed to be were evacuated first.

The river that ran behind the rear field was higher than Sam had ever seen, and he was sure it was only a matter of time until the banks broke. His own house wasn’t that far from the river, though he hoped the fact it was raised from the ground would save him from the worst of it. He’d done all he could to protect the things that mattered. All his important paperwork—though forged—was in plastic bags and stored on high shelves. His journal and photo albums were out of the way, and the most important books in Samuel Campbell’s library were stored high up. Everything else could be replaced.

“You done, Taylor?” Ray called loudly.

Sam raised a hand. “They’re in.”

Ray nodded. “There’s a box of paperwork on the kitchen table. Can you grab it for them? Then they’ll be ready to go.”

Sam nodded and sloshed through the mud in his rain boots to the house. It was unusual for him to take instruction from Ray who was his subordinate at work, but this was Ray’s gig. He’d been the one to call Sam in to help evacuate the houses and farms near the river, and Sam was happy to let someone else be in charge for a change.

He found the cardboard box of plastic wrapped birth certificates and deeds to the farm and he tucked it under his raincoat and ran out of the house and to the truck. The man threw opened his door and received the box from Sam with thanks, and then thrust it into his wife’s lap.

Ray patted the hood and said, “Get out of here!”

The old engine sputtered to life and the truck backed slowly on the mud slick track to the road.

Carl closed the farmhouse door and then gestured them to his truck to move onto the next house to see if they needed help. The rest of them had left their cars in the less likely to flood construction site lot, set on higher ground. Carl had a big enough Dodge truck for them to get into, and they’d used it to evacuate an elderly couple already that had no car of their own to get away from their house on the banks of the river.
Sam climbed in, accidentally smearing mud from his clothes onto the seats. Fran wasn’t going to be happy about the state their truck was going to be in by the time this was over, though Sam knew her well enough to know she’d be proud of her husband for doing his bit for the people of Lawrence.

“Where next?” Carl said over the sound of the rain hammering the windshield.

“There’s one more place to check,” Ray said. “Take a right and drive till you see a red barn.”

Sam peered out of the rain-pelted windshield, searching for a sign of a red barn. He spotted it a few minutes up the road and pointed it out to Carl who turned onto the track that led to the house and drove until they came to a stop outside the large house that looked as though it was badly in need of maintenance.

“Brace yourselves,” Ray said. “This is going to be a tough one.”

Of the eight houses they’d evacuated, none of them had been particularly troublesome. So Sam assumed the law of averages meant they were bound to have trouble eventually.

They climbed out of the car and picked their way around the biggest puddles to the door. The rain made it hard to see, so Sam was already on the porch when he saw the sign propped up on the rocking chair beside the door: This house is defended!

“Nice welcome,” Sam said wryly.

“We’ve got to try,” Ray said, knocking on the door and then stepping back.

There was the sound of bolts disengaging and then the door creaked open a few inches and the barrel of a shotgun was shoved out. “I’m going nowhere,” an angry woman’s voice said.

Sam dragged Ray and Carl toward him, out of the line of fire, and said. “That’s okay. You don’t have to go anywhere you don’t want to. We just wanted to give you the option of help.”

“You want to steal from me,” the voice accused.

“We really don’t,” Sam said. “We’ll leave if you don’t need us.”

“I don’t,” she said. “I don’t need nobody.”

“We’ll leave then.”

He backed away from the door, gripping the rail as he reversed down the steps. The barrel of the shotgun twitched, and Sam stopped dead.

“Thought you were going,” she said, the door opening a little more and revealing a face framed by tangled brown hair. The eyes in the flushed face were narrowed and the mouth a snarl.

“We are,” Sam said. “Come on guys.”

Ray started toward Sam but Carl seemed frozen in place. Sam said his name gently, and he shook his head. He was too scared, understandably, to move.

“Go!” the woman screeched, and Sam saw the gun twitch up to aim at Ray who froze with his eyes wide. “You have five seconds before I shoot you as trespassers!”

Sam had two choices. He could try to talk the woman down or disarm her. He was in no danger, but his friends were. He made the decision in an instant and acted, pushing Ray so that he was
standing with Carl out of range. In the same motion, he slammed his body against the door, slamming it against the gun. There was the crack of a gunshot and someone shouted in shock, but Sam saw that both Ray and Carl were unharmed. The door was pushed open a little further and the woman was shouting with rage, but Sam was fast; he gripped the barrel and forced it upwards. There was another shot and then Sam had ripped it out of her hands. He ejected the rounds that remained and stepped in front of the woman who stood panting with rage on the doorstep.

“You guys gets in the truck,” Sam said.

Ray and Carl didn’t hesitate. They raced down the steps to the truck and threw themselves in.

Sam fixed his attention on the woman who was looking at him with loathing. “I’m going to set this down on the boundary of your land. You can collect it when we’re gone.”

“Thief!” she screeched.

“You’re lucky I’m giving it back,” Sam said. “Only sane people should have guns.”

Her flushed face paled. “How dare you?”

Sam put the shotgun over his arm and said. “The flood is coming. Try not to drown.”

“Is that a threat?”

“No,” Sam said calmly. “It’s a warning. This river is going to rise and the water is coming. If you’re too stupid to evacuate, you should at least be smart enough to get upstairs.”

He walked away, ignoring her screeched threats behind him, and climbed into the cab. “Let’s go.”

Carl started the engine, and they roared away from the house. It hadn’t been the best morning, Sam thought. Sure they’d helped a lot of people get away from the approaching flood, but they’d almost been shot. At least he hadn’t been shot. It would have taken more explanation than he cared to give his friends to explain why he was unhurt.

All in all, he was happy it was over. He would get back to his own home now and wait for the flood to come.

xXx

Carl dropped Sam off at the end of his drive as he’d decided to leave the Mustang at the site where it should be safer. The water would have to be very high to reach it there, and if it was that high, there would be bigger things to worry about than a car, no matter how much Sam loved it.

He walked up the muddy and puddled drive to the house, rain beating down on him. Though he had worn his rain coat and boots, he was still wet, and he was looking forward to getting a shower in the recently installed shower cubicle he’d had fitted when George finally confessed how difficult it was becoming for him to get into the bathtub with his knee the way it was—something Sam felt guilty about for not seeing sooner.

He climbed the steps to the house, glancing at his drenched vegetable garden as he passed. This year’s harvests were ruined, and, unless he was lucky, he was going to have to replant the lot for next year. He opened the door and called to George. “You home?”

“Where else am I going to be?” George grumbled back.
“I thought Missouri might have come to get you to take you to higher ground,” Sam said, hanging his coat and kicking off his boots before walking into the living room where George sat with his leg propped up.

“She called to offer but I declined.”

Sam frowned. “Why?”

“Because you’re going to be here, so I might as well keep you company. How were the rescue efforts?”

“We got a decent number of people out before having a gun pulled on us by a crazy woman that thought we wanted to rob her. We’re all okay,” he added in response to George’s concerned look. “I disarmed her easily enough.”

“Good. I imagine your friends were shaken up though.”

“They were filled with adrenaline still when they dropped me off, but I think it will hit them soon. I’ll call them later if everything is okay.” He pushed his wet hair back from his face. “I need to shower.”

“You do,” George agreed. “Do you want coffee?”

“I’ll get it,” Sam said, thinking of George’s pain that morning when he’d gotten out of bed. “I’m going to clean up.”

George nodded and Sam padded in his damp socks into the bathroom where he stripped off his clothes and set the shower to running. His dirty clothes created a muddy pile on the floor, and Sam made a mental note to clean up the bathroom when the crisis had passed.

He stepped into the shower and scrubbed the mud from himself before soaping up. The hot water felt good but he didn’t want to waste too long enjoying it when the flood could strike at any moment. He rinsed the soap from his body and shampoo from his hair and then climbed out and wrapped a towel around his waist.

When he stepped out of the bathroom and into the hall, he heard the sound of voices in the living room. It took him a moment to realize that George had turned the radio on. He thought he should have thought of that sooner; they would get alerts that way.

He went into the bedroom to dry off and dress, straining to hear the voice on the radio as he did. The clean clothes felt good, though he wondered how long they would remain clean if the waters rose. He didn’t know what else he could do to avoid them. The house was built on one story, and they didn’t even have an attic to shelter in that was accessible for George.

“Sam!” George called in a warning tone.

Sam rushed into the living room, buttoning his shirt. “What?”

George pointed to the radio and Sam concentrated on the somber voice.

“*The banks of the Kansas River have broken. Properties in Lecompton, Midland, Lawrence, Fall Leaf and Eudora are now at severe risk of flooding. If you’re in a property in this area, the advice is to stay in your homes and get as high up as you can. The water may be shallow enough to walk in, but the advice from the environment advisory is to not attempt to walk in water above the ankle. The current in the river water is strong, and you could be knocked off your feet easily. It’s safer to*
stay inside. I repeat, do not attempt to walk in water above the ankle. As the water is still rising, it’s safer not to try at all. It could rise at any minute. The emergency services are inundated with calls that they are trying to deal with. Unless it is an emergency, leave them to work. They are following established protocols in the face of the emergency.”

Sam rushed to the window and peered outside. He saw no sign of approaching floodwater, but he wasn’t going to risk his house. He rushed to the door and yanked it open.

“Where are you going?” George asked.

“I’m moving the sandbags,” Sam said.

“How are you going to get in again?”

“I’ll manage.”

Sam had stacked sandbags by the doors, and now he started to pile them in front of the door, creating a barrier that would at least filter the water coming in. The water was going to be hard enough to deal with without the debris and flotsam that would come in with it.

The front door protected, Sam moved around to the back. He hefted the bags, concentrating on the work as the rain overflowed from the gutter of the porch roof and streamed to the ground. When he was done, he realized his problem. He had effectively blocked himself from the door. He was going to have to climb back inside. He opened the door and tried to get himself over the pile of sandbags. As tall as he was, and as long as his legs were, he couldn’t do it gracefully. He had to throw himself forward and slide over them on his stomach.

George was in the kitchen, making a pot of coffee at the counter, and he laughed as Sam sprawled at his feet. “You look like the world’s clumsiest burglar.”

“Thanks,” Sam said, getting to his feet and dusting off his clothes.

“You’re welcome,” George said happily. He poured Sam a mug of coffee and carried his own into the living room, his limp making him sway from side to side in a rolling gait. He sat down on his chair and set the mug down on the table at his elbow.

Sam moved to the window and peered out into the yard. For a moment, he was just squinting through the rain at the trees, and then he saw it coming toward them. It came like a wave, foaming at the edge as the water crept closer to the house.

“It’s coming.”

“You can’t stop it by staring,” George said. “You might as well sit down.”

Sam ignored him, freezing as something occurred to him. He’d left all the electronics plugged in. He dashed around the house, unplugging things from the sockets.

“What are you doing?” George called after him.

“Stopping us dying in a housefire.”

“You wouldn’t die,” George pointed out.

“No, but you would. And I don’t want to experience third degree burns.”

“Don’t worry about me,” George said. “There are worse things that dying when you have a life like
mine.”

Sam froze a moment, horror filling him, and then he rushed back into the living room to face his friend. “Do you want to die, George?”

“I am not afraid of death.”

“Do you want to hurt yourself?” Sam waited with bated breath for an answer.

“Of course not,” George said irritably. “That would be a sin.”

Only slightly reassured, Sam asked, “Are you Catholic all of a sudden?”

“There is nothing sudden about it.”

Sam frowned. “Are you telling me you’re actually religious?”

“I am. There is much you don’t know about me, Sam.”

Sam stood mute, unsure of what to say. This was a revelation. He thought he knew George well, but he’d never so much as hinted at the fact that he had faith before. It was as if he had just proclaimed he was really a werewolf that had hidden his nature at the moons from Sam.

“You never told me,” Sam said.

“You never asked.” George sighed. “Come sit down and I will tell you about it.”

“There’s a flood coming.”

“But you can’t stop it by standing in its path, so you might as well talk to me.”

Seeing the sense in his words, Sam moved to the couch and sat down.

“Does it really shock you?” George asked.

“Yes,” Sam said. “And you could have chosen a better time to tell me than a biblical flood.”

“This isn’t biblical.”

“Have you always been religious?” Sam asked, ignoring the correction.

“I was raised Catholic, but I lost that definition a long time ago. I haven’t been to confession since Korea. I still have faith though, just in a different form of God. I don’t believe it’s all strict rules and conformity. I believe He hears you no matter how you choose to speak to Him.”

“So when you met Anna?”

“I was disappointed,” George said. “She wasn’t what I had expected at all from an angel, even though I had never been sure they were real at all once I had left Catholicism. It affirmed my belief in my God, though, and confirmed the need for faith.”

“It did the opposite for me when I met Castiel,” Sam said. “I knew God was real, but I lost my faith. At least I lost faith that God could find any value in me, and that had mattered to me a lot. I was always different; I felt like a freak. When I was older and things started happening, I knew I was one. I think I needed God in my life so I didn’t feel that I was doomed to be bad. It turned out that I was anyway.”
“What do you mean?”

Sam shook his head. “That’s a story for another time. I lost something important to me when I met Castiel though, and it made things hard for me for a long time.”

“But it got better?” George asked.

Sam smiled slightly. “I found something else to put my faith in. Dean.”

George frowned. “Dean became your God?”

“No, not really. It was more that I made him my strength. Dean was always strong. Even in 2010, when he’s struggling so hard, he’s not given up. He wants to, I can tell, but he doesn’t. He has something that gives him faith. I don’t know what it is, but it’s powerful.”

“Do you think it could be you?” George asked.

Sam huffed a laugh. “It’s definitely not me. I am not worth having faith in.”

“You are,” George argued. “You’re a good man. You’re strong.”

“I am now. I have to be strong now. But in my own time, where I really belong, I am so weak. I made so many mistakes, things that people are suffering for. There is nothing in me for Dean to have faith in.”

George considered for a long moment. “I think you might be wrong.”

“Trust me,” Sam said. “It’s not me that he believes in. I think it’s hard for him to even be around me some days.”

Uncomfortable, Sam got to his feet and went back to the window. The water was lapping over the porch now, almost at the door. His vegetable garden was under water and ruined. It seemed stupidly important when there was so much more at stake.

“Do you pray, George?” he asked.

“Only every day.”

Sam turned back to him. “What do you pray for?” He realized it was a personal question and he probably shouldn’t have asked, but George started to answer before he could retract it.

“I pray for many things: strength, lessening of the pain, peace for my mind.” He fixed his eyes on Sam. “I pray for you a lot.”

“Me?”

George raised an eyebrow. “You are living with the knowledge that an apocalypse is coming, Sam. You are a man out of time, without your brother, and with the burden of knowledge on you. I pray for peace for you, for strength and comfort. I pray that when the time comes, there will be a solution and the world will be saved.” He sighed. “I don’t think I will be here when the time comes for you to be really tested, so I am doing the little I can while I can.”

Sam had never considered losing George before. His age was just a part of him. It didn’t change how Sam saw him. He realized now that George was probably right. Unless he lived to a very good age, he wasn’t going to be there for the end. He was glad in a way, as George would be spared that terrible time, but he was afraid of losing him. George was important to him. He didn’t want that to
end. The thought was like a lead weight on his chest, restricting his air. He had to turn away from
George to gather himself.

“Sam,” George said seriously.

“Yes.”

“I think we’re being flooded.”

Sam’s eyes snapped to the door and he saw the water creeping inside. He rushed towards it,
grabbing a blanket from the back on the couch to try to stem the flow.

“There’s no point,” George said. “It will come in one way or another.”

Sam knew he was right, but to see it pooling on his floor was upsetting.

“Look on the bright side,” George said.

“There’s a bright side?”

“Yes. We can buy new furniture. Personally, I would like to try one of those La-Z-Boy recliners
I’ve seen advertised on the TV.”

Sam huffed a laugh, turning from the water on the floor to his friend. “We’ll get you whatever you
want.”

George rubbed his hands together, and Sam noticed they were no longer a young person’s hands.
How could he have not noticed the faint liver spots and the way the knuckles were thickening? His
hair was now more grey than red. George was getting old and Sam had missed the signs.

“Grey leather, I think,” George said happily. “We can get a matching pair. And you can update that
couch. I am sure it was a bargain when you bought it, but it’s like sitting on a sack of rocks after a
while.”

Sam laughed. “We’ll shop as soon as the floodwater is gone.”

“Good,” George said. “Why don’t you come sit down? Put your feet up.”

“We’re flooding, George. I don’t think now’s the time to relax.”

“I disagree. It’s just a light flow coming in, so I don’t think we’re at risk of drowning. Besides,” his
lips quirked into a smile, “you’re getting wet.”

Sam looked at down at the damp hem of his jeans and laughed. He was standing there as if he
could make an iota of difference to the amount of water coming in. He might as well sit with his
friend and plan their purchases. It was probably time to update the house anyway. His garage sale
finds were dated and not really that comfortable, and it would be entertaining to shop with George
who, before today, had never shown signs of being interested in shopping of any form.

It would be something they could do together, making their home, and it would be a memory for
Sam to hang on to one day when he needed, because, as little as he wanted to admit it, one day,
maybe not that far away, he was going to lose George.

xXx

It was three months since the house had flooded, and it was finally over. The floodwaters across
the Midwest had retreated, and people all over were putting their homes together again.

Sam’s house had been dried out by mid-July, and he’d used the time between to have some work done on the house’s exterior. He’d stripped back the old wood walls in sections and had them replaced with new. The doors and windows had been upgraded and the kitchen appliances had been replaced. A lot of the work had been done by contractors Sam had met through the site, and some of his crew had done the work on their weekends and evenings to earn extra money. It looked like a different house now; from the outside it was a new cabin. Missouri had even been given free rein to finally replace Sam’s thrift shop pans and dinnerware. The living room had been repainted light green and there were new curtains at the windows. Sam had personally thought it was overkill, but Missouri had been caught up in the idea of making some changes and he’d not wanted to spoil her fun. George had enjoyed himself, too. He’d appointed himself foreman of the ‘site’ while the work was happening, and he’d overseen the details of everything that had happened. George was happy now, too, and that had made the frivolous spending worth it. He now had his La-Z-Boy chair—as did Sam—that he could recline on with his legs raised and knee rested while watching Mariners’ games on the new, larger TV set Sam had bought for them.

Sam came home from work one evening to see George sitting with Missouri watching a nature documentary on wolves. Missouri had a mug on the table beside her, and George a measure of whiskey. They were deep in conversation, and only greeted his return with nods of the head.

“I’m telling you, it doesn’t happen,” George said. “Werewolves aren’t like this.” He pointed at the pack of wolves hunting a deer on the screen. “They’re loners.”

“These weren’t,” Missouri said obstinately. “There were four of them, and Richard and I hunted them all down with the Davidson brothers.”

Sam sat down on the new couch beside Missouri and asked, “Who are the Davidson brothers?”

“Before your time,” George said. “Both of your times. They were taken out by a demon in ’74. Damn shame. They were good men, and even better hunters.”

“Good enough to take on a pack of four werewolves with us,” Missouri said slyly.

George rolled his eyes. “If you say so.”

“I do say,” Missouri said.

Sam laughed. “Children, don’t fight. If Missouri says she took on four, she did.”

“Thank you, Sam,” Missouri said sweetly.

“Not that I’m complaining,” Sam said, “but are you here for a reason?”

They’d seen her the day before when they’d gone for their traditional Sunday dinner with her, and she didn’t usually visit so often after seeing them.

“Yes,” Missouri said, reaching into her purse and pulling out a page of news sheet. “I didn’t know if you’d seen this.”

Sam took it and read the headline. “Great Flood of ‘93 claims 32 lives.”

“The Great Flood,” George said musingly. “You think that’s something you would have remembered, Sam.”
Sam shrugged. “I must have heard of it, but I’m only a kid out there somewhere. It didn’t stick in my head.”

“All those people though,” Missouri said. “And the damage is going to cost billions to repair.”

“We got off lucky,” Sam said. “Mississippi got it much worse than us.”

“We were lucky,” Missouri said fervently. Her house hadn’t been touched at all by the floodwaters, though her garden had been ruined by the heavy rain that turned her lawn to a swamp and flowerbeds to sludge. Like Sam’s vegetable garden, it was going to take work to put right.

Sam wasn’t worried though. He would have time in the spring to work on it. He was looking forward to it even. He did less work with his hands now he was site foreman, and he’d always enjoyed creating things.

All in all, he was happy. His home was better prepared for winter than it ever had been before, and George was settled in his retirement now, more so than Sam had ever hoped he would be. It was Thanksgiving in a month, so they would see James. All in all, life was good, and that was almost all Sam hoped for.

The only thing missing was the rest of his family, Dean, Bobby and Castiel, and time was moving slowly towards their reunion. All he needed now was for Anna to make one of her periodic visits and to tell him she’d found a way to end Lucifer. Then things would be perfect for Sam’s life in 1993.
Sam sat in front of his new Macintosh in the study with Missouri and George standing behind him. With bated breath, he clicked the connect button with the mouse and the long forgotten screech of a dialup modem came from the computer as Sam accessed the internet for the first time in sixteen years.

“That is an awful noise,” Missouri said.

“It’s sound of the future,” Sam said happily. “Besides, you’ll get used to it before broadband comes along.”

“Broadband?” George asked.

“It’s the next step. It’ll mean you can use the phone line as well as surf the internet at the same time.”

“You can’t now?” Missouri asked.

Sam turned and took in her crossed arms and scowl. “No, which is why I bought a cell phone. I got George one, too. We’ve given the numbers to all the hunters that call, so we can still be called if they come across something they need help with.”

“I heard cell phones give you cancer,” Missouri said.

“They don’t,” Sam said with a sigh. “Trust me, Missouri, by my time almost everyone will have a cell, and the cancer myths will be debunked.”

Sam was proud of his new Ericsson EH237. It was a smaller design than most on the market, and it only weighed as much as a cup of sugar. He’d held off on buying one until they were feasible, and the time had come. It felt good to be able to call and be called wherever he was now, thought he didn’t clip it to his belt, as was the fashion. There were certain trends he was happy to avoid in 1994.

The connection was made, and Sam opened the browser. The page loaded slowly and then he was welcomed to the Mosaic browser for the World Wide Web and invited to search over two thousand website using the Gopher search engine.

“What shall we search for?” Sam asked.

“Vampires,” George said.

Sam grinned as he typed in the word and clicked search. There were two results. One was an essay on the existence of vampires in classic literature and the other was a strikingly named vampires dot com site. Sam clicked that one and was met with a page of text.

“Vampires are among us!” he read aloud. “The time of truth comes with the advent of the World Wide Web. Finally people have access to the information authorities have kept hidden for years. I have facts and information that people need to know to protect themselves…” He continued down
the page and snorted as he read, “No one should be out of the protection of their home without a crucifix and holy water.”

George laughed. “I thought this was supposed to be a wealth of information for the world, not some crackpot’s latest breakdown.”

“It does seem silly, Sam,” Missouri said.

“This is, yeah, but give it time and the net will be a cache of knowledge for hunting. Me and Dean have used it more times than I can remember. The facts are there if you look hard enough. The information has literally saved our lives dozens of times.”

“Perhaps you could start the process,” George said. “You have a lot of knowledge to be shared. You could make one of these web sheets and help future hunters.”

“Web pages,” Sam said distractedly as he mulled over the idea. It was a good one. He knew more now than he’d ever known in 2010. Perhaps some of the information he’d gotten online in the future came from him originally. He remembered the site they’d used most often. He could buy the domain and build the information. “That’s a pretty good idea, George,” he said.

“I know,” George said. “And it will make the money you’ve spent on this fancy new computer and having the internet tuned on worth it.”

Sam grinned. “I’ll look into it. Thanks.”

“So we’ve seen the internet doing its thing. Can we have a coffee now?” Missouri asked.

“Sure.”

He closed down the browser and shut down the computer before disconnecting the modem and getting to his feet to follow Missouri and George into the living room. George sat down in his chair and raised his legs to rest his probably sore knee while Missouri headed into the kitchen. Sam filled the jug at the sink while Missouri spooned coffee into the machine.

“It really is going to be big,” Sam said. “You’ll be able to shop, talk to friends, even make phone calls on a computer one day.” He laughed. “You can even have a psychic reading done online.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Missouri said. “You can’t feel a person unless you’ve connected with them.”

“I know. It’s a load of bull. A lot of people believe it though, and the fraudsters make a lot of money from them.”

Missouri flipped on the coffee machine and turned to lean against the counter with her arms crossed. “The future doesn’t seem like a very nice place to me.”

Sam shook his head. “Preaching to the choir, Missouri. I know what’s coming, remember.”

Missouri touched his arm. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s fine,” Sam said. “I have faith it’s going to be okay. Anna thought she was onto something when she was last here. It could be the thing we’ve been waiting for to fix the world.”

“It could. And if that’s not the thing, there will be something else. I have faith, too. You have come this far fighting, and I believe it will end on our terms in 2010.”

Sam hugged her. “Thanks, Missouri.”
She embraced him in return with a laugh. “I only say what I think.”

“I know, which means it matters so much more. If a psychic thinks it’s going to work, it has to work.”

Missouri pulled back. “You know it doesn’t work like that.”

“I know,” Sam said with a smile. “It doesn’t change how I feel though. We’re going to find something.”

Missouri patted his cheek. “We are.”

xXx

Even though he sat close to the fire he’d built, Sam was freezing. It was October in the Nebraska National Forest, and the tent he’d pitched behind him was tempting him inside where there would be some defense from the cold air.

He scolded himself for his weakness. He hadn’t been on the hunt enough recently, and he was going soft. The cold couldn’t harm him with Michael’s protection. He just had to stick it out a little longer.

The reason he was out in the forest on such a cold night was a suspected werewolf terrorizing the nearest campsite. He’d persuaded the rangers to close down the campsites as a precaution while pretending to be a senior member of the Department of Agriculture. It hadn’t been too hard, which told him they were as worried by what was happening as he was. There had been seven deaths over the last three months all in the same area, and Sam was hoping that—as the forest was officially closed—he would be seen as easy prey by the werewolf. He had his Taurus loaded with silver bullets, so he was just waiting for it to strike.

The moon was fully risen and he was alert and ready when he heard a twig cracking behind him. Not wanting to strike too soon, Sam gripped his gun and kept himself poised to strike while sitting. He saw a light bobbing towards him from behind, and he realized it wasn’t the werewolf. They wouldn’t need a flashlight.

He got to his feet and turned in time to see a man in a dark green uniform that looked almost black in the dark coming towards him. It was a ranger, and Sam cursed his luck. How was he supposed to get this man safely out of the forest and kill the werewolf at the same time?

“Excuse me, sir, the forest is closed,” the ranger said.

“I know. I’m the one that closed it,” Sam said. “Sam Taylor, Department of Agriculture.”

“You’re from the office, are you? It’s not often we get visits from you guys.”

“These are special circumstances,” Sam said.

“I’ll bet,” the ranger said. “It’s not every day we have a werewolf set up a new hunting ground here.”

Sam snapped his mouth shut with an effort and cleared his throat awkwardly. “A werewolf?”

The ranger laughed. “You can relax, Taylor. I know what you’re doing here.” He clicked off his flashlight and stepped closer to the firelight. “I’ve heard of you. Word is, you’re the go-to lore man.”
“You’re a hunter?” Sam asked, breathing a sigh of relief.

“I am. Bill Harvelle. Nice to meet you.”

He held out a hand to shake, but Sam was frozen. Bill Harvelle, Ellen’s husband and Jo’s father, the man who was going to die on a hunt because John Winchester would screw up. He would leave his wife a heartbroken widow and his daughter with a thirst for hunting, following in his footsteps, that would ultimately end with her death.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

Sam quickly shook his hand and said, “No, sorry. I was just surprised by the name. I’ve heard of you, too.”

“All good I hope,” Bill said cheerfully.

“I hear you’re a great hunter.”

“Well, that’s nice. Unexpected, too. It can’t be John Winchester saying it. He never has anything nice to say about anyone.”

“I can’t remember who it was,” Sam said. “It’s good to meet you.”

It was. Sam had wondered a lot about Bill when he’d heard the story of his death, and he’d thought about him sometimes, wondering when the fateful hunt was going to come in which he would die. When time passed and they hadn’t crossed paths, Sam had thought they wouldn’t. Seeing him now was a shock. It was like seeing a ghost. To Sam, he was the memory and guilt of his father’s failure and his friends’ grief.

“You too,” Bill said. “I’ve called your place a few times for help, and I always got George. How is he?”

“He’s good,” Sam said. “Sad he couldn’t join me on the hunt.”

“I’ll bet. He had a helluva reputation before he retired. As do you. Is it true you took out an arachne together?”

“Yeah, years ago,” Sam said. “It was a tough kill.”

“I’ll bet. So, any sign of our wolfy friend yet?”

“No,” Sam said. “Maybe we should sit. I want to look like a tempting target.”

“Sure,” Bill said, he hooked his flashlight onto his belt and sat down at the fire, and Sam sat down, too.

“Where did you get the uniform?” Sam asked.

“I stole it,” Bill said with an impish grin. For a moment, Sam couldn’t breathe, as it was Jo’s grin he saw. She looked a lot like her father. They even shared the same blonde hair. “I guess you couldn’t do the same. Not many men out there as tall as you.”

Sam forced himself to smile. “No, I had to go in as a suit.”

“I’m not so good at acting,” Bill said. “My wife says I couldn’t act my way through a kindergarten play.”
He rooted in his pocket and pulled out a wallet. He flipped it open and handed it to Sam. Sam took it and held it closer to the light to see what he was being shown. It was a photograph of a woman with a young girl. Ellen was smiling wider than Sam had ever seen in life, and Jo had a gap-toothed grin and pigtails.

“That’s my wife, Ellen, and my little girl Jo,” Bill said. “The loves of my life.”

Sam swallowed down the lump in his throat and smiled at him as he handed back the wallet. “They’re beautiful.”

“They are,” Bill agreed. “The pair of them have made me the happiest man in the world. They give me what I need to keep hunting.”

“You don’t think it’s too dangerous with a family back home?” Sam asked.

“No,” Bill said easily. “It’s for them that I do it. I want the world to be the safest place it can for them, especially my Jo. What about you? Have you got a family?”

“I have,” Sam said. “I’ve got George and Missouri, that are like family, and a brother, but I don’t see him much. I lost my parents a long time ago.”

“That’s a shame,” Bill said. “Family is important.”

“I know,” Sam said seriously. “You have to cherish every moment with them that you have.”

He was thinking of Ellen and Jo. Ellen would live without the man she loved, raising a daughter alone, and Jo would grow up without a father. It would be hard for them both, and they would meet their end too young—because of Sam. He didn’t think he had ever felt the guilt for their deaths as acutely as he did now, seeing the man they also lost.


“No,” Sam agreed. “It’ll come though. We’re the only meal in miles.”

Bill nodded. “Tell me more about yourself. How did you become the top lore man anyway?”

Sam shrugged. “I had the knowledge and wanted to share. I was set up with a call from Rufus Turner and it went from there.”

“Well it was a good thing you did. You’ve saved a lot of lives if half of what I hear is true. You’ve—”

He cut off as Sam held up a hand. He’d heard something, and wanted silence to listen for it again. With the only sound breathing and the crackle of the fire, Sam strained to hear. The sound was soft but also worrying. It was a low growl. Sam raised his gun and gestured to Bill who drew his own gun. Sam pointed right and at himself and then left and a Bill, indicating he would go right and Bill left. Bill nodded and clicked off the safely.

The action was a mistake. With a snarl, a dark shape shot out of the trees and flung itself at Bill. He was bowled backwards as a man with canine teeth and dirty hair pinned him down. Sam sprang up and aimed his gun, but they were trashing about as Bill tried to dislodge it, making a clear shot impossible.

Sam shouted Bill’s name and charged forwards. He tackled the wolf off of Bill and they rolled in the dirt, coming to a stop dangerously close to the fire. He felt hot and foul breath on his face, and
he gripped the wolf’s neck to hold his teeth away from him. The last thing he wanted was to be bitten. He had no idea if Michael’s protection would extend to saving him from becoming a werewolf.

“Sam!”

“Kill it,” Sam grunted out, breathless with the effort of holding the wolf back. He used all his strength to hold the wolf away from him and ceased his other struggles so Bill would have a better shot.

There was the crack of a gun and then the wolf became dead weight on Sam. He shoved it off of him and took Bill’s extended hand to pull himself upright.

“Oh, you saved mine,” Sam said. “I think we’re even.”

“I guess I did.” He breathed out in a whistle. “That was close.”

“It’s done now,” Sam said, picking up his gun from where it had fallen and tucking it into his pants. “And we’re both okay.”

Bill nodded fervently. “We are. Let’s get this thing taken care of. I have a mighty need to cherish the way you said.”

“I’ll do it,” Sam said.

“Are you sure?”

Sam could tell he wanted to get to Ellen and Jo, perhaps to kiss Jo as she slept and to curl in bed with Ellen. To hold her and count his blessings.

“I’m sure,” Sam said.

Bill clapped him on the shoulder. “Thank you, Taylor. I really appreciate… well, everything.”

“Get home to your family,” Sam said. “Maybe take a few days off before setting out again. Just enjoy your time with your family.”

It was the best he could give them. He couldn’t save Bill’s life, or Ellen and Jo’s, but he could give them this time together before the world fell apart for their family. It wasn’t all he wanted for them, but everything else was impossible. Sam was limited because he was there.

This was one of those times that his presence felt like an equal blessing as curse.

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Sam let himself into his house just before dawn and smiled as he heard George’s snores through the closed door of his bedroom. He hung up his jacket and wandered into the kitchen to get a beer. He knew he should sleep, but he was too wired still from the hunt and meeting Bill. He thought he would spend some time winding down before going to bed.

He took a beer from the fridge and twisted off the cap before taking a draw on the bottle. He peered at the food on offer, and decided to skip making a snack. He wasn’t in the mood; he just wanted to sit and think.
George’s snores were audible in the living room, and Sam smiled to himself as he flopped down onto the couch and propped a pillow under his head. He closed his eye a moment before tilting his head up to take another draw on his beer.

“Hello, Sam.”

Sam had heard her arrival, so he didn’t start at Anna’s voice. He sat up slowly and set down his bottle on the end table. “Hey, Anna.”

He had no expectations that she would come with news any more than she had at any other time she’d visited. She’d told him she thought she was onto something, but that had been a year ago and there had been a few visits since without news. It wasn’t until he took a good look at her that he noticed something different about her. Her eyes were alight with something he hadn’t seen there before.

“What?” he asked. “What have you found?”

“I need to ask you some questions,” she said.

He sat up straighter. “What have you found, Anna?”

In lieu of an answer, she sat down on George’s chair and pushed her hair back from her face.

“Anna,” Sam said in a warning tone. “Tell me.”

“What do you know about a demon called Crowley?” she asked.

Sam frowned. “He’s a crossroads demon. The boss of them, I guess. He set me and Dean up with the colt to kill Lucifer, but, obviously, that crapped out. Why are you asking about him?”

“He might be able to get us something we need,” she said. “I hear he has it.”

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“For a long time I’ve been following clues to a weapon. It’s called The Lance of Michael. It was what he was armed with when he fought Lucifer and banished him to the Cage. I have learned it’s with the demons now, under the care of Crowley.”

“And this lance will kill Lucifer?” Sam asked.

“It will.”

Sam breathed out a sigh. “We have to get it.”

“We can’t yet. We need it at the last moment.”

Sam huffed a mirthless laugh. “You’re kidding, right? We need it now, Anna.”

“If Crowley finds the weapon is gone, what do you think he’ll do?” she asked.

Sam turned away. The answer was obvious. If something was stolen from Crowley, he would surely make it his mission to get it back.

“See,” she said, satisfied. “We cannot spend the next sixteen years hiding it, risking him getting it back. We need it too much. We have to wait until the right time.”
“But what if it’s lost before then?” Sam asked.

“It’s too important for them to lose it. The fact they have it is a triumph over the angels. It’s Michael’s weapon, a vital part of the angels’ history. They hate that it’s lost. The demons will not be careless with it. I promise you it’s protected.”

Sam sighed. It made sense to wait when she said it like that, but he wanted it in his hands, ready to use when the time came.

“I know this is hard, but we have to be patient, Sam.”

Sam nodded. “Okay. So when it is time, how do we get it?”

“You said Crowley gave you the colt.”

“Yeah.”

“So he’s not unwilling to help. The breaking of the seals and Lucifer being freed is prophesized amongst demons and angels, and has been for millennia. From what I have learned about Crowley, he’s not drinking the demon Kool-Aid. He doesn’t want Lucifer to win.”

That made sense to Sam. Crowley had told them he believed Lucifer would kill demons when he had finished with humans. If he felt that way now, though, they could maybe bring him into the plan.

“Can’t we tell him now?” Sam asked. “Get him on our side early?”

“No. Crowley is not a Lucifer Loyalist, but he is faithful to Lilith. He wouldn’t betray her by giving us something she prizes; not while she is alive at least. When she’s dead, I am willing to bet he’d hand us whatever we asked for if it would defeat Lucifer.”

Sam believed that at least. It felt wrong to wait, but he did trust Anna. She was the one that had been consumed with the fight since Mary had died. Sam had been traveling and experiencing things, but she’d been searching for a way to kill Lucifer. Sam had to follow her lead.

“Okay,” he said. “We’ll wait. I can do that. When we have it though, how do we use it?”

“It’s a lance, Sam. We stab him with it.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Sure we do. Who’s going to hold him in place while we do it?”

Anna looked down at her lap. “You will.”

Sam laughed and she looked up at him. He realized she looked serious.

“What?”

“We need Lucifer to be a target,” she said. “If he sees we’re armed with the weapon that led to his downfall, he will run. We will have no chance unless he’s not the one in control. You have to do it, Sam. Say yes, let him in, and then take control. I will use the lance to kill him.”

Sam understood at last. He was going to be the one that Anna would stab. “And me,” he said quietly.

“Yes.” She didn’t sound cold, but nor did she sound sympathetic. He was glad. He didn’t think he could bear it if she was kind to him.
Adrenaline was coursing through him. He could feel the chill of the bottle in his hand as he picked up his beer and took a swig. He felt his breaths filling his lungs and his heartbeat in his ears. The clock on the mantlepiece that George had bought at Christmas was ticking loudly.

He was going to have to die. A part of him felt like he should have known it would end with him all along. He was the one that had started it after all. He should die. How else could he repay the debt of his crimes if not with his life?

But he didn’t want to die. He wanted to live and be with Dean. For sixteen years he had been holding onto the thought of their reunion. When it got hard to be apart from him, he reminded himself of the incredible story he would have to tell. It was supposed to be a moment of happiness, amplified when Sam told him he knew how to end Lucifer. He wanted a life with Dean, not a funeral pyre.

There was no choice though. Lucifer had to be stopped, and Sam was the only one with a chance of doing it. If he was in control, Anna could do it. Unless… What about Michael’s protection?

“But can I die?” he asked. “What about Michael? He made it so I heal straight away. If I can’t die, can Lucifer if he’s in me?”

“Nothing Michael can do will repair the damage from the lance,” she said. “Lucifer can be killed.”

Which meant Sam could, too.

“Okay,” he said. “No problem. We’ll do it.”

Anna nodded, though she didn’t look surprised. She had been expecting this all along. She knew Sam would make the right choice. And it was the right choice. He had to be the one to end it.

“What do we have to do?” he asked.

“For now, nothing. I will use the rest of our time to learn as much about Crowley as I can. I want to know his habits and hiding places. Who he trusts and who he doesn’t. When the time is right, I will find him and get the lance. Then all we have to do is bring Lucifer to you, which will not be hard. He’ll come for you.

She was wrong though. There was more for Sam to do after they had Lucifer. He had to die. And he had to do it alone. He had waited for Dean all this time, imagining the moment they would be together again, but if he was going to die, they couldn’t be together. Dean could never know what Sam was planning. He’d try to stop it. Worse, if he failed and Sam died, he would blame himself. He would twist himself up with guilt and try to save Sam, bring him back. If Sam came back, would Lucifer? They couldn’t risk it.

Sam couldn’t hide something like this from him. Every word he said would be a goodbye and Dean would notice. The solution was simple, though it made Sam feel like his heart was being torn from his body. He couldn’t see Dean again.

He had waited all this time for that moment, and now he had to accept that the last time he had seen Sam, in this very house at the moment Anna killed him, would be the last time ever. He could never talk to him again. He couldn’t apologize or say goodbye; he had to let Dean go.

And he had to wait.

If he could die now, this minute, he could handle it. Living another sixteen years for the time to be right was going to be a whole new kind of pain. He wasn’t waiting for a reunion anymore—he was
waiting for death.

“Are you okay?” Anna asked.

“I’m fine,” Sam lied. He took a deep breath and focused his attention on what he had to do, as it wasn’t only Dean that needed to be protected. “You can’t tell anyone else. Missouri and George can’t know, nor can Dean when it’s time. You and I have to do this alone.”

“Don’t you think they deserve to know?”

“No,” Sam said firmly. “It will hurt them if they know. We have to carry on the way we have been. Don’t come when they’re here. Wait for me to be alone. I’ll tell them you’ve found something, but I won’t tell them what has to happen. They can think it’s all going to end okay for us all. That will be better.”

“I won’t tell them, but I think you should. You’re going to need extraordinary strength for the next sixteen years, and they can help.”

“I can be strong alone,” Sam said. “And like you said, I have sixteen years before it happens.” He forced a smile. “That’s a long time to live. There’s still a lot for me to experience.”

“It is a long time,” she said, though she didn’t seem to believe what he was trying to represent. Sixteen years was a long time, and to live it all knowing what was coming was going to be hard.

“Really, Anna,” Sam said. “I can do this. Most people don’t know when the end is coming for them, and they waste time. I won’t do that. I’ll make it count.”

“Okay,” she said. “I won’t tell them, and I will do what I can to help you. Call me whenever you need me. I will do whatever I can to help you.”

“Thank you,” Sam said. “I appreciate it.”

“I should go,” she said.

Sam was confused for a moment and then he registered the change. George’s snores had fallen silent. He was an early riser, and had apparently woken up.

That was good, Sam thought as Anna disappeared. He would be able to tell George they had found a way to save the world. He could share the amazing news and relief. He would be able to make George happy. He would do it with a smile on his face, never letting George see his pain. He wasn’t afraid of death. He was happy to die to save.

The thing that hurt him was the fact he couldn’t have Dean again. Sam had waited for it for so long, and now that was over.

He would die without ever seeing his brother again.
Chapter Forty-Three

It was a scorching early July day, and Sam was working bare-chested on his vegetable garden, checking the eggplants and green beans for harvest when he heard a car coming along the drive. He recognized the sound of the engine as Missouri’s, and he smiled as he began to cut the eggplants from the stem with his short knife. He stacked them in the box he’d brought out with him and then turned his attention to the green beans, plucking them from the stem and dropping them into the box as well.

Missouri pulled up beside the Mustang and Sam turned to greet her. She climbed out and eyed him disapprovingly.

“Did you forget to finish getting dressed this morning?” she asked.

Sam rolled his eyes. “C’mon, Missouri, it’s baking out here.”

“Men in their forties don’t have bodies like you, Sam.”

“Nor do they have faces like mine, but no one’s said anything so far. Besides, no one comes up here but us.”

“They don’t see your face properly thanks to that beard. And anyone could come at any moment. What if one of your friends from the site decided to pay a visit?”

“Then it would be the first time in years.”

“You need to be more careful, Sam.”

Sam sighed. “I will.” He grabbed his shirt from the chair he’d slung it over and pulled it on. “I have eggplant and beans ready for you,” he said, hoping to guide her away from the topic of his lack of care for his cover.

“Perfect,” she said with an approving nod. “I’ll stuff the eggplant for dinner tomorrow.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“I picked up your mail,” she said, holding out a sheaf of envelopes. Sam took them and paged through them. There was what looked like a utilities bill and letter from Dieter, and a cream colored envelope for George. When George moved in with Sam, he got no mail at all for the first year, but he must have made connections he hadn’t mentioned to Sam, as letters started arriving for him.

Missouri walked past Sam and went into the house, calling to George. Sam picked up his box of produce and carried it inside and into the kitchen to where Missouri was pouring coffee from the pot into mugs. Sam grabbed two and took one to George in the living room and gave him his letter. George took it without a word and tore open the envelope.

Sam sat down with his coffee and watched as Missouri bustled inside and sat on the couch. “How are you?” Sam asked her.”
“I’m good,” she said with a bright smile. “I have news. James is coming home next week.”

“I thought he was traveling the states this summer,” Sam said.

“He is, but he remembered he had a family here that would also quite like to see him, so he’s diverting here to see us.”

“Excellent,” Sam said. “I was thinking I’d have to take some time off and go to California to see him.”

“You have time off due?” George asked distractedly, not taking his eyes from his letter.

“Yeah. I’ve got some vacation days waiting for me. I thought I’d take a week at the end of summer to see James, but if he’s coming here, I don’t need to.”

George nodded without looking up. “Good.”

“I think James is coming because he has news, too,” Missouri said.

“He does?”

Missouri beamed. “He’s met someone! Her name’s Tess and she’s in his ethics class. I’m not sure how long he’s known her as he was playing it all close to the chest, but things must be serious if he’s talking about her to me. And there’s the way he talks about her. I think he’s falling in love.”

Sam grinned. “Good for him.” He’d thought something was happening for James as when they’d spoken a month ago he’d been in an extraordinarily good mood, excited about something. Sam was happy for him. James had had casual girlfriends over the years that he’d told Sam about, but he’d never been serious enough about them to tell his mom anything. Sam remembered how he had felt falling in love with Jess, the way the world seemed to reform around that person and how you craved them when you were apart. He hoped James was feeling the same way.

“He’s coming next Saturday and he’ll be here till Friday,” Missouri said. “I thought it would be nice if we all went out for dinner.”

“Sounds great,” Sam said.

“George?” Missouri prompted when he didn’t speak.

His head jerked up. “What? Sorry, Missouri. I was distracted. What were you saying?”

“James is coming next week. I thought we could all go out to dinner.”

“Yes,” he said vaguely. “That will be fine.”

“Are you okay?” Sam asked. “Was there bad news in your letter?”

George cleared his throat roughly and shook his head. “No. It’s even good in a way. They’re finally opening the Korean War Memorial in Washington.”

Sam had read about the memorial in the newspapers. It had been a project that had stalled many times in the years since it’s conception, and the fact it was finally ready was a point of pride for the team behind it. There was going to be a grand opening with veterans, and military and political figures. The president was even going to speak.

“That’s good, right? It’s about time.”
“They want me to go to the opening,” George said. “This is a letter from the Veterans Association on behalf of The White House asking me to be there for the official ceremony.”

For a moment, Sam had no words. From what he understood from the newspapers, the invitations were going to senior veterans that had distinguished themselves. Sam knew George had been a captain, but he didn’t know that would have been enough to gain him an invite. Sam had the feeling there was more to George’s story of his time in the army that he’d mentioned so far.

“That’s wonderful, George,” Missouri said enthusiastically. “What an honor.”

“I suppose,” George said.

“Are you going to go?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know.”

“I think you should,” Missouri said. “After all this time, they’re finally doing something to mark the sacrifices you all made there. You shouldn’t miss it.”

“Perhaps,” George said, looking at Sam. “Will you come with me?”

“Of course,” Sam said. “Whatever you need.”

He was surprised to be asked. George was independent to a fault, even with his reduced mobility. Sam would have expected him to go and manage alone. Though perhaps this wasn’t about his physical limitations. Perhaps George needed someone to be there for him personally. Sam couldn’t ask why George wanted him to go as that may make him rescind the invite, and Sam had a feeling that it was important for George to be there. Sam had no idea what memories George held from that war, but perhaps seeing the memorial would be good for him.

“I’ll arrange to take time off,” he said. “It’s the end of the month, right?”

George nodded.

“I’ll let Vic know Monday, and I’ll make a run by the travel agents to arrange flights.”

“Thank you,” George said.

Sam smiled at his friend, seeing the shadow in his eyes that told him he wasn’t really there in the room with them. His thoughts were elsewhere. Sam wondered where. Was he already in Washington, imagining what awaited him there, or was he in Korea, remembering the things the memorial was designed to mark?

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“Are you okay in there?” Sam called through the bathroom door.

“I am fine, thank you,” George said irritably.

“Sorry,” Sam muttered.

He was aware he was probably being too attentive, but he knew George was in pain. The flight had been reasonably short for Sam, but it was a long time for George to sit without being able to extend his leg and rest his knee. They’d rested the day before in the hotel, but it wasn’t enough. George needed a chair that he could recline properly on. They were going home the next day, though, and George would be able to rest. Sam wished they had more time, though. There was so much to see in
Washington, and he’d only seen the things they’d passed on the way to the hotel from the airport so far. He would have to make a trip another time.

Sam moved to the mirror and checked his tie was straight. He was wearing a suit for the first time in a while. The only time he usually donned one was for a hunt in which he needed to present a position of authority. He’d had his hair and beard trimmed for the occasion, too. He looked much smarter than usual. The guys from the site would get a kick out of seeing him like this, not a hammer or clipboard in sight.

The bathroom door opened and George came out. Sam was momentarily taken aback at the sight of him. Sam had never seen him in a suit before, and with his trimmed hair and freshly shaved face he made quite the sight. That wasn’t the most remarkable part of his appearance, though. It was the decorations on his chest that caught Sam’s attention. He was wearing five medals Sam didn’t even know he possessed.

The most eye catching was the one in the center. It was bright gold with green gemstones and an upside-down five-point star. It was hung on a pale blue ribbon with white stars above an eagle with spread wings. Sam knew very little of military honors, but even he recognized a Medal of Honor, given for acts of distinguished valor. He couldn’t believe George had one and he’d never known.

The other medals, though highly polished and in perfect condition, paled beside it.

“Are you going to stand there and stare all day, or shall we go?” George asked.

Sam snapped out of his thoughts and nodded eagerly. “Sure. Let’s go.”

He handed George his cane from beside the bed and opened the door to the hotel. George walked out ahead of him, his gait even more rolling than usual as he tried to combat his pain.

They went to the lobby in an elevator, and Sam instructed the doorman to hail them a cab. When the yellow car pulled up, Sam went around to climb in on the far side to save George walking further than he needed.

“What the gum chewing cabby asked.

“I’ll get you as close as I can,” he said. “There’s a lot of traffic there today, security, too. Lots of big guns coming to the opening.”

“Thanks,” Sam said.

The cab pulled away from the sidewalk, and Sam watched the city pass as they made the ten-minute drive from the Watergate Hotel to the Memorial. The driver was right about security. They had to set down by the Lincoln Memorial, and walk the rest of the way. They had to pass a checkpoint where George showed the letter of invitation and Sam had to show his ID as his guest for the day. Sam noted the difference in the security now compared to what it would be post 9/11. They were waved through and then met with more people that checked the letter and directed them to their allocated seats.

Sam was surprised that they were only a few rows from the front. It made more sense now that he saw George’s medal, but it was still strange to him to be in such a prominent position when he saw the uniformed people in front of him with their chests emblazoned with medals. Sam didn’t see many other Medals of Honor among them, so he supposed it made sense.
Sam tucked George’s cane under their seats and they sat in silence as the seats around them filled and voices washed over them. Sam felt stupidly nervous. He could see the stage and lectern ahead of them, waiting for the most prominent of the attendees, including the president, and he wondered if this would be the day he was exposed as an interloper in this time. It was irrational, as people had far bigger things to worry about than one man with a false identity, but the thought persisted. Of all the things he’d seen and history he’d experienced, this was probably the closest he was going to come to the powers behind it.

His knee started to bounce and George pushed it down. “Relax,” he said. “No one is going to notice you here. All the attention is on him.”

“Him?” Sam asked.

George nodded to the stage where a man in a black suit had just stepped up to the lectern and leaned close to the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, please stand for the President of the United States and President Kim of South Korea.”

Sam stood and reached to help George up. There was a moment of cleared throats and then an audible indrawn breath from the crowd as Bill Clinton walked across the stage with the man whose face Sam had seen in the newspapers in the press coverage of the memorial’s construction.

Sam breathed in and took in the moment. Here he was, in 1995, in Washington DC, only a matter of feet from the President of the United States.

He wished this was a story he could tell Dean one day.

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Sam had listened to the speeches, trying to absorb the words rather than marveling at where he was and what was happening. Every so often, he would glance at George and see that he was frowning at some of the things he heard.

When Clinton told the story of a soldier from his home state of Arkansas, how he’d cleared three enemy bunkers in a solo assault, earning himself the Medal of Honor, Sam wondered about George’s story. What had he done to earn his? He was desperate to ask, but he didn’t know if George would tell him. He held so much close to the chest.

Sam noticed George rubbing his knee as Clinton’s speech came to an end, but when George caught his eyes, he shook his head briskly and turned back to the stage. Sam imitated him, and listened as Clinton spoke. “So to all the veterans here today, and to all throughout our land who are watching, let us all say, when darkness threatened, you kept the torch of liberty alight. You kept the flame burning so that others all across the world could share it. You showed the truth inscribed on the wall: that freedom is not free. We honor you today because you answered the call to defend a country you never knew and a people you never met. They are good people. It’s a good country. And the world is better because of you. God bless you, and God bless America.”

There was a moment of polite applause and then closing remarks given by the Chief of Defense before the presidents were led from the stage and people began to stand up. Sam waited until their row was empty before he stood up and held out a hand to George. He knew George was struggling as he took Sam’s hand and pulled himself up slowly.

“Do you want to go back to the hotel?” Sam asked.

“No,” George said. “I want to see it properly. I came all this way for it, not a bunch of speeches by
people that weren’t even there.”

He stumped away toward the small garden of statues. Sam looked at them. He knew there were nineteen and they were representing the armed forces that had been present. They were rich with detail, posed in their rain capes with weapons, positioned for patrol.

“They’re very good,” George said. “You could almost imagine you were there with them.”

Sam wondered how that felt to George. What was he remembering? The bitter cold winters and scorching summers? The way it felt to spend weeks in a foxhole, waiting to advance even a matter of feet? The sounds of battle? The smells? What was it hidden in his mind that he’d experienced in Korea at war?

George cleared his throat roughly and walked away toward the granite wall with its sandblasted images of war personnel.

“Captain!” a voice said behind them. “Captain Collins?”

George froze and Sam spun around to see a man that looked to be in his fifties coming towards them. He was wearing a suit with two medals on his chest, and his brown hair flecked with grey had been combed to hide the thinning on his temples. His face was flushed with pleasure.

“Is it you, Captain?” he asked.

George turned slowly and his face was a mask. “It is.”

“It’s me, sir,” the man said. “Corporal Peter Baker. First Infantry Division. Heartbreak Ridge.”

A shadow crossed George’s face but he quickly smiled at the man, who beamed in return. “It’s good to see you again, Corporal. Were you here for the dedication?”

“I came to watch from afar,” he said. “No invite from the house for me. I wanted to be here though. I thought I might see some of our unit. I never imagined it would be you though. How are you, sir?”

“I’m fine,” George said.

“Your leg?” the man asked, looking at his cane.

“It’s nothing,” George said. “Just a dicky knee. How are you, Corporal?”

“I’m really well, sir. I have a granddaughter now.” He pulled his wallet out and held it out so George and Sam could see a photograph of a small baby in the man’s arms. “Serena Grace.”

George didn’t say anything, so Sam quickly spoke. “She’s beautiful.”

“Thank you,” the man said.

“This is Sam Taylor,” George said. “He’s a friend of mine.”

“Nice to meet you,” Corporal Baker said, shaking Sam’s hand. “You have a great friend here. He’s a hero.”

“I know,” Sam said seriously. Even without knowing the story of George’s medal, Sam knew his friend was a hero as he’d dedicated his life to the army and then hunting to save other people.
“I wouldn’t be here without him,” he said.

George cleared his throat. “I should get back to the hotel. I need to rest my knee a while. I’m happy to see you’re doing so well, Corporal. Take care of yourself. Sam, I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll come with you,” Sam said quickly.

“No. You see the city. We’re going home tomorrow so you might not have the chance again. Take your time.”

Sam knew that George was really saying he wanted to be alone, so he nodded and said, “I’ll be back later then,” even though he would rather have gone with him.

George walked away, leaning heavily on his cane.

“Is he okay?” Corporal Baker asked.

“Yeah, his knee gives him trouble. He needs to rest it a lot.”

“Do you think I made him uncomfortable? I probably shouldn’t have come over. I just couldn’t believe it when I saw him. It’s not every day you see the man that saved your life when you were just a snot-nosed kid playing at being a soldier.”

“George saved your life?” Sam asked.

He nodded energetically. “He did, and not just mine. There were four of us.”

“What happened?”

“It was Heartbreak Ridge in 1951, a few miles past the 38th Parallel. We’d been trying to take the ridge for three weeks, fighting to the top and getting pushed back by the North Koreans. One night, me and a few buddies were on patrol when we were snatched by the north. In Korea, you pray for death instead of capture if you’re UN. They things they did to us were inhuman in the early days. We were piss scared when they took us, and I think that, if they hadn’t stripped us of our weapons, we’d have swallowed a bullet.” He shuddered and went on, “They took us to one of their bunkers on the ridge, and I think the plan was to move us north in the morning to one of their camps. We lost track of time, but it was pitch black and freezing cold when he came. First we heard a lot of shouting from our captors and gunshots, and then there were explosions. One was close enough that it kinda stunned me, and the next thing I know Lieutenant Collins—he was just a lieutenant them—was dragging us out of the bunker and down the hill. We ran like hell and didn’t stop when we reached the foxhole. We kept going until the lieutenant ordered us to stop. We were panting and exhausted, and looking to which of our friends had saved us, but there was only the lieutenant. We were taken to Battalion Aid, as the North Koreans had been rough with us, and it was when we were there that they told us what had happened. The lieutenant came for us alone, see. He disobeyed his orders and snuck out in the night to come for us.”

Sam just stared, trying to take in the incredible story. George had done that! He was braver than even Sam realized.

“I don’t know how many he killed,” the corporal went on. “But ours wasn’t the first bunker he found. He cleared them out one by one until he found us. He’s a damn hero.”

Sam spoke in a breathy voice. “He is.”

“The North Koreans took the hill in the end, but I never thought it mattered. To me and the rest of
our unit, we’d won as we’d been snatched back right under their noses. We beat them in that.”

“Yeah. I get that,” Sam said. Chills were working up and down his spine, and he felt disconnected from the people milling around them. He was completely taken by the story he’d heard.

“I should fall out,” Corporal Baker said. “I don’t have long and I want to get a good look at that wall first.”

“Okay, sure,” Sam said. “Thank you for telling me this.”

“I was happy to. If you’re the captain’s friend, you should know just what kind of man he is. I don’t imagine he tells his stories often.”

“No,” Sam said with a wry smile. “He really doesn’t”

They shook hands and parted, the corporal going to examine the wall and Sam heading in the direction of the Lincoln Memorial. He thought he would explore Washington a little and then head back to the hotel. He wanted to see his friend again, to look at him knowing what he now knew.

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George was asleep on his bed when Sam got back to the hotel, his knee propped up on a pillow.

Sam crept around the room, changing out of his suit and into a pair of jeans and a t-shirt before sitting on the bed and pulling a book from his duffel and settling down to read while waiting for George to wake.

He didn’t have to wait long. He’d barely read a chapter before George stirred and opened his eyes.

“Sam?”

“I’m back,” Sam said, swinging his legs off the bed and standing.

George struggled to sit and rubbed his knee.

“Do you want me to get a heating pad for it?” Sam asked.

“No, it will settle. You could get me some of my pills though. They’re in my jacket.”

Sam crossed the chair where George had laid his jacket and his took the yellow bottle of pills from the pocket. He handed them to George and then fetched him a glass of water.

George took two pills and then set down the glass and asked, “Did you look around?”

“I did,” Sam said. “It was great.”

“That’s good,” George said tiredly. “Did you manage to shake off Baker? He never did know when to stop talking.”

Sam bit his lip. “We spoke for a while.”

“You did?” George said interestedly, and then his face darkened. “What did you talk about, Sam?”

“He told me how you saved his life.”

George shook his head. “He told you his version of how I did it. The only person that knows the
real story is me. Everything else was just guessed at.”

“Will you tell me?” Sam asked.

George considered a long time before answering. “If you really want to know, then yes. I suppose you have earned the right.”

Sam sat down on the edge of his bed and fixed his gaze on his friend.

“What did he tell you?” George asked.

“That he was captured and you saved him and his comrades solo.”

“Well, he told you that much honestly. The story grew each time they retold it until it was too incredible to be true.” He sighed. “I was in command when they were taken. Our captain was killed the day before and our major was further back along the line. They were taken because I underestimated how close we were to the enemy lines. I sent them out to patrol, and they were snatched. I heard it happen, but when we got there, they were already gone. We retreated to our foxhole and I sent a runner back to the major for orders. When they came back they told us to hold our lines and that he would send replacements for the missing soldiers.”

“They abandoned them?” Sam asked.

“It was war, Sam, it wasn’t that unexpected. I couldn’t let it end there though. It was my fault they’d been taken, so I was the one that had to get them back. I waited until dark and armed myself with as many weapons and I could hold. I ordered the rest of my men to stay behind while I made a short recce, and then I left. I found the first bunker and managed to kill their machine gunner before they knew I was there. It was freezing cold but there had been no rain for days, so there was no mud I could camouflage myself with. I used the gunner’s blood to cover my hands and face. I still remember how it was warm at first before the air made it cold.” He shook his head, seeming to feel he’d said too much, as he spoke in a harder tone as he said, “I emptied that first bunker by stealth, but one of them got a shot off which alerted the rest of the enemy. They started shooting at me. I took a circular route to the next bunker, avoiding the bullets but taking longer. When I was close, I used force to clear it.”

“And you weren’t hurt?” Sam asked.

“Not then, no. I searched the bunker, but my men weren’t there. I found the next, but they were more than ready for me. I shouted orders to people that weren’t there, trying to make it seem as though there was more than just me coming for them. Some of them spooked and ran, I was able to shoot them, but then they started throwing grenades.” He laughed harshly. “I threw them back.”

Sam sucked in a breath. “You did what?”

“You heard. I threw them back. It worked, they were panicked, and more started to run. I hid behind some scruffy bushes and picked them off. I wasn’t the only lucky one though. Someone got off an impossible shot while running, and I was hit in the side. I didn’t even realize it until later. I didn’t feel a thing—the adrenaline blocked it out. I knew that all of the running soldiers were going to the next bunker to recover and defend, so I went back into the bunker I’d emptied and lit candles. I set them up around the edge and then crept around from the east. They were all shooting at the candles, cocky enough to break cover, and I got a group of them with a grenade. While they were confused I went into their bunker and found my prisoners.” He cleared his throat. “And I imagine Baker told you the rest. I got them out and we ran. I made arrangements for them to be sent to Battalion Aid, and the next thing I know I’m tipping forward onto the dirt. I woke up
in a MASH unit three days later.”

“That’s incredible, George,” Sam said.

“But true. They gave me a medal and made me a captain, and I spent the rest of the war trying to ignore the story that had been spread out around me. People all seemed to expect me to do great things.”

“How did it feel?” Sam asked.

George smiled grimly. “No one has ever asked me that before. People always wanted to know how many I killed, how did I manage to keep going after being shot. Not even Truman asked what it felt like, and he seemed to grill me forever when he gave me my medal.” He nodded to himself. “It felt incredible. I was more than a man for those minutes; I was superhuman and nothing could stop me. People talk about the horror of war and the pain of taking a life, and that’s all true, but it’s not everything. I can only speak for myself, but I loved being a soldier at times like that. When it was black and white—me and the mission, me versus the enemy—I felt alive.”

Sam understood. He felt the same about hunting sometimes. When there was a clear enemy and lives to save, he felt that thrill George was talking about. He’d felt superhuman, too. When he’d started exorcising demons with his powers, he’d been more than a man. The cost of the blood didn’t seem to matter in those moments.

“You left the army after the war ended though,” Sam said. “Why would you do that if you felt like that?”

“I started to question my place,” George said. “When I served in the Second World War, I felt like I was fighting for America. We had the support of the country and allies behind us. We were doing the right thing. When I came home from Korea, I just felt empty. I wondered where I would fight next. I realized I was no longer the person that enlisted at eighteen; I didn’t have the same morality. I don’t regret a thing I did at war, but I regret losing that person. I thought I would find him again by leaving the army and dedicating myself to a civilian life. I thought I’d have a wife and family. As you know, it didn’t work out like that. I became a different kind of soldier. It was more than that though. It was America’s reaction to the war. I saw so much death in Korea, I lost friends and enemies, and it seemed huge to me, but America didn’t seem to care when it was over. They seemed to just want to forget.”

“And they did,” Sam said quietly. Korea was known as the Forgotten War. It had taken over forty years for the memorial to be built. Vietnam, the war that had polarized opinion in the country, had a memorial long before Korea. It was unfair to the tens of thousands of Americans that had died in Korea.

“They did,” George said. “I left the army so I could try to forget the person I became as the world had forgotten us. It didn’t work. I was still that man and I still saved lives with only a few people caring about it.” He shrugged. “That’s life I suppose.”

“I guess it is,” Sam said.

“Now I’m hungry. What are we eating for dinner?”

The moment over, Sam shook his head to clear it and said, “It’s up to you. We can order room service or go downstairs to the restaurant or out somewhere.”

“Let’s go downstairs,” George said. “You’ll need to change though. They won’t let you in the
restaurant dressed like that.”

Sam nodded and grabbed his shirt and suit pants from where he’d hung them in the closet.

As he changed, he thought about the story he’d just heard. He felt that he understood George better now; he knew him better as a man as well as friend. He could relate to the way George questioned himself as he did the same.

It occurred to Sam that he’d never spoken to Dean about it. Did he feel that thrill hunting still? Did he feel more than human? Did it made him feel less than human after it was over?

He wished he could ask him. He wished he could speak to him at all. He would love to tell him the story of his friend George and how he was a hero. It seemed that, now he knew he never could, he had so much to ask Dean that had never occurred to him before. He had wasted time. And now he had another fifteen years to wait through—but not waste—before they could take on Lucifer.

He thought exorcising demons was going to be nothing to how he’d feel when he had overpowered the devil. It would cost his life, but it would be worth it.

George had saved his comrades. Sam was going to save the world.
Sam had lived through many great days since 1978, but the May afternoon he watched James graduate from law school was one of the best.

As Missouri wiped at her streaming eyes, Sam put an arm around her and squeezed her to him. She buried her face in his shoulder and Sam smiled. He understood how it felt to be overwhelmed by the moment. He was feeling it now. It seemed impossible that the boy he’d met all those years ago was now queuing up, waiting to walk across the stage. To think that this moment had been spawned from a conversation fourteen years ago on a Ferris wheel was incredible. James had taken the idea, cherished it, and dedicated himself to it, leading him to this day where he was saying goodbye to college and joining the real world.

He wouldn’t be joining the real world quite yet though. He and Tess were going on a trip to Australia for a month—a graduation present from Sam and Missouri—and then James was going to have some time in Kansas with his mother before starting his job at a Californian law firm.

Missouri was disappointed he wasn’t going to be living closer, but Tess’ family lived in California and she wanted to be closer to them—and James wanted to be close to her. Sam wished he was going to be closer to Lawrence, but he’d anticipated that James might not want to come back to Kansas after college whereas Missouri apparently hadn’t. James was ready to go out into the world and make a life for himself, and the fact he could have Tess with him was going to make him all the happier.

The queue filed across the stage as students took their diplomas, and Sam eased Missouri up when he saw James coming closer to the head of the queue. She wiped at her eyes and gripped Sam’s hand so hard he felt the bones in his fingers pop.

“James Mosely.”

James strode across the stage as Missouri broke into fresh tears and Sam applauded loudly. James took his diploma and crossed to the steps and returned to his seat.

“He did it,” Sam whispered into Missouri’s ear.

She nodded and sniffed. “I just wish Richard could see.”

Sam hugged her to him. He didn’t want to share some platitude about how Richard could see them, as he didn’t know if it was true. Missouri could reach spirits with her talking board and she could sense things, but did that mean the connection worked both ways? Did the people they’d lost watch over them, or was that just wishful thinking?

It was hard for Missouri and James, he knew. At moments like this, the space left behind by Richard had to feel huge. He’d been gone a long time, and he was still greatly missed. Sam sometimes felt like an interloper when things happened and he was in what should have been Richard’s place. When he was at an important birthday celebration, when he and Missouri bought a gift for James together, when they’d moved him into college, he knew it wasn’t his place really to be doing those things. He loved that he could though. James and Missouri were his family; he
loved them and any time they got to spend together was a blessing.

The ceremony came to an end, and Sam and Missouri hurried out to the park across the street where they’d arranged to meet James to take photographs.

They weren’t the only people that had the idea to utilize the pretty area as a backdrop. Many families were standing around, waiting for their own graduates to join them. Missouri seemed more composed now, and Sam was glad. James was surely thinking of his father today, too, but it should not cast a cloud on the moment. This was all about his triumph.

James came to them with a woman clinging to his hand. They were both wearing caps and gowns, and clutching their diplomas. She was pretty and had a kind face that Sam recognized from the photograph James had proudly shown him when he’d been home over the summer after he’d met Tess.

James whispered something to her and then strode towards Sam and Missouri as Tess veered left towards a couple that were waving at her and smiling widely.

As soon as he reached them, Missouri enfolded James in a hug and then pressed loud kisses to his cheeks. James bore them without complaint and then took Sam’s outstretched hand. They shook and Sam tugged James into a hug that James returned with a slap on the back.

“You did great,” Sam said as they parted.

“You did!” Missouri agreed enthusiastically. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks,” James said ducking his head, obviously embarrassed. “I can’t really believe it’s over. I mean, school, college, done. It’s time for the real world.”

“It will be soon,” Missouri corrected. “You have other adventures to enjoy before that one starts.”

“Yeah… Australia,” James said with a grin. “It’s going to be awesome.”

Missouri smiled indulgently at him. “You’ve earned it.”

Suddenly she straightened and brushed a hand down her navy dress to smooth it. Sam was confused until he noticed Tess leading the people that had to be her parents towards them. Sam adjusted his suit jacket and cleared his throat. He knew this was important to James and Missouri, and he wanted to make a good impression.

James reached for Tess’ hand as soon as they were close and she stepped to his side. “Mum, Dad, this is James’ mother Missouri Mosely,” she said. “And this is Sam Taylor.”

Sam was surprised she knew him to introduce him, and then he realized James would have given her some explanation for his presence.

“Mrs. Mosely, these are my parents, Fisher and Meredith Kline.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both,” Missouri said, shaking Fisher’s outstretched hand. “And you must call me Missouri, Tess.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” Fisher said, turning to Sam. “And you Mr. Taylor.”

“Sam, please,” he said.

“Sam’s my surrogate father,” James said easily.
Sam blinked quickly and smiled, though there was a lump in his throat. James had never introduced him like this before.

“Ah,” Meredith said, a question answered for her.

“Surrogate?” Fisher asked, looking between Sam and Missouri.

“My dad died when I was seven,” James explained. “Sam and Mom have been friends for years, and Sam stepped up for me. He’s been like a dad to me. He keeps me in line.”

“It’s not hard,” Sam said, seeing Fisher shoot James a quick look. “James was always a good kid, and now he’s a good man.”

James grinned as Tess leaned closer to him.

“Would you like to join us for dinner?” Fisher asked.

“We’d love to,” Missouri said.

“Photos first!” Meredith interjected.

“Of course,” Missouri said, reaching into her purse for her camera. “James and Tess, in front of that tree please.”

James and Tess positioned themselves and Missouri and Meredith snapped pictures of them and then Missouri posed with James while Sam took pictures and then he joined them while Meredith took some.

After thirty minutes of every imaginable combination of people, they tucked away their cameras and arranged to meet at the restaurant of the hotel Sam and Missouri were staying at. Fisher, Meredith and Tess headed for the parking lot and James led Sam and Missouri to the street and hailed them a cab. They climbed in and Sam gave the address before relaxing back in his seat.

He was feeling content. For just a little while he’d felt like a proud dad meeting his son’s girlfriend and her parents for the first time. It was something he’d never thought he would experience in life, and it had been better than he could have imagined. He’d felt like more than just a worker and hunter in that moment, more than a friend. He’d really felt like a father.

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Sam was happy as he walked through arrivals at Los Angeles International Airport to see James waiting for him with a card with his name on it. He stood out among the other people with their name cards as James had drawn a pair of board shorts on his. He held it up higher as Sam approached and grinned. Sam pushed it aside and said, “Very subtle. What would your colleagues say if they saw you now?”

“They’d probably laugh and tell me to have a good time. And I would ask what they’re doing in LAX when they’re supposed to be in San Francisco working. Things are different to the way they were in your day, old man. We’re allowed to take time off for fun stuff.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. Even in 1996 things were very different to 2010, and that was Sam’s time. At least he thought so. It was sometimes hard to remember how things had been then as he had lived his way through from 1978. He was a product of his new time, too.

“What?” James asked. “You are an old man, even if you don’t look it.”
“I’m forty-four,” Sam said defensively. “That’s not old.”

James laughed. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Sam set down his bag and hugged James. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too,” James said. “So much has changed that it feels like forever since I was in Lawrence.”

“How’s it all working out?” Sam asked.

“I’ll tell you about it in the car. Let’s get out of here. It’s crazy.”

People were moving around them like shoals of fish, eager to get out of the airport, some to start their vacations and others to get home. James picked up Sam’s bag and they set off to the exit.

Sam hadn’t been in LA since the riots, and it felt strange to be back. He knew that the city was going to be a very different place to the one he’d seen those dark days, but some of the damage was still visible from the billion dollars’ worth of destruction wrought over the city. He was unlikely to see it though, as they were heading to Venice Beach for the long weekend.

It had been James’ idea for Sam to meet him in LA so they could spend a weekend at the beach with James teaching Sam to surf, and Sam had agreed readily. He’d never surfed before, despite that conversation with James many years ago, and he was looking forward to spending time with James, too.

They got to James’ car, a black SUV, and James tossed Sam’s bag onto the back seat before climbing in behind the wheel.

“How was your drive down?” Sam asked, snapping on his seatbelt.

“It was good,” James said as they pulled out of their spot. “Traffic was light most of the way, and it’s pretty straight. I enjoyed it. How was your flight?”

“Apart from the turbulence over Colorado, it was smooth. I like the short flights.”

“Yeah,” James said. “Australia was a long one.”

“About the same as Berlin,” Sam said.

They slid into the traffic on West Century Boulevard. “We studied Berlin and the Wall in my political science class,” James said. “What was it like to be there?”

Sam drew in a deep breath. “I don’t think I can describe it. The two sides were polar opposites. The West was so rich and vibrant. When I went to the East, before the wall came down, it was the darkest, most depressing place I’d ever seen. You could feel the way people suffered by just walking down the street. Then the wall came down and the whole world changed. It was a joy such as you can’t imagine for those people. Complete strangers were hugging like they were brothers that had been separated all their lives. I’ve never felt anything like it. My friend Dieter said the feeling seemed to last forever, that elation at being reunited. I was watching history, lives changing in the best possible way, and it was incredible.”

James nodded. “I bet. So it’s good this time travel thing?”

They’d never really openly discussed Sam’s presence in this time before. After James had seen proof of the truth, he’d seemed to place it in a box and ignore it. He acted as if Sam was the same
man he’d always been, not a man out of time that had harbored a huge secret from him for years.

“Sometimes,” Sam said. “I see a lot of history happen, and that can be great. I get to experience things I missed before, like Live Aid and Berlin, but I also know the bad stuff that’s coming, and there’s nothing I can do to change it. My mom died in ’83, and though I tried, I couldn’t save her. I am going to lose other people, too, and I am going to have to watch it happen, knowing I can’t help. It’s a blessing and a curse. I miss the people I left behind.”

“Like your brother?” James asked.

“I’m surprised you remember him. I told you about him a long time ago.”

“It stuck in my head. You hardly ever talk about yourself, so when you do I remember.”

“Yes, Dean. I haven’t seen him properly in eighteen years, and I wish every day that I could. I see things that I know he’d love to see and things I need to share with him, the good and bad.”

“You could see him though,” James said. “He’s out there somewhere, right? Why don’t you track him down? You could just see him,”

Sam sighed. “I’ve thought about it a lot of times. It would be hard to find him, as we moved about a lot growing up, but I don’t think I could do it anyway. I saw him when he was a baby and a young kid, as they lived in Lawrence, but he’s seventeen now. He would look like himself, and that would be hard. I want to do more than see him; I want to talk to him and tell him about everything he’s missed. Seeing him but not being able to do that would be too painful. Maybe one day I’ll be strong enough to see him but not go to him. I’m not yet though, so I have to keep my distance.”

“It’s really hard for you isn’t it?” James said glancing at Sam with a new understanding in his eyes.

“Sometimes,” Sam said with a smile. “But I have gained a lot by being here now. I would never have met George if I hadn’t come back, and I would never have known your mom the way I do now. I wouldn’t have met you either. I think most days it’s a fair exchange.”

James flipped on the blinker and they drove onto Lincoln Boulevard. Sam watched the buildings pass, sitting up higher in his seat as the more eclectic stores and hotels of Venice Beach appeared. He’d never been before, and he liked the look of the place. When the ocean came into sight, he smiled. He’d not seen it in a long time.

“What’s the hotel?” James asked.

“The Hotel Erwin,” Sam said. “It’s on Pacific Avenue.”

They scanned the street signs, coming to Pacific Avenue a few minutes later. They pulled into a spot in the parking lot and climbed out.

James looked up at the hotel and said, “You sure this is the right place? It looks a little high-end.”

“This is the one,” Sam said happily. He usually stayed somewhere a little higher class when he was traveling for pleasure rather than a hunt, and he had booked what promised to be a nice place for them.

James cast him a dubious look as they took their bags and walked toward the entrance.

The lobby was an impressive place with much chrome and grey veined marble. James hung back as Sam checked them in and took their key cards to where James waited. “We’re on the third floor,”
Sam said.

James took his card and they headed to the elevators. Sam gave their floor to the blue uniformed elevator attendant, and they sped upwards. When they came to a halt, Sam slipped the attendant a bill and they set off along the corridor to their room. Sam let them in and James whistled.

It was a nice room, with French doors that led onto a balcony with seats set on it. Sam dropped his bag then opened the doors and went out to look at the spectacular view of Venice Beach. Straight ahead of them was the boardwalk and to the left Sam could see young people throwing themselves around on the skate park.

“This is pretty swanky, Sam,” James said, walking onto the balcony with him. “How are you paying for this?”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “I’m from the future, James.”

“I know.”

“Which means your mom and I do well on the stock market.”

“How well?” James asked.

“I do very well,” Sam said. “You’ll have to ask your mom about her profits.”

James whistled between his teeth. “I knew there was something. I mean college wasn’t cheap and you guys sent me to Australia, but still…” He frowned. “What are you doing living out in that place in the woods if you’re rich?”

“Same reason your mom still lives in her house. We have what we need already. Why change?”

“She never said. I’ve never gone without, but she never told me we were rich.”

“Would you have wanted to know?” Sam asked. “If you had everything you needed, already, what difference would it have made?”

“None, I guess. I guess I should have figured before. She can’t make that much doing her woo-woo stuff.”

“Her ‘woo-wo’ stuff is about helping people,” Sam said. “And it does.”

James nodded. “I know there’s still more to the world that she tells me. If angels are real, what else is? But I don’t think I want to know about it. If my mom really is psychic, she can keep it to herself.”

“She’s never told you anything she thinks might change things for you,” Sam said. “It’s why we never told you the truth about me. Neither of us wanted to open your eyes that much.”

“I’m glad.”

Sam was glad, too. He didn’t want James’ life changed too much by the knowledge his mom could actually read his mind when she let herself. She never did, not since he was a young child, but the idea would still be too much for James to handle. Sam still had trouble with it sometimes, and he knew she never did it to him unless the circumstances were extreme. She respected the privacy of the people she loved. Other people were fair game.

“I want to change out of my plane clothes and then we can go explore,” Sam said.
“Sure,” James said. “Let’s do this.”

Sam grinned and clapped him on the shoulder. “Yeah. Let’s.

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As they walked along boardwalk on Saturday morning, Sam watched the surfers riding the waves, and he felt a thrill of trepidation. They made it look very easy, and Sam was pretty sure it wasn’t.

James was excited. He’d been surfing every summer since he was small, when he visited his grandparents in Florida, and he’d spent some time surfing only a matter of weeks ago in Australia. He was eager to get back into the water.

Sam was more worried for other people than he was himself. If he wiped out, he was going to get away fine. Any unwitting victims he’d hit were going to be the ones hurt. James laughed off his fears when he confided them and said he would be fine.

They went to a surf shack with boards stacked outside, and a man appeared out of the door, bare-chested wearing boardshorts and a shell necklace. Sam thought he looked like a walking cliché, but he greeted them warmly and introduced himself as Jay.

James picked out a board and, seeing he was working with a competent surfer, Jay asked him where he’d surfed before. As they shared stories of different beaches, Sam eyed the boards curiously. When they finally finished their conversation, Jay turned his attention to Sam.

“First time?” he asked.

“Yes,” Sam admitted.

“You’re going to need a softboard then.” He ran a hand along the boards and pulled out a bright yellow one. “This should be good. It’s got the length to handle your weight, and it’s not going to be too hard to control.”

“Thanks,” Sam said.

“You got wetsuits?” Jay asked.

“I have,” James said, lifting his backpack, but Sam needs one.”

“You want a full body or a steamer?”

Sam just looked at him blankly. He had no idea what he was choosing between.

“A steamer,” James said. “It’s warm enough, right?”

“Yeah, it a warm one and is going to get warmer. Come on in and I’ll size you up,” Jay said.

Sam followed him into the store and looked around at the racks of wax and the surfing themed souvenirs.

Jay looked Sam up and down and turned him in a circle then picked a wetsuit from a rack and handed it to him. “This should do you. Want to try it on?”

Sam held up the suit against him and looked at James who nodded and said, “You’d better.”

Jay pointed to a changing cubicle and Sam went inside. He stripped off his t-shirt and examined the
suit, quickly realizing he had no idea how to put it on. He could kill a werewolf with a silver bullet
to the heart, he could decapitate a vampire with ease, he could take out a vengeful spirit and he
knew more lore than ever before, but he had a feeling this was going to be tougher.

He peered out and asked, “Any tips?”

“Feet first.” James said.

Sam scowled. “Very funny.”

“I’m serious. Get it high on your ankles and then bring it up your legs piece by piece. It’s not like
putting pants on, Sam.”

Sam sat down and pulled the suit onto his feet and worked it upward. When he was confident he
had that right, he moved up his legs to his torso. The suit seemed to cling to him like a too-tight
second skin, and he struggled to get it up to his chest. After a minute of cursing and fumbling with
the sleeves, James took pity on him and came to help. With what seemed like unfair ease, James
had his arms through the sleeves and was zipping the back.

“Happy?” James asked.

Sam bent his knees and stretched his arms to test the feel of it and was surprised to find he had freedom of movement, despite the clinging fit. “Yeah. It’s good.”

James unzipped his backpack and took out his own wetsuit. He sat on Sam’s vacated chair and began to put it on. Sam watched, trying to see the trick to it, and realized it was probably just practice that made it look so easy.

Sam paid for their rentals and tucked his wallet back into his own backpack.

“Do you want to leave your stuff in here?” Jay asked. “I can keep an eye on it. The beach isn’t the most law-abiding place.”

“Yeah, thanks,” James said, handing over their bags to Jay who stashed them in a room between the stacked shelves.

Jay locked the door and tucked the key around his neck on a thin black cord then took two packages of wax from the shelf and tossed them to Sam and James. “You’ll need these.”

He led them outside and they picked up the boards and thanked him. “Enjoy,” he said easily, then turned his attention to a man that had approached to look at the boards.

Sam and James carried their boards to the beach, and when James set his down, Sam did the same and waited for the next step.

“Wax,” James said, holding up the package of wax. He peeled something from the bottom and Sam did the same, seeing something that looked like a reversed hair comb. The handle was wide and the teeth at the edge very small. James tore open the package and shook what looked like a bar of soap into his hand. Sam did the same and smelled the pineapple the wax was scented with. “You need to cover the spot your feet are going to be.”

He took the wax and drew diagonal lines across the board, working his way down to the bottom. He indicated to Sam where to start, and then Sam began to make the same lines. When the area was coated, James picked up the comb and showed Sam how to use it to rough the edge of the wax to give better grip.
“And this is supposed to help me stay on the board?” Sam asked.

James grinned. “Face it, Sam, you’re coming off at some point. No one learns to surf without wiping out. Make sure you’ve got your leash on and that you fall oceanside, and you’ll be fine. Besides, it’s not like anything can hurt you.”

“No, but my pride can be bruised.”

“Your pride will be fine. You’re already pushing the boundaries by trying it in the first place. I figure someone your age will be set in your ways and not able to try anything new.”

Sam threw the remains of his wax at James, catching his chin. “I’m forty-four years old. I’m not too old to try anything, thanks.”

James laughed and then became serious. “Is it weird? Being that old but not looking it, I mean?”

“Yeah. I worry that people are going to realize something’s different about me. I say my dad had good genetics and didn’t age fast too, but even with the beard, I’ll have to quit work eventually. I can’t get away with it when I’m in my fifties.”

“How long till it’s your time again?”

“It mostly feels like this is my time now,” Sam said. “But I will catch up to where I left in thirteen years, seven months.”

“You count down?” James asked.

“Wouldn’t you?”

“I guess.”

Sam used to be counting down to seeing Dean again, but now he was counting down to the time he would be able to save the world. He tried not to think of it as counting how much time he had left. It was about stopping Lucifer.

James got to his feet and said, “Lay on the board. You want your toes touching the edge.”

Sam glanced around at the other people on the beach. He was going to look pretty stupid lying on a surfboard on the sand, doing whatever James thought he should do next, but at the same time he wanted to do it right. He lay down and adjusted himself to James’ instructions.

“Paddle,” James said. “You’ve got to imagine you’re getting out behind the wave.”

Sam obeyed, feeling stupid, and watched James as waited for further instruction.

“That’s good,” James said. “Now we’re going to try getting up.” He lay down on his board and pushed his chest up with his hands at his sides. “Get halfway and then bring your feet up under you,” he said demonstrating the movement. “You can go onto knees first if it’s easier, but you want to make the movement smooth. Don’t lean too far either side. Keep your knees bent and lower your chest so your center of gravity is spread.”

Sam braced himself and then tried to imitate James’ smooth movement. He felt the wax gripping his feet, stopping him sliding off, which pleased him, but he knew from James’ expression it hadn’t been as good as it should have been.

“Try again,” James said.
Sam lay down and, taking care to balance himself, pushed up and brought his feet under him.

“That’s good,” James said. “Spread your legs a little further. You want them shoulder width apart.”

Sam obeyed and checked James for approval. James nodded and said, “That was better. Now go again.”

With a sigh, Sam lay down and started again.

It took what felt like an age for James to decide Sam was proficient at getting up, and then he turned his attention to teaching Sam how and when to find a wave to catch. They stood on the beach watching other surfers, seeing how they gauged their moment. Then Sam had a long lesson in how to catch a wave and position himself on the board as he rode it in. Sam listened attentively, eager for anything that would help him not make a fool of himself.

The sun was high and Sam was sweating under his suit when James decided Sam was ready to get into the water.

“Just paddle at first,” he said. “Get the feel on the board and learn the weight.”

They stayed in the shallow water, and Sam practiced aiming himself so he could get on the wave at the right moment.

After what felt like the hundredth correction, Sam said, “Is this really boring for you? Don’t you want to get out there and actually surf instead of teaching me?”

“I figure I owe you,” James said. “You spent enough time teaching me stuff when I was growing up. I’m good with computers now because of the lessons you gave me growing up. Besides, I think it’s time for you to have a go.”

“Seriously?” Sam asked brightly.

“Yeah. You’ve prepped as much as you can.” He turned his board out to the ocean and paddled away.

Sam followed, raising himself as James had taught him when he passed over a wave. He stopped when James did, and watched him carefully as James gave him the thumbs up and them paddled himself towards a wave. He caught it and got to his feet in a movement that looked far easier than Sam knew it was. The wave caught him, and before Sam knew it, he was speeding away, balancing perfectly on his board.

When he reached the shore, he turned back and gestured to Sam. With a deep breath, Sam waited for the right wave and then paddled towards it. He turned the board and then gripped sides, poised to raise himself. He judged the moment right then brought his feet under him and rose to a stand.

For a moment, he felt exhilarated. He was doing it! The water was rushing beneath him and he was almost flying. He laughed. This was incredible. The feeling dissolved a second later as the tip of the board rose in front of him and he began to fall. He pitched himself back, off the board—oceanside as James had instructed—and caught the leash to keep the board from rushing away and hitting someone. Red-faced and scowling, he walked to James on the shore and set the board down.

James was trying to hide his smile, but Sam saw it.

“Congratulations, Sam, you just had your first wipeout.”
“I crapped out,” Sam said bitterly.

“No, you did what everyone does their first time. Are you ready to try again?”

Sam looked back into the water, where surfers were riding the waves with what looked like effortless ease. “Yeah, I am,” he said.

“Good,” James said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Sam picked up his board and followed James back into the water,

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“So, will you do it again?” James asked.

“Definitely,” Sam said. “Even falling off was fun in the end, and actually staying upright was a hell of a buzz.”

It was the last night of their stay in LA, and they were sharing a pitcher of beer at a beachside bar.

“Great,” James said. “I think you could be really good at it if you practice.”

Sam smiled to himself as a memory flickered through his mind. “Might be hard. I don’t think I’ll find many good waves in Kansas.”

James frowned slightly. “You said that before, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Sam said, surprised. “I didn’t think you’d remember. You were only a kid.”

“When was it?”

“The first summer I was here. You’d just gotten back from Florida where your grandparents had arranged surfing lessons for you. You told me I should try.”

“I think I remember that. It took you long enough to try.”

“I needed a teacher,” Sam said. “I had to wait for you.”

James laughed. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

“It was worth the wait. This weekend has been great. It was good to be able to spend time with you.”

James refilled their beers. “It was good to have time with you, too. I think it’s going to be hard in future.”

“Things are going to be busy for you, I guess,” Sam said. “You won’t be able to take off for weekends when you like as easily once you’re taking big cases.”

“I know,” James said. “All the juicy cases have gone to the partners, but I think they’ll trust me eventually.”

“You want to get into court,” Sam guessed, “defending the innocent.”

“I do. There are so many people out there that need it.”

The law firm James was working with was a private firm that took a lot of pro bono work,
especially for cases where there was racial discrimination. It was a great firm for James to be a part of as the Rodney King incident had as great an impact on him as it ever had, and he really wanted to make a difference. He would be good at it, too. James was passionate about the law.

“There’s other things too…” James said quietly. “I might be busy outside of work as well.”

Sam sipped his beer. “Yeah? What’s going on?”

James took a deep breath. “I’m going to ask Tess to marry me.”

Sam sputtered and set down his glass quickly before he spilled it. “Seriously? That’s.. wow… big.”

“I think I’m ready,” James said. “I feel ready. We’ve talked about it before, our future, and I think the moment is right for me to ask.”

“Great,” Sam said enthusiastically, reaching over the table to grip James’ arm. “I’m happy for you. Tess is great, and you deserve to be happy. Does your mom know?”

“Yeah, she gave me her engagement ring for Tess. I asked her not to tell you because I wanted to do it myself.”

Sam grinned. “Thanks. Have you planned how you’ll do it?”

“I’ve got no idea. I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“I have,” Sam said. “Well, I’ve prepared to at least. I was in love with a woman once, and I was going to ask her to marry me. I had the ring, but before I could ask, something happened and I didn’t get a chance.”

“What happened?” James asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sam said. “It was a long time ago.” He didn’t want to spoil the moment of happiness by telling James about Jessica’s murder, even a version that was stripped of the supernatural elements. “I had it planned though, so I know how nerve-wracking it is.”

“How did you handle it?” James asked. “I have to fight the urge to ask all the time. I want it to be perfect, but I want it done, too.”

“I remember the feeling,” Sam said. “I concentrated on making it perfect for her. I was waiting for this big interview to happen before I asked, so I knew exactly what I could offer her for a future. There were these gardens we went to sometimes, and I was going to take her there to stargaze and ask then.”

James nodded thoughtfully. “There’s this spot by the bay that we like.”

“Maybe there then,” Sam said. “You just have to find the right time and place for you both. It’s unique for every couple. What makes you happy will probably make her happy, too.”

“Thanks, Sam,” James said. “I feel a little calmer now.”

Sam relaxed back in his seat. “You’re going to make a great husband,” he said. “You’re a good man.”

“I’ve had great role models,” James said. “My dad taught me a lot, and you and mom even more. If I am a good man, and I try to be, it’s because of you two.”
Sam felt his eyes burn. “Thank you, James,” he said quietly. “I appreciate that.”

“It’s the truth,” James said easily. “I know what happened to you, being stuck here, must have been hard, but I’m really grateful you were. I can’t imagine my life without you in it. And I think Mom would have been very different, too.”

“I would have been different without you both, too,” Sam said. “I almost gave up a few times, and it was your mom that always pulled me out of it, and you both that kept me out.”

James raised his glass. “To us then.”

Sam clinked his glass against James’ and said, “To us. And to you and Tess and your future together. It’s going to be something special.”

“I hope so.”

Sam was confident that it would be. James was a good man, and his life with Tess would be a rich one. He felt enormous pride that he might have been a part of making James what he was. If he achieved nothing else in his time in the past, he had done this. That was as special as anything else he’d done in his long life.
Sam walked through the front door and dropped his keys down into the bowl on the table. He kicked off his boots and called, “George?”

“In here.”

He walked into the living room and saw George sitting in his usual chair with his feet elevated. The TV was playing a quiz show, but George had muted it. Sam saw a woman dancing on the spot and the host waving an expansive hand at a shiny new SUV that Sam assumed the contestant had just won.

“How was your day?” George asked.

“Long,” Sam said. “There were two machinery breakdowns to deal with that slowed us up and ended with big bills for Vic to complain about. Nothing we can do though. We need the equipment to do the job. Maybe if he had regular maintenance on them, they wouldn’t break so damn often.”

“Oh the woes of a working man,” George said with a sly smile.

“Exactly,” Sam said seriously, and then laughed. “I’m going to clean up and then I’ll get us something to eat.”

“Before you do that, we need to talk,” George said. “We have a problem.”

Sam sat down on the couch and said, “What’s wrong?”

“We have a ghoul.”

“In the bathroom?” Sam quipped.

George showed no sign of amusement, and Sam wiped away his smile and looked serious.

“In Shawnee,” George said. “There have been reports of five recent graves dug up and corpses defiled. The newspapers aren’t saying eaten, but I’m pretty sure that’s what’s happening.”

Sam nodded. Shawnee was only a thirty-minute drive away for him. He could take care of the hunt in a night if the ghouls showed. He was tired, and he’d been looking forward to crashing early, but the ghouls couldn’t be left. They weren’t a physical risk to living people unless their meal was interrupted, but the things they did to the dead still wrought emotional damage. People laid their dead to rest, not to be dug up and eaten.

“I’ll take care of it,” Sam said. “Don’t suppose you know how many cemeteries there are in the area, do you?”

“I made a few calls,” George said. “There are over a dozen spread about the area.”

“Awesome,” Sam said.

“There’s good news though. The three that have been attacked so far are in the same small area of the city, and there is one more that’s not been touched yet. St Joseph’s. It’s within a mile of the others, but there’s been no sign of ghoul activity there.”

“Yet,” Sam said.
“Exactly. I think if you place yourself there, you have a good chance of catching them. What do you think?”

Sam got to his feet. “I’ll go now. I can get into position before dark and try to catch them before they feed.”

“You’re not going to clean up first?”

“Since I’m pretty sure I’m going to be spattered with ghoul gore before morning, I’d say there’s no point.”

Sam went to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and a power bar. If he was going without dinner, he’d need something to eat. As he was going to be so close to home, he didn’t need his hunting duffel, and all the weapons he needed were in the hidden compartment of the trunk.

“You want anything before I go?” he asked George as he walked back into the living room.

“No, thank you. I can get whatever I need myself,”

“Okay,” Sam said. “There’s leftover chili in the fridge. Just heat it on the stove.”

“Sam, I am quite capable of taking care of myself,” George said impatiently. “Go save some…”

“Lives?” Sam asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Some grieving families.”

Sam nodded. “On it.” He shoved his feet into his boots again and went out to the car.

It wasn’t how he thought his evening would go, but it was something worth doing. It could save people suffering more than they already were with the deaths of their loved ones.

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Sam could only hope the ghouls would show at the cemetery that night. With so many to choose from in the area, he couldn’t be sure where they’d go, but he hoped they would stick to pattern and come to the one he was going to stake out. If they didn’t, he would try again the next night.

He’d parked the car a block away so it wasn’t obvious he was there, and then, when he was in the cemetery, he set himself up beside a mausoleum where he would be out of sight but able to hear if someone was close.

It was cold and he was hungry again in the early hours of the morning when he heard sounds that didn’t belong—footsteps and excited voices.

It wasn’t impossible that it would be kids playing around, and he knew cemeteries were popular places for dares, so he didn’t reveal himself straight away. He stayed curled against the stone wall and listened.

“I don’t want to dig for dinner,” a woman’s whining voice said.

“We don’t need to,” a gruff-voiced man replied. “I saw them stuffing a fresh one in here today. We can have an easy meal if we share.”

“I don’t want to share,” a different man replied.
“That’s because you’re a pig,” the woman said. “You can dig yours up if you like. I call dibs on whatever’s in here.”

Sam knew it was the ghouls and there were three of them. He thought if he could trap them inside the tomb, he could take them out easily. He had his loaded sawn-off in his hand, and a spare in the bag on his back. That gave him six rounds without needing to reload. He’d done more with less before.

He heard someone scratching at the locked door, and then the gruff-voiced man said, “Don’t bother.” There was a crash and the woman whooped. Sam assumed they’d kicked open the door. He heard grunts of appreciation and then the voices came from inside.

“Help me get this off,” the woman said.

“So now you need me. I’m not too much of a pig to help you get your dinner.”

“Screw you, Hank,” she said. “Brett, can you help?”

“Of course.”

“Kiss ass,” Hank muttered.

There was the scrape of stone and then a laugh. “A double funeral. That’s what I’m talking about. There’s plenty here, even for you, Hank.”

There was a creak of wood and Sam guessed they were prying open the coffins.

“And they’re not embalmed,” Brett said. “As pure as the day they died. Wonder what it was that killed them.”

“Looks like I’ve got a head shot here,” Hank said. “Murder suicide do you think?”

“Maybe a double suicide,” the woman replied. “It doesn’t matter. They’re good eating either way.”

There was a moan of appreciation, and Sam swallowed bile. Of all the things he hunted, ghouls were the most disgusting. Even the horror of seeing a shapeshifter shedding its skin was better than this.

From the sounds inside the tomb Sam thought they were eating, distracted, so he straightened up and crept to the side of the door. He took a breath, clicked off the safety and stepped into the opening.

The ghouls were eating, but there weren’t just three of them. Four of the monsters were feeding on the corpse of a woman in a white dress Sam thought might have once been a wedding gown.

Horrified and cursing his lack of oversight in checking how many there really were, Sam took aim at the closest ghoul and pulled the trigger. The ghoul’s head disappeared in a spatter of gore, and Sam pumped the shotgun to engage the next round.

He corrected his aim to the woman, but she was already in motion. With a scream of Brett’s name, she surged towards him, her bloody and clawed hands outstretched to his face.

He pulled the trigger, but his aim was off. The shot caught her in the chest, making a raw mess of her body, exposing flesh and bone. The injury didn’t stop her. She collided with his chest and Sam was sent sprawling back. She straddled him and peered down at him with hatred.
Sam pumped to reload and brought the shotgun up in front of him. He pulled the trigger and her head disappeared. Her corpse fell onto him as he shoved it away, scrambling to his feet and reaching over his shoulder for his second gun. He could feel the slick of the female’s blood on his face, and the scent was thick in his nostrils. It made him feel sick.

The other two ghouls seemed to have been stunned into inaction by what was happening in front of them, but they snapped back to themselves as Sam engaged a new round. One of them kicked at Sam, trying to knock him off his feet, but Sam was strong and fast. He took the blow then sidestepped to avoid the next attack. He shot his opponent, missing the head, but then someone was holding him from behind. His bag was torn from his back, his arms dragged into awkward angles, and there was a click. Sam had only a moment to act. He could take another shot at the ghoul in front of him and then deal with the one behind and whatever it had taken from Sam’s bag to arm himself, or he could defend and kill the one behind.

He acted automatically, pulling the trigger and exploding the ghoul’s head into a bloody spatter, then spun in time to see the last ghoul bringing up Sam’s Taurus. With a smile, the ghoul pulled the trigger and Sam’s head exploded with pain like he’d never imagined. His vision whitened out and then became black as he toppled backwards. His mind reeled with panic and fear.

He knew he was dead. There was no way he could survive a shot like that, no matter what Michael had done to him, but as he waited for awareness to pass, he realized it was coming into sharper focus instead. He head was still searing with pain, but he was alive and able to move. He opened his eyes and saw the ghoul standing over him with an expression of complete astonishment. He seemed disbelieving of what he was seeing. Sam used his capitulation to grab up his shotgun and take aim. With a final, cracking shot, the ghoul was killed, and the remains of its body toppled backwards.

Sam got to his feet, panting in shock, feeling his hands trembling. He looked around the carnage of the tomb, the bodies and blood, and knew, as much as he wanted to get away from the scene, he couldn’t leave it like this. He reached for his bag and pulled out the can of gasoline he’d brought with him for cleanup. He felt guilty at what he had to do, but he couldn’t leave the woman to be found chewed up. She needed to be burned, too, as did the untouched man that lay in the second coffin. He lifted the bodies of the ghouls into the stone tomb and doused them with gasoline, then trailed a line down the side and spattered the bloody floor so that would ignite, too.

He trailed it to the door and dropped the empty can into his bag with his guns then pulled a book of matches from his pocket. He lit them and dropped them onto the gasoline. They lit and the fire spread across the floor and up the side of the tomb to the contents. The air quickly filled with the sick scent of burning flesh and Sam walked away, his bag over his shoulder.

It hadn’t seen as simple a kill as he’d experienced before, and his mind was full of fears and questions, but that part of it was over. Now he wanted to get home to clean up.

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Sam could hear the TV playing in the living room when he got inside, what sounded like an infomercial, even though it was the middle of the night. He guessed George had stayed up to see him home and to make sure it was over. Sam wished he hadn’t. He didn’t want to face him yet.

He stood in the hall for a moment, only moving when he heard the sounds of George getting out of his chair and the tap of his cane on the floor, a sure sign he had stayed up too late to be good for his knee. George needed to rest it properly in bed if he wanted to avoid more pain.

At the sound of George’s approach, Sam quickly kicked off his boots and went into the bathroom.
He wasn’t quick enough for George though. Before he could close the door, George was looking at him from the arch that led into the living room. He looked slightly sickened.

Sam had cleaned his face and hands, but his hair was still slick with the ghouls—and his own—blood.

“I’m okay,” he said.

“Clean yourself up,” George said in a softer voice than usual. “We can talk after.”

Exquisitely grateful, Sam closed the bathroom door and set the shower to running. He didn’t wait for the temperature to regulate before stripping off and getting in. The blood and gore diluted and poured down him to the drain. He squeezed shampoo into his hand and lathered his hair roughly, wanting the blood gone.

Even when the water ran clear and he’d shampooed his hair three times, he stayed under the water. He was trying to cleanse himself from the mess of his night’s work and also delaying the moment he would have to talk to George.

It wasn’t until the water ran cold that he got out and grabbed a towel from the rack. He wrapped it around his waist and left the bathroom and went into his bedroom. He dried himself off and dressed in a pair of sweats and a t-shirt, leaving his feet bare.

When he walked into the living room and sat on his chair, George turned the TV off and said, “That was not a normal hunt.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Sam said darkly. “There were four of them,” Sam said. “I got them all.”

“What happened to you?”

“How do you know something happened?”

“I know you, Sam. That look in your eyes was familiar. I saw it when Anna killed Chronos. It was fear and horror. What happened?”

“I was shot,” Sam said.

George nodded. To him the news wasn’t that striking as George had seen Sam fatally hurt before only to be fine within seconds, fine and fighting.

“In the head.”

George sucked in a breath. “Dear Lord.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, fiddling with the seam of his pants leg and avoiding George’s eye.

“That’s never happened before, has it?”

“No. It was a first, and I…”

“It was different?” George guessed.

“I thought it was going to work,” Sam said. “I really thought I was going to die.”

“That must have been very hard.”
It had been more than hard. Sam had been sure in that moment he was going to die, and the panic had been real. He had been scared for what would happen if he was gone. How would they kill Lucifer, even if they had the lance, if Sam wasn’t able to overpower him and make him a target? The whole plan could have failed if Sam had died.

“You lived though,” George said. “You’re fine now, aren’t you?”

“Yes, but for a moment I thought I wasn’t. I thought that was it, and that would have destroyed the plan for Lucifer. I’m needed to defeat him. I can’t explain it properly, but I have to be there, George. It won’t work without me.”

“I understand,” George said. “You have waited a long time for this. But you are alive. You will be able to defeat him.”

It wasn’t just that though. Sam had felt in that instant, as he waited for death, that he wasn’t ready, and not only because of Lucifer. He didn’t want to die at all. He was happy with his life. He had people he loved and he was enjoying the things he was doing. There was more he still wanted to do and see.

He was scared. What would happen if the time came to defeat Lucifer and he was too afraid to do what he needed to do for them to win? If he had some doubt or fear that weakened him, would he be able to overpower the devil? Would he even want to in his heart? Was he afraid of failing, or was he afraid of dying at all?

“What aren’t you telling me?” George asked.

Sam sighed and the truth crept from him. He needed to say it and be reassured that he would have the strength when it was time. “To defeat Lucifer, I have to let him in. He has to be using me as a vessel and I have to take control.”

“And then what?”

“Anna has to kill me,” Sam said quietly. “I have to hold Lucifer long enough for her to use the weapon I told you about, the lance.”

George looked stricken. “You have to die?”

“Yes. I can’t run from it or hide. I have to stand there and let her stab me.”

“And there is no other way?”

“None. The only thing that will stop him is me.”

George closed his eyes, and then they opened, Sam was stunned to see they were wet. “And you thought that you failed today.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. But it’s more. I realized I wasn’t ready to die. I’m scared now that I won’t be ready then either. I have to be at my strongest to beat Lucifer down, and how can I do that if I don’t want to actually win? If I don’t want to die, won’t some part of me fight against it, stop me overpowering him?”

George was silent a long time and Sam barely breathed. He needed something from his friend, some reassurance or comfort.

“You will win,” George said quietly. “The fact you don’t want to die won’t stop you from doing
the right thing. When it’s time, you will think of the people you love and that will make it possible. You will die to save the world. No one else can say that. It will be on your terms, and that will give you strength. I have faith in you, Sam.”

Sam stared into his eyes, seeing the sadness there and the strength, and he believed. George knew him as well as anyone in this life, and if he could believe Sam could do it, so could Sam.

“Thank you,” Sam said with feeling. “I needed to hear that.”

George forced a smile. “I don’t know how death works. I have always believed in Heaven as I have believed in God, and now I know it’s real as angels are. If it is a place where we can see the people we want to see, then I will be waiting for you. I will have the honor of shaking the hand of the man that saved the world.”

Sam smiled. “I might beat you there. You never know. You could outlive me.”

“No,” George said with certainty. “I will be waiting for you, Sam. I know that in my heart.” When he caught sight of Sam’s expression, he smiled and said, “Not yet. I have time still. There are things for me to see.”

“Like James’ wedding,” Sam said.

“Yes, like that. I want to see that boy walk down the aisle next week and start his forever, and I want to see Missouri’s face when it happens.”

“About that…” Sam said tentatively. “You can’t tell Missouri what I’ve told you. She can’t know I will die for this. It will spoil everything.”

“It will break her heart,” George said sadly.

“It will make everything a goodbye. I don’t want anything to change for us. She knows we have found a weapon that will work, and it will be ours when it’s time. She doesn’t need to know anything else.”

“I agree,” George said.

“Thank you,” Sam said fervently.

He couldn’t bear for Missouri to know. He loved her and didn’t want to hurt her, and he didn’t want to hurt himself. Perhaps it was cowardly, but he couldn’t bear to see her face when she did know.

He wanted to enjoy James’ wedding and whatever came next for them all without the burden of the future lying over them. He wanted to just live. Perhaps living now was what would give him strength to die when it was time.

That was all he could hope for.

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Although the style would have appeared strange to Sam in 2010, he felt comfortable in his tan suit with its wide shoulders and pleated pants in 1997. He was wearing a pale pink and cream tie, the color scheme James and Tess had chosen for their wedding and guests had obliged them by
choosing outfits of the same shades. It was a quirk Sam hadn’t heard of before, and he thought Dean would have gotten a kick out of the teasing potential of it.

The ceremony was finished, the speeches done, and the cake cut. Now Sam and Missouri were dancing to a slow waltz the band was playing.

Sam was happier than he’d been since he’d faced the ghouls, but his mood was still tarnished by lingering fear for what would happen when it was time for Lucifer to die. Sometimes he felt strong, sure he would be able to overpower him and he would be ready, but other times, when he thought of Dean and what he would miss not being able to see him again, he faltered.

Missouri raised her head from where it was resting against his chest and looked up at him. “What’s wrong, Sam?”

Sam smiled quickly. “Nothing. I’m great.”

She shook her head and said, “Come with me.”

Sam allowed her to lead him by the hand to the French doors that led out to the gardens of the hotel James and Tess had chosen for their wedding. Sam hadn’t been out there before, but now he saw it was beautiful, with lush grass and white roses planted in neat beds. It was illuminated by white hanging lanterns and candles that floated on the surface of the small reflective pool. They walked towards it and Missouri brushed down the stone seat.

“Wait,” Sam said, taking off his jacket and laying it down for her to sit on so she wouldn’t dirty her pale pink dress.

She sat and patted the spot beside him. Sam perched beside her and looked out at the gardens.

“You never lie to me, Sam,” she stated. “You’re hurting, and I want to know why, but I haven’t asked because I think you’d be forced to lie.”

“It’s a bit pointless lying to a mind reader,” Sam said with a small smile.

“It is, but I haven’t read your mind in a long time, though I have wanted to this past week more than anything.”

“Thank you.” Sam was glad as he didn’t want her upset by the truth she would see there.

“I don’t really want to read you either,” she said. “Even though I know it would answer my questions. This isn’t like before. I would not be searching for answers about myself. It’s what you’re hiding that I want to know, and it’s not fair for me to pluck that from your mind.”

Sam looked into her brown eyes and saw the concern there. He hated that they were having this conversation on this day. Missouri should be occupied with her son’s happiness, not Sam’s problems.

“I’m sorry, Missouri,” he said. “I really am, but I can’t tell you. If the time comes when you need to know, I promise I’ll tell you, but please just let it go for now.”

She looked disappointed but she nodded. “If that’s what you really want.”

“It is,” Sam said. He bent and kissed her cheek. “You don’t need to worry. I’ll be okay.”

She smiled and touched his face. “Good.”
There were footsteps and James appeared. “What are you two doing hiding out here?” he asked with mock annoyance. “If you’re not going to make Sam my step-dad, you don’t have an excuse for lurking outside alone in the candlelight, Mom.”

Missouri laughed.

“You wouldn’t want me as a step-dad,” Sam said seriously. “I’m very strict.”

Missouri laughed even harder and James grinned. “Seriously, though, what are you doing hiding out here? You’re supposed to be dancing. Mom, it’s time for you and me to take a turn, and Tess wants to dance with you, Sam.”

James bowed to Missouri and held out a hand. She took it and allowed him to lead them back into the ballroom. Sam brushed off his jacket and pulled it on then followed them in. It was time to be Sam the regular father figure again, not the hunter or vessel, just the man.

He thought he succeeded until he was inside and saw George give him a knowing look. Perhaps he wasn’t as good as he thought.
Chapter Forty-Six

Sam was in the kitchen, making the coffee while George and Missouri watched the news in the living room. They had just finished the dinner Sam had made for them all, and the evening was winding down.

He could hear the speech being given by Bill Clinton on the TV, and he snorted as he heard the famous words: “I did not have sexual relations with that woman.”

“Did he, Sam?” Missouri called through to him.

“Of course he did,” George said. “Just look at him. He’s lying through his teeth. And he seemed to be decent when we saw him in Washington. In my day, presidents were presidential.” He paused for a moment. “And discreet.”

“Sam?” Missouri prompted.

Sam picked up two mugs of coffee and carried them through to her and George. “He did,” he said. “Many times. She even kept a souvenir from one of the encounters that will become proof.”

“What kind of souvenir?” George asked.

“A dress that really should have been dry cleaned.”

Missouri wrinkled her nose. “That’s disgusting.”

“Yes, it is,” Sam agreed. He went back into the kitchen for his coffee and carried it into the living room. Taking his seat, he set it down on the table and said to George, “Turn it off, George. I was sick of this story the first time around.”

George turned off the TV and tucked the remote between his leg and the chair. Sam had to bite back the urge to tell him to move it. The remote would slide down between the cushions and George would be searching for it, never thinking to look in the place it always was. It happened all the time. He bit it back because it wasn’t irritation at George that was going to make him say it; it was his own problems.

“So, are you going to come with me, Sam?” Missouri asked, picking up the conversation they’d been having over dinner.

She wanted to see Titanic—which was still taking the box offices by storm even weeks after its release—and Sam didn’t want to. It had been a favorite of Jessica’s, and he’d not enjoyed the film that much then. Now it was intrinsically linked to his lost love in his mind.

He shook his head. “No. I’ve already seen it more times than I would like.”

Missouri sighed. “I hate going to the movies on my own.”

“Take George,” Sam suggested.

George looked up. “Is it about the ship?”
“Yes,” Missouri said quickly. “It’s supposed to be very accurate too. The special effects they’ve used look amazing.”

George looked interested, and Sam decided it was better to be honest with him now than deal with his complaints if he was tricked into seeing it.

“The effects are good for the time,” he said. “But it’s basically a soppy romance with Titanic sinking as a backdrop for the big finale.”

“No thank you then, Missouri,” George said.

Missouri scowled. “Thank you, Sam. Now I’ll have to go alone.”

“You have a hundred other friends to go with,” Sam said. “Ask someone that will actually enjoy it.”

Missouri waved a hand dismissively. “They’ve already seen it. They say they can’t face that ending again. And I was waiting for you to actually be home long enough to take me.”

Sam had been out more than he’d been home since Christmas. He’d been working late on the site, and he’d taken two hunts. He didn’t want to sit through the movie though, no matter how much he loved Missouri.

“Please, Sam…” she wheedled.

“No!” Sam said harshly. “If you keep asking, I’ll tell you exactly how it ends then there will be no point in you seeing it at all.”

Missouri jerked back, stung, and George scowled at him. He’d been rude, he knew. He wasn’t angry with Missouri; he was angry with life. He shouldn’t have taken it out on her.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. “You’ve been like this for weeks now. What’s happened?”

Sam shook his head. “It’s nothing. I’m sorry.”

“He has problems at work,” George said.

Sam glanced at him. He hadn’t confided in George either, so he didn’t understand how he’d found out. Unless he’d been eavesdropping on some of Sam’s calls.

“What kind of problems?” Missouri asked.

“I’m not sure, but that Vic is a part of it, and it’s making him moody.”

“I can hear you, you know,” Sam said, irritated that they were discussing him as if he wasn’t there.

“That’s good,” George said. “Perhaps you can tell us what exactly is happening that’s making you act like a bear with a sore head.”

Sam ran a hand through his beard. “It is Vic,” he said. “He’s selling up.”

“And you’re worried about your job?” Missouri guessed.

“No. I’m worried about everyone else’s. He’s never exactly been a good guy, but he’s gotten even
worse these past couple years. He’s past retirement age, and he wants to let the business go. But to do that, he’s trying to save money so he can show better profit margins to get a better price. He wants to lay people off. It’s not right. We need more people, not less. We need more money, too. There’s equipment that needs to be replaced to keep the site safe, but he won’t spend a cent more than he absolutely has to. I don’t know what to do. I am supposed to be foreman, taking care of the workers as well as the business. That’s why he hired me in the first place, but he’s not letting me do my job properly.” He sighed. “I missed three days because of that rugaru in Montana, and I’m dreading going back, facing the people that need me to keep their jobs for them, and dealing with Vic’s crap.”

He picked up his coffee and drained it, though it was too hot still, just to have something to do with his hands rather than ball them into fists.

“What can you do?” George asked.

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “I’m staying on top of the safety, and when he’s on site I make sure no one is standing idle, looking like a target for firing, but he’s not going to listen to me. He just cares about the money now. He doesn’t care about what we’re actually building the way he used to.”

“You could stop work completely if he starts laying people off,” Missouri suggested.

“And leave them all open to being sacked?” Sam asked. “No. He’s stupid enough to clear the site and bring in new guys that don’t know what they’re doing.”

He was in an impossible situation. He was the boss, so he had to protect the workers as well as the business, but his boss was making that difficult. He wished he was working on the site team again, away from this responsibility. It was cowardly, but true. He didn’t want the responsibility of his friends’ and colleagues’ jobs on his shoulders.

xXx

Sam got to work early on Monday morning, eager to catch up with what he’d missed by taking three days off to hunt. He parked his car in the lot and walked into the site office. There was a stack of papers in his tray, order receipts to be checked over and given to Vic and notes informing him that the Caterpillar excavator had broken down again. It needed to be replaced, Sam knew, but there was no way of persuading Vic to spend the $100,000 on a new one. They had to deal with the breakdowns by doing quick fixes and hoping it would suffice.

There was also a certificate for the electrical wiring in the first block of apartments. Sam noticed it wasn’t their usual inspector that had signed off on it. It was a name he didn’t know. Making a mental note to check out the name, Sam put on his hard hat and went out to the second block of apartments whose brickwork was still being finished.

He liked to walk the site before everyone arrived. It was peaceful compared to the usual racket when everyone was there and working. It gave him time to think of what he had coming for him that day. Vic would be on site that afternoon, and Sam was going to take the chance to try to persuade him—one again—to ditch his idea to lay off the crew. He didn’t think he’d get far, but the fact it was purely financial gain that was powering Vic made him determined to try. The economy was booming for now. There was no excuse for letting people go other than greed.

Other people started arriving, and there were the usual friendly greetings and teasing—asking Sam if he was angling for overtime getting there early—before hardhats were donned and people got to work.
Sam was heading back to the office when Carl waylaid him. “Can we talk?” he asked.

“Sure,” Sam said.

Carl led him into what would be the lobby of the apartment building in time and then came to a stop.

Unlike Sam, Carl had aged. His son was now in eleventh grade, and his daughter in her last year of middle school. Raising them had added to the lines on Carl’s forehead and the grey hairs creeping in at his temples, though he was a few years younger than Sam.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked.

“Vic,” Carl said. “He was on site Friday, and he brought an inspector with him. It wasn’t the usual.”

“I know. I saw the certificate sign off,” Sam said. “What’s the problem?”

“He wasn’t good. Vic came on site Wednesday and had the crew rushing the wiring job. They weren’t using the usual gear either. He brought in stuff from a company we’d never heard of. The guys don’t trust it.”

Sam frowned. “Did they say anything to Vic?”

“They tried. He told them to get their asses back to work. He wouldn’t answer any questions and wouldn’t listen when they tried to explain what was wrong. Then he brought this inspector in and they were all ordered away for the inspection. You know what’s not how it usually goes. They normally want to talk to them, ask what they used. It’s not right, Sam.”

Sam nodded his agreement. As little as he wanted to think it, it sounded like Vic was cutting corners on safety seriously now. The different equipment—which Sam would bet was cheaper—was bad enough, but a suspicious inspection meant people could be in danger. He needed to do something real now. Jobs weren’t as important as lives.

He walked toward the side of the room where the electrical wiring was exposed waiting to be boxed in, and looked up at the tangle. He saw a manufacturer’s label on one, and he reached for it, wanting to read the name so he could check the company’s reputation.

“Don’t!” Carl said quickly, his hand falling on Sam’s arm the same moment Sam’s fingers made contact.

The jolt of electricity tore up his arm and he was thrown backwards. He knew a moment of weightlessness before he slammed hard into the opposite wall. He felt his heart racing wildly in his chest, and he just lay for a moment, trying to make sense of what had happened.

“Carl?” he said weakly.

The only answer was the rumble of voices from outside and the sound of Celine Dion warbling her way through My Heart Will Go On playing on the radio.

“Carl!” He rolled over and then crawled towards Carl where he lay on the floor, his eyes closed and his chest unmoving. “Help!” Sam bellowed. “Call an ambulance!”

He checked for a pulse he knew wouldn’t be there, and then he raised a fist and thumped it down on Carl’s sternum. He checked for a pulse then did it again. When Carl remained perfectly still and
Sam could feel no pulse, he tilted his head back and blew two breaths into his mouth then started chest compressions.

“Carl!” someone shouted behind him. “What happened?”

“Call 911,” Sam ordered. “And shut down the power. He’s been electrocuted!”

He heard more voices and people crowded in on him, and he repeated the order in a shout. “911, now!”

“Clive’s calling. What happened?”

Sam ignored the question and blew another two breaths into Carl’s mouth.

He felt rather than saw someone drop down beside him. “Is he going to be okay?”

It was Ray, and Sam could hear the fear in his voice.

“‘The ambulance is coming,’” Sam said in lieu of a proper answer.

Carl had to be okay. He couldn’t be dead because of Sam, could he? Had he lost someone else he cared about because of another mistake?

He had been thinking of finding something to stop Vic when he’d looked at the wiring. He thought if the inspection was dodgy, he would have something to fight with. He hadn’t thought of how dangerous it could be or what could happen. It was his fault. He had survived the shock because of Michael, but Carl didn’t have the same protection. Because he had been trying to stop Sam, to protect him, he had been shocked, too.

He felt people crowding around him, and he shouted, “Get out of here. Someone go wait for the ambulance. Everyone else just get out. He needs space.”

That wasn’t technically true. Sam was the one that needed the space. He didn’t want to be watched as he fought to save Carl’s life.

He blew in another two breaths and returned to cardiac massage.

“Where’s the damn ambulance?” he muttered.

“Maybe it’s too…” Ray trailed off.

“It’s not too late,” Sam said angrily. “We just have to keep him going until they get here. They have the equipment we need.”

He didn’t know how long had passed since they had been shocked, but it felt like a lifetime. Sam’s arms were tired and his head swimming, but he didn’t stop. He needed to keep the blood moving to Carl’s brain.

“They’re here!”

There were racing footsteps and then blue uniformed knees dropped down in front of Sam. “Okay. We’ve got it,” a woman said, and Sam’s hands were pushed back onto his lap.

The woman restarted the chest compressions and a bag and mask were fitted over Carl’s mouth. The bag was squeezed twice and then the hands disappeared.
“What happened?” the woman asked.

“He had an electric shock,” Sam said. “A big one. It came from the mains wiring.”

“Let’s give him another then,” the male EMT said as he pushed Sam aside and set down a boxy defibrillator with large red paddles attached.

Sam got to his feet and moved back to give them space. They cut through Carl’s t-shirt and placed electrodes on his chest that they attached to a monitor on the box beside his head. The EMT doing chest compressions stopped and sat back with her hands on her lap as the male ordered her to clear and then pressed the button on the paddles that would send the current into Carl’s heart.

Sam watched the monitor carefully, seeing the jolt as the shock was given, and prayed for more. He needed to see Carl’s heartbeat. There was nothing, and they shocked him again, and then Sam felt the world rushing back at him with a rush of sensation. He heard the voices outside the building, people calling him for news, the EMTs’ voices as they arranged to transport Carl to the ambulance, and the beep of Carl’s heartbeat on the monitor.

The male EMT went to the ambulance to fetch a gurney and the woman packed away the defibrillator.

“How long was he down?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “He’s okay though.” It wasn’t a question.

“We’ve got him back, and we’re going to do our best to keep him that way,” she said. “What’s his name?”

“Carl,” Sam said. “His name’s Carl Pennington.”

“Does he have any preexisting health conditions?”

“None that I know,” Sam said. “I’ve got his file though. I’ll get it for you.”

One of the first things Sam had done when he took over properly was to create employee files for everyone. They listed emergency contacts and health information. He had hardly needed that information before, and never for something like this. He ran past the crowd outside, ignoring their questions, and into the site office to yank open a filing cabinet and flip through to Carl’s file. He ripped it out and ran back into the lobby to hand it to the EMT. She took it with a word of thanks and said, “Do you want us to call his wife?” She checked the form. “Fran?”

“I’ll do it,” Ray said.

“Tell here we’re going to Lawrence Memorial,” she said.

Sam stepped back as they wheeled Carl outside, and then he took a breath and walked outside. He wanted to be in the ambulance, too, taking care of Carl, but he knew his responsibility was on the site and to the workers that remained. He watched as Ray climbed into the back of the ambulance and then it pulled away and onto the road. He let himself look at the shell-shocked workers waiting for him to speak.

He cleared his throat and said, “We’re shutting down the site today. Make sure all your equipment is shut down and then go home. Come back in the morning and we’ll talk then. Is the power off?”

“Yes,” Stephen, an electrician that worked on the site, said.
“Good. I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

Sam went back to the office and sat down behind the desk. Pam, the site secretary came in, and went to her desk for her purse. She looked like she wanted to say something, but she merely hooked her purse over her arm, smiled sadly, and left.

Sam listened to the car driving out of the lot and he picked up the phone. Vic’s number was assigned its own speed-dial, and Sam hit it then tapped his hands against the desk as he waited for it to be answered.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Carol,” Sam said to Vic’s mild-mannered wife. “It’s Taylor. I need to talk to Vic.”

“He’s eating breakfast at the moment,” she said. “Should I interrupt…”

The thought of Vic scarfing down his late breakfast while Carl was raced to the hospital made Sam’s voice harsh. “Yes. He needs to hear this.”

“Okay.” There was the sound of the phone being set down and muffled footsteps, then someone stomped back and Vic said, “This better be important, Taylor. I was busy.”

“It is important,” Sam said. “Carl Pennington was just electrocuted on the site. He’s on his way to Lawrence Memorial now in an ambulance.”

There was a long silence and then Vic said. “What happened?”

“One of your shortcuts was a dangerous one,” Sam said. “The exposed wiring in the south building lobby must have had a frayed edge.”

“What does this mean for the site?”

“For the site!” Sam growled. “It means that one of your crew died today. Luckily the EMTs got him back, but it means that it’s not safe. I’ve shut it down for today and asked the crew to come back tomorrow when we know more.”

“You shut down my site? Now wait one damn minute, Taylor, I pay you to do a job, not decide to shut down without asking me. Do you know how it will affect us if we’re delayed?”

“No. I don’t make those decisions. I do. I want them back on site tomorrow and replacing that wiring. It was obviously a shoddy job in the first place. Tell them there will be no overtime pay for this.”

Incensed, Sam slammed down the phone and cursed loudly and fluidly. When his own heart had slowed to a calmer rhythm and the red haze had left his vision, he reached for the rolodex and flipped through for the number of the safety inspectors. If Vic was going to put the business first, it was down to Sam to take care of safety.

“Kansas Department of Occupational Safety and Health,” a smooth voice answered.

“This is Sam Taylor of Crewe Construction. There has been an accident on site today, and I want to
“Report it in as an unsafe environment.”

“I will pass your call on to the appropriate department, sir. Please hold.”

Sam took a breath. He knew that doing this was going to cost him his job, and if the site was shut down for a long time, other jobs, but as he had realized when trying desperately to save Carl, there were more important things than a job.

There were lives on the line.

xXx

It took Sam an hour to make all the necessary calls and go home to pick up his paperwork, and then another two hours in Kate’s Kitchen, a café in town, waiting for the man he needed to speak with to arrive. He was late, probably because he thought Sam was joking when he said he’d wanted to meet—they had never been friends.

When he arrived, Sam stood to get his attention. The man nodded, ordered his coffee and collected it, before joining Sam at his table. He sat down and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Talk, Taylor.”

He was Sinclair Brookes of Brookes Construction, and Sam had never liked him. They’d shared a site once for a mall project that was too big for Sam’s crew alone, and his arrogance had rubbed Sam the wrong way. Sam needed him now though.

“Vic is selling up,” he said.

“I heard. Good riddance.”

“I want you to buy him out.”

Sinclair raised an eyebrow. “You are kidding.”

“I’m not,” Sam said. “And I want to help.”

“How can you help me?”

“I can pay.”

Sinclair choked on his coffee. When he had sputtered and coughed his way to breathing again, he said, “I am a busy man, Taylor. I don’t have time for jokes. I know your crew has a good reputation and Vic probably pays you well enough, but you don’t have enough to buy one piece of the machinery Vic is selling, let alone his business as a whole.”

Sam reached inside his pocket and pulled out his most recent bank statement. He laid it face down on the table and slid it across to Sinclair. “I can afford it.”

Sinclair picked up the statement with a roll of his eyes and turned it. There was a comical moment in which his eyes bugged and his mouth dropped open before he marshalled himself and said. “How?”

“I did well in the dotcom boom and tech stocks,” Sam said.

“No really, how?”
“I’m telling you the truth,” Sam said. “I invested early and I’ve been lucky. It’s all real, and it’s all mine, and I want to go into a partnership with you. Vic is going to want to sell fast as he’s having a little trouble, so I want us to take advantage of it.”

“What trouble?”

“He’s working below code. One of the crew was electrocuted today. He nearly died. I’ve made all the reports to the right people, so he’s about to enter a shitstorm of inspections and investigations, but he can maybe make some of that go away if he sells and we can bring things back to code.”

“Say I was interested, what do I get out of it?”

“I will put up the cost of Vic’s firm in exchange for a forty-sixty share in Brookes Construction.”

“You want me to give you sixty percent of the business my father created and I have spent almost all my life building up?”

“No, I want you to give me a forty-percent share,” Sam said. “I want you to take control. I want you to employ dual foremen—Ray Harwood and Carl Pennington—and I want you to give the workers a pay rise. As long as you treat them fairly, you won’t hear from me outside board meetings. I will leave it all to you. You decide what contracts to tender for. You decide who to work with. You control everything as long as you’re fair to the crew.”

Sinclair sat back in his chair. “Are you serious about this?”

“Have your lawyer draw up the paperwork and I’ll sign today.”

“And you will leave me to work unhindered?”

“Put it in the contract,” Sam said. “As long as it’s in there that I control workers’ rights, too.”

Sinclair laughed softly. “I think you’ve lost your mind, Taylor.”

“Is that a yes?” Sam asked.

“This is a deal weighted in my favor. Are you sure you won’t regret that in future?”

“If the crew is taken care of, I’ll be happy. I don’t mind taking a bad deal for that. Are we on?”

He held his breath as he waited for Sinclair to take his offered hand. Sinclair glanced at Sam’s bank statement once more and then nodded. He took Sam’s hand, shook it once, and said. “We’re on. I will have my lawyer write up the paperwork and I will contact Vic straight away.”

“Give it a day,” Sam said. “Let him get the calls from the inspectors and then he’ll be more than motivated to negotiate.”

“This is all very underhanded, Sam.”

“Do you care?” Sam asked, noting the use of his first name for the first time. “I didn’t report him to make the deal better. I did it because he’s risking lives. I am doing this to save the crew from another accident.”

Sinclair looked him in the eye. “I believe you.” He got to his feet. “I will call you when the contracts are ready.”

He walked away from the table and out of the door, leaving his coffee half drunk. Sam downed the
last of his own and then followed him out.

There was somewhere he needed to be.

xXx

Sam was directed to the fourth floor of Lawrence Memorial where he found Fran and Ray standing in a hall. Ray had his arm around Fran’s shoulders, but as Sam approached, Fran slipped out from under his arm and rushed to Sam. She threw her arms around him, and though she was a petite thing, Sam had to step back to steady himself.

“Ray told me what you did,” she said into his chest. “Thank you, Taylor. Thank you so much.”

Sam hugged her and then smiled as she pulled back. Though he had seen her only a few months ago at an end of summer barbeque she and Carl hosted, she looked very different now. It was as if the stress had aged her beyond her years in a matter of hours.

“How is he?” he asked.

“He’s doing better,” Ray said seriously. “He’s awake and talking.”

Sam sighed with relief. “That’s good.”

“They’re running all kinds of tests,” Fran said. “They don’t think he’s damaged his heart, but there might be other damage to his organs because of the way his muscles contracted when he was shocked. I don’t really understand it.”

Sam knew from experience just how much damage could be wrought by an electric shock—it had almost killed Dean with the damage to his heart—and he was massively relieved Carl had avoided that fate at least.

“We’re not supposed to understand,” Sam said, hugging Fran to his side. “We just need to know they’re doing everything they need to do for him.”

A door opened and a doctor stepped out dressed in green scrubs. “You can go back in now,” he said to Fran. “Try not to tire him.”

“Thank you,” Fran said, then she turned to Sam. “You should go in. I know he’ll want to see you.”

“No,” Sam said. “You should be with him. I just wanted to check in.”

“It’s okay,” Fran said. “I need to call my mother. She’s with the children, and they need an update.”

Ray nodded. “Go on in, Sam.”

Sam thanked them and then opened the door the doctor had come through. Carl’s eyes were closed, and Sam hesitated, thinking it would be better to leave him to sleep, but as he deliberated, Carl opened his eyes and his pale lips tugged into a smile. “I wondered when you’d get your ass here.”

Sam moved closer to the bed and took in his friend’s appearance. His skin was greyish and his eyes bloodshot and shadowed. There was a bandage around his palm where the shock had entered him. He looked better than he had when Sam had last seen him though, awake and talking, and Sam took comfort in it.

“How are you doing?” Carl asked.
“I’m fine.”

“But you were shocked, too.”

“Ah, yeah,” Sam said awkwardly. He’d forgotten that Carl at least would know that part of the story. “It went straight through me and into you. I wasn’t hurt as you grounded me.”

Carl nodded slightly. “That’s good. Better that only one of us ends up dying for it.”

“I am so sorry,” Sam said. “It was my fault. I never should have touched the wiring. You told me it might not be safe.”

“I did,” Carl agreed. “But you saved my life, so I think we’re even.” He frowned. “What’s happening on the site? Has the wiring been stripped?”

“I shut it down today,” Sam said. “There needs to be inspections done. I’ve put the calls in and people are coming out later. I’m meeting them on site in an hour.”

Carl smiled faintly. “Vic won’t be happy.”

“Vic can go screw himself,” Sam said. “I don’t owe him my protection. I owe it to the crew.”

Carl nodded and then winced. “Well I’m glad it’s being checked out properly at least. It was a death trap. I don’t blame the people that did the wiring. I blame Vic for using cheap supplies and rushing the job.”

“He’ll get his,” Sam promised.

Even if Vic sold to Sinclair, he would still be liable if Carl chose to sue him. It was him that had arranged the dodgy inspection. That was someone else Sam needed to make sure was investigated. Whoever had signed off on that work needed to be punished, too.

He wanted to tell Carl about his deal with Sinclair, but if it fell through, it would be another blow for Carl when he didn’t need one. He had to keep it quiet until the paperwork was signed.

The door opened and Fran came in. She crossed straight to the bed and kissed Carl then sat down and held his hand.

“I should go,” Sam said. “I need to make sure I’ve got everything on site ready for the inspectors.”

“Inspectors?” Fran asked.

“I’ll explain later,” Carl promised. He held out his free hand and when Sam took it, he shook it weakly. “Thanks, Sam. You’re a literal lifesaver.”

Sam smiled at him. “I’ll let you know how everything goes. You rest and recover.”

Carl waved a hand and then turned his attention to Fran, and Sam slipped out of the room.

xXx

The inspectors were at the site for three days, and Sam had to be there with them. He fetched paperwork and showed them where work had been done. He checked records of previous inspections and showed them certificates. On the last day, as they were wrapping up, they gave him a folder of paperwork pertaining to their visit and told him that, though they would be in touch, it was okay for the crew to come back to site and strip the inferior wiring.
Sam sat down in the office when they’d gone, in what was usually Vic’s seat behind the desk and he sighed. He flipped open the folder and read the first page of site maintenance recommendations. It was going to take time to read through it all and, truthfully, he didn’t want to be the one to do it. He was done with the site life.

As the thought settled in his mind and he felt a longing for home, his phone rang in his pocket. He took it out and saw the caller was Sinclair. He hadn’t heard from him since they’d met at Sinclair’s lawyer’s office to sign the papers making a preliminary deal of their new arrangement, valid on the condition that the sale went through.

“Give me good news,” he said in answer.

“It’s done,” Sinclair said. “I just left his lawyers. We’ve signed the papers. Brookes Construction now owns your crew, equipment, land and contracts.”

Sam sighed with relief. “That’s great.”

“You might want to brace yourself if you’re at the site. Vic said, quite happily, that he was going there to tie up some loose ends. I think you’re one of those ends.”

“I’ll enjoy that,” Sam said.

“I’m sure you will. I will be in touch. Can I trust that you’ll tell the new foremen they’ve been promoted?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Sam said happily. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Goodbye, Sam.”

He ended the call and put the phone back in his pocket. He looked around the office in wonder. He was now a part owner of it. He wouldn’t be there to enjoy it, but he would do the most important thing: protect the workers. Sinclair could worry about the business side of it.

A car pulled up outside the office, and Sam schooled his features into a neutral pose instead of smiling smugly. A moment passed and then the door burst open and Vic strode in.

“You’re here then,” he said, his narrowed eyes falling on Sam.

“I’m here. I needed to be to help the inspectors do their job.”

Vic glared at him. “The inspectors you called. I know, Taylor. A little birdy told me you couldn’t wait to run to them with your accusations. Anything to frame me.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Whatever you want to believe, Vic. I really don’t care.”

“I know you did it.”

“I did, but I did it for the right reasons. I was stopping someone else getting hurt. None of that matters now though, does it.”

“It doesn’t,” Vic said. He gripped the edge of the desk and leaned toward Sam, his plump face coming close enough to intimidate someone less confident than Sam. “You’re fired.”

“Thank you,” Sam said.

“I cannot have someone on my… What?”
“I said thank you. You just saved me needing to quit. I’ve got a new job, see.”

“Not with construction,” he said. “Your name is blacklisted to every single name in my address book.”

“That’s okay,” Sam said. “I have found someone that will take me. I’ve invested in someone else company.”

Vic straightened up and laughed. “I don’t know why you bothered. We both know you don’t need to work. I know the kinds of numbers you’ve got in your bank account.”

Sam frowned. The only people that knew about Sam’s wealth outside of George, Missouri, and James were Sinclair and the bank tellers. He didn’t think Sinclair would have outed him, so it had to be someone at the bank. He was pissed that his privacy had been violated.

“There’s no point asking how I know,” Vic said, apparently reading his mind. “I protect my sources.”

“Shame you don’t protect your workers as well,” Sam said. “Though you’re not going to have that problem now you’ve sold up, are you?”

The smile slid from Vic’s face. “How do you know that?”

Sam grinned. “I protect my sources, too, Vic, though I guess it can’t hurt to tell you. You’re looking at the new partner in Brookes Construction. I signed the papers yesterday. I guess, technically, you just sold your business to me.” He laughed at the look of horror on Vic’s face. “Don’t worry. I’ll take real good care of it.”

“You can’t do this!” Vic growled.

Sam got to his feet and walked around the desk. He leaned in close, looming over Vic’s five foot seven frame. “I just did.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “It was good doing business with you. If you could empty your desk by tomorrow, that would be great. We want to move the business on without you quickly.” He walked to the door and then turned back. “Oh, I forgot to say. The inspectors are done. They found liability on the company. You may have sold up, but it’s your name on the work sheets. I’m sure they’ll be in touch.”

He walked outside and let the door slam behind him. As he walked to his car, he thought he hear a shout of rage from the office.

“That was fun,” he said happily.
Sam was smiling as he pulled up in front of his house and climbed out of the car. He ran a hand over the hood as he walked toward the steps, taking a moment to appreciate the beauty that was his car.

He had been out for a beer with Carl and Ray at The Brew and Cue. He hadn’t seen as much of them as he used to since he’d left the site, but every month or so one of them would call and invite him out to meet them. He always went when he was free. It was good to catch up with them, and he was able to get a gauge on how things were going at the site for the workers though them.

They didn’t know that he owned a part of the business; he and Sinclair always met offsite, and the pay raises and benefits he’d introduced were presented as Sinclair’s idea. Brookes Construction was becoming an enviable place to work. According to Ray, they got a lot of interest from other tradesmen that wanted to join the crew. It made Sam happy to know it was going so well, that he had done the right thing by them.

He’d heard a couple months ago that a settlement had finally been arranged for the case against Vic and his dangerous practice. He was fined for poor site safety standards, and Carl had received a payout for what had happened to him. He would be able to put both his kids through college without struggling now.

As happy as he was for Carl, Sam was much happier that Vic had gotten his comeuppance. If anyone deserved it, he did. He’d almost cost Carl his life. And it would have been Sam’s at risk too had he not been protected by Michael.

It was over now though. Vic had returned to his bitter golf course retirement, and Sam had returned to his quasi version of retirement. He still hunted, and he and George split the phones, but a lot of what Sam did was civilian. He took time with his family. He traveled to California to see James, Tess and their new baby daughter Patience. He stayed in town when a hunt was finished to explore. He and Missouri had even spent a weekend in New York visiting Niagara Falls. That had been a memorable one, and Missouri had taken a roll of film worth of pictures of them both in their rain ponchos posing in front of the falls.

Sam was home for now though, and other than helping George run the phones and keeping an eye out for hunts, Sam was free to do what he liked.

“In here,” George said from the kitchen when Sam let himself in and called to his friend.

Sam went through the living room and saw George making a sandwich at the kitchen counter.

“You didn’t need to do that,” Sam said, knowing George was finding it harder to get around and cook for them nowadays. “I was going to make a proper dinner for you.”

“I don’t mind. I didn’t really have the stomach for something big. Besides, I was in the mood for real food, not your leafy stuff.”

Sam chuckled. “Because I serve you so much salad.”
George made no secret of his dislike for Sam’s dietary choices. He thought a proper meal should consist mainly of meat and potatoes. Sam obliged him by cooking what he preferred and accompanying it with his own choices—most of the time.

“You serve enough,” George grumbled, finishing his sandwich and picking up his cane from where it rested against the counter. If he needed that in the house, it meant George was struggling with the pain and stiffness.

“You okay for meds?” he asked.

“I’m fine, thanks,” George said gruffly. “I have more than I need.”

Sam wasn’t surprised. Though George would treat with Tylenol, he would take nothing stronger unless it was really necessary. The doctor he saw in town had given him some stronger painkillers, but he was loath to take them. Sam wished he would take more to prevent suffering like this, but he couldn’t argue with George over it. It was his choice to make. If he preferred pain to dulled reflexes, that was down to him.

George limped his way back to his chair and sat down with his legs raised.

“Did you eat?” he called back over his shoulder.

“No, I’ll grab something in a minute. You want a drink?”

“Beer, please.”

Sam took two bottles from the fridge and carried them through to the living room. He handed George one and then dropped down onto the couch. He unscrewed the cap and took a deep draw. He lowered it, smiling, and caught sight of George’s worried frown as he looked at him from beneath his bushy brows, his head ducked.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked.

“Nothing is wrong,” George said carefully.

“Then what’s right?” Sam asked. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I am not looking at you like anything.”

Sam leaned forward, his beer held between his knees. “What’s going on?”

Sam frowned. “For what?”

“I called Missouri.”

“Why? You’re kinda freaking me out, George. What’s happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” George said. “Everyone is okay. There’s just something I need to talk to you about.”

Sam’s palms were sweating and his heart was beating too fast. He didn’t know what was going on, but he was sure that it was something bad. George said everyone was okay, but he’d also called Missouri over, and why would he do that if there wasn’t something bad coming?

There was a knock and then the sound of a key turning in the lock. “Hello?” Missouri called.
“Through here,” George said.

Missouri rushed in, her hair loose and tousled, as if she had been running her hands through it. She looked sympathetically at Sam as she crossed the room and sat beside him, taking his hand in her.

“It’s okay, honey,” she said.

“What’s okay?” Sam asked harshly. “George won’t tell me what’s going on.”

Missouri scowled at George. “How long have you left him like this? You should have told him!”

“I thought it was better to wait.”

“You have waited!” Sam snapped. “Missouri is here. Now tell me what’s going on.”

“Go on,” Missouri prompted, when George remained silent. “You’re the one that it happened to.”

George drew a deep breath. “We got a phone call this evening. I was outside and couldn’t get to it before the machine picked up.”

“And? Who was it?” An idea occurred to him. “Was it my dad again?”

John and George disliked each other immensely. Sam thought it was because they were too alike, but whenever John called for lore—rarely now since Bobby was settled in his role as advisor—he asked for Taylor and dealt with George only as a last resort. George might think Sam would be upset if he’d fought with John, but he really would have been amused. They were as bad as each other, and John needed someone to put him in his place now and again.

George shook his head. “Not him, no. It was Dean.”

Though his mouth continued to move, Sam heard nothing else George said. His ears were filled with ringing as if he’d stood too close to a speaker at a rock concert. His heart was beating against his ribs, and his mouth was dry. There was one word reverberating around his mind like an echo: Dean, Dean, Dean.

Dean had called. He didn’t know why he’d never thought of the fact it could happen before. John contacted them, so why wouldn’t he have passed the number on to Dean? Surely he should have been expecting it already. He hadn’t though. He’d never imagined Dean would call, and the idea that he had, that Sam could have spoken to him if he’d been home, was incredible and heartbreaking.

Missouri wrapped her arm around his shoulders, and it was her voice that he heard when the ringing finally stopped. “Take a breath, Sam. You’re okay.”

Sam obeyed, feeling the air reach deep inside him, and exhaled slowly. Things came back into focus, and he felt his heart slowing.

“Do you still have the message?” he asked.

“Yes. I thought you might want to hear it,” George said. “Do you?”

Sam nodded and Missouri got to her feet. She crossed to the telephone and pressed a button on the base. There was a beep and then a voice Sam hadn’t heard properly in twenty-one years came through the small speaker.

“Hey. I’m looking for Taylor. I’m Dean Winchester, John’s Winchester’s son, and I am working a
gig in Oregon I could use some information on. Anyone there? No. Okay. Call me back at 1-866-907-3235. Oh yeah, thanks.”

Sam closed his eyes and listened, sifting through the words for deeper meaning, a wave of the hand from the future. Dean was proud when he said his name, and prouder when he said John’s. He valued his father’s place in the hunting world, which had seemed huge when they were growing up. Sam saw now that it was magnified by their contact with people like Caleb, Bobby and Pastor Jim—the people that called him a friend. Sam knew a lot more hunters now, and he knew John’s name didn’t have the same resonance to them all as he’d imagined as a kid.

Dean sounded happy, too. Sam hadn’t heard him sound like that in a long time in 2010. He’d been bogged down by everything that happened to him in those last few years. Losing John, seeing Sam die, going to Hell, Lucifer, Sam’s betrayal, it had all drained him of his light. He was full of it now though. It was clear in his voice. He was a different man at twenty to the thirty-one-year-old Sam had left behind, and Sam hadn’t realized by just how much until now.

“Are you okay?” Missouri asked.

“That was…”

“I know,” she said solemnly.

Sam cleared his throat of the lump that had formed and said, “Did you call him back?”

“No,” George said. “I thought you might like to do it.”

“Me?” Sam pulled back, away from the words. He couldn’t speak to Dean, could he?

“You will not have a chance again…” George said with meaning, “for a very long time.”

Sam knew what he meant. Sam would never have a chance to speak to him in life. He wasn’t going to go to Dean when time lined up again, and then he would die. This was his last chance to have a conversation with Dean, even though he could never know the truth of who he was speaking to.

“You sound different when you’re on the phone as Taylor,” George said. “He won’t know it’s you. You can just help him with this hunt.”

Sam looked at Missouri. “What do you think?”

“I think you should make this choice alone. You are the one that will have to live with it after. Do you think it will be harder later if you speak to him now? Will it make it easier or harder to live without him for the next eleven years?”

That was the problem, Sam didn’t know what it would mean for him. Could it possibly be harder to let Dean go if he spoke to him now compared to how it already felt? Did he have the strength to resist? This wasn’t seeing Dean as a child. He was a man now. He would be a younger version of the man Sam had left behind.

Ultimately, he couldn’t resist.

“I think I need to,” he said slowly.

George smiled, satisfied, and Missouri looked relieved. Sam understood now that she’d wanted him to come to this decision, to make the call of his own accord.
“I wrote down the number,” George said, picking up the newspaper from beside him and holding it out.

Sam took it and saw the number inked onto the top of the front page. He got to his feet and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “I’m going to take it outside,” he said.

“We’ll be here when you’re done,” Missouri assured him.

He picked up his beer and went outside into the warm summer night. He sat down at the table he and George sometimes had breakfast at, and where he where he and Missouri chatted over coffee while George napped in the afternoons.

With a deep breath and sense of great trepidation, he dialed in the number and held the phone to his ear.

It rang a long time, and Sam waited, willing Dean to answer.

“Dean Winchester,” a bright voice said.

“Hey, it’s Taylor,” Sam said.

“Hey, Taylor. Thanks for calling me back. I need a little help. But you already know that because I called, right? Sorry, dude, I’m running on adrenaline. I just got my ass chased by a fugly tattooed dude with glowing blue eyes.”

“Are you okay?” Sam asked worriedly.

“Yeah. I got it with a knife to the heart, so I don’t need your help after all. Thanks for calling though.”

“Wait! Did you use lamb’s blood?” Sam asked.

“Did I what?”

“The thing that chased you was a djinn. You found it somewhere underground, right? And the bodies had all been drained of blood?”

“Yeah. It was the basement of a factory. What does lamb’s blood have to do with it?”

“You need a silver knife dipped in lamb’s blood to kill it,” Sam said. “You have to get it in the heart.”

“Damn, I thought it was done already and I could get back to…” He sighed. “Okay. No problem. A djinn, yeah? Anything else I need to know?”

“Yes, a djinn is a monster that feeds on people while it has locked them in a dream. Its poison puts the victims in a coma in which they’ll live out their deepest desires while it slowly drains them. They die. If you find any victims living, you can save them by killing the djinn. Its influence dies with it.”

“Silver, blood, dreams, comas. Got it. Anything else I need to know?”

“They’re dangerous,” Sam said. “Be careful. Take your dad along if you can.”

“He’s in Florida with Caleb right now. He can’t get back here in time, and I’d rather not call him if you know what I mean. It took a lot to get him to lay off this hunt for me to do it solo already.”
“And there’s no one else?” Sam asked. “Maybe Bobby Singer?”

“The only person nearby is my kid brother, and I’m not bringing him in on this. He hates hunting anyways. I’ll deal with it. I’ve done plenty before. It’ll be fine.” He sounded cocky and confident now, like the Dean that had come for Sam at Stanford.

For a moment, Sam considered offering to help himself, but he held back the words. He knew he couldn’t. Dean might not recognize his voice like this, but he would know his face, even with the added years. He had to let Dean do this alone. He could. The fact Dean was alive in 2010 meant nothing that bad could happened to him in 1999, and Sam remembered him being fine at the time.

“Okay,” he said. “Take care and get it done.”

“You know it,” Dean said cheerfully. “Thanks, Taylor.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Later.”

Before Sam could say another word, Dean had ended the call. Sam lowered the phone and drained his beer then stood and walked back into the house. He could feel himself losing control of his emotions, and he didn’t want to cry. If he was with George and Missouri, he would have to be strong for them. It would help. He would be able to hide the way he felt having just spoken to Dean for what would probably be the last time, the way it felt for his heart to break.

xXx

Sam didn’t sleep well that night. His mind was still full of Dean. He couldn’t stop thinking of him out there now, so alive, taking on a djinn alone and how exhilarated he would feel when it was done, one of what Sam thought was his first solo hunts.

He gave up trying to rest around dawn and got out of bed and dressed then went into the living room to watch TV. He had nothing planned for that day, but he knew he needed to find something. He’d seen James, Tess and Patience only a month ago, otherwise he’d go visit them. They would probably ask difficult questions if he arrived again already. Missouri’s garden might need maintenance. She’d been talking about trimming the forsythia. He didn’t know if it was the right time of year to do that, but he didn’t much care either way. He just needed something to do.

George was an early riser, and Sam was considering making them pancakes for breakfast when his phone rang in the bedroom. He rushed in to get it from the bedside table where he’d left it and checked the caller ID. It was Missouri. She never called this early as, unlike him and George, Missouri enjoyed lazy mornings. Something had to be wrong.

He answered with a curt, “What’s happened?”

“I had a vision,” she said.

“You have visions?” Sam asked, wondering how he’d never known that before.

“Very rarely,” she said. “They’re usually stupid things, like phone calls I’m going to get before they happen, or James’ report cards. It’s not stupid this time though. Sam, it’s Dean.”

Sam’s heart failed for a moment and then came to a racing start again. “What about him?”

“I think he’s been caught by the djinn. I saw him strung up.”
“Where?” Sam asked, and when she hesitated too long, he barked, “Where, Missouri?”

“I don’t know. It was somewhere underground, like a basement. I saw windows set near the ceiling. He said he was in Oregon, didn’t he?”

“Yeah, but he didn’t say where!” Sam’s voice was tight with panic. “I need to find him.”

“How?”

Sam’s eyes bugged as he remembered what could be his only hope. “Anna!” He dropped the phone down onto the bed and raised his voice to a shout. “Anna! I need you! I’m at home!”

There was a flutter and then Anna appeared in the doorway, her eyes tense. Before she could ask a question, Sam spoke in a rush.

“It’s Dean. He’s in trouble. A djinn has him. We need to get him back.”

“How do you know?”

“Does it matter?” Sam asked impatiently, then went on when she just looked at him. “I spoke to him last night. He was going after a djinn in Oregon. Missouri just had a vision of him strung up. The djinn has him and I have to get him back! Are you going to help me?”

“Are you sure you want to do this, Sam?”

“Am I sure I want to save my brother’s life? Yeah, pretty sure. Come on, Anna. We have to go!”

Why didn’t she understand? The djinn could already have Dean. Who knew when Missouri was seeing. He could already be locked in a dream, being drained of blood and life, and Anna was asking stupid questions.

When she still hesitated, he snapped, “What are you waiting for?”

“He’ll see you.”

Sam opened his mouth and then snapped it shut again. Dean would see him. Did that matter? Didn’t the fact Sam was going to do this mean that he already had? He couldn’t change anything, so this had to have already happened for Dean in his time. Dean must have already know what was going to happen, but he couldn’t change it either, like Sam couldn’t change things, so he hadn’t said anything.

“If he does, it means he’s supposed to,” he said. “Whatever happens, happened. Now, please, take me to him. You can sense him, can’t you? He’s not got the rib etchings yet.”

“I can sense him, yes.”

“Then take me there!”

She looked him in the eyes, nodded once, and then Sam felt a swoop in his stomach as they moved.

They came to rest in a dingy subterranean room with windows set close to the ceiling. There were large and rusted tanks against the dirty walls, and litter on the floor. It looked as though it had been used by people sleeping rough.

Sam took it all in within the moment of arriving before his eyes fell on the most important part of
the scene. Dean. He was hanging unconscious by his tied hands from the ceiling, and there was a needle and tubing in his neck. He looked so young, just as Sam remembered him looking before he had left for college, when things had been better for them together. His face was pale in the dingy light, and there was a trickle of dried blood on his face from a cut on his temple.

The sight made Sam’s heart clench as he crossed the room and reached for Dean.

“Wait!” Anna said. “We need to find the djinn first.”

Sam ignored her. He pulled the needle from Dean’s neck and tried to untie the knots that were holding Dean up. They were too tight, though and he’d not bought a knife—or weapon of any other kind—with him.

“Anna! Help!” he demanded.

“Little busy,” she said.

Sam turned away from Dean, one hand holding his shoulder, and saw the djinn walking down the stairs into the basement. It was bald and tattoos covered its face and head.

“I don’t have a knife!” Sam gasped.

Anna nodded. “I’ll take care of it. You stay with Dean.”

The djinn reached the bottom of the stairs and then its eyes began to glow blue. It rushed towards Sam and Dean, but Anna stepped in front of it, her own eyes blazing. She raised her hand and pressed it to the djinn’s forehead. There was a burst of blue-white light from the djinn’s eyes and mouth and the skin burned and the body turned to ash. When Anna lowered her hand, the djinn fell to the floor and crumbled into ash and dust.

Sam turned his attention back to Dean and saw that he was still unconscious.

“Why isn’t he waking up?” he asked.

Anna came to them and placed her hand on Dean’s temple. “He’s just drained and he took a knock to the head. He just needs time.”

“Get him down,” Sam said.

She tugged on the ropes and they broke. Sam supported Dean’s weight, gently lowering him to the floor with his head cradled in Sam’s elbow. Anna untied his wrists and tossed the rope away.

“He’s going to be okay,” she said. “He just needs time.”

Sam knew he should go now. Dean had been saved, and he was going to wake up. Sam couldn’t be there for that. The right thing to do was to leave him. He’d wake up with questions, but that was okay, wasn’t it? He would be fine surely. Sam just had to lay him down and leave. But he couldn’t. Now he had his brother in his arms, he couldn’t let go of him. He needed to make sure he really was okay.

The stupidity of the idea and the complications it would cause didn’t matter to him. He was so consumed with seeing Dean, feeling him, being with him after so long, that he felt no compunction when he said, “Take us home.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.
“I need to take care of him.”

He felt Anna’s eyes on him, though his own gaze was focused on Dean’s face, and he only moved when she said, “Hold him tight.”

He hooked his arms under Dean’s knees and got awkwardly to his feet, holding Dean against his chest. He was heavy, a man’s weight to hold, though he seemed so young to Sam.

“I’m ready.”

He felt the shift again and his eyes closed. When they opened, they were in the hall of his own house. He checked Dean was still sleeping and then carried him through to his bedroom. He heard voices behind him, and knew George was now awake and Missouri had arrived, but he ignored them for the moment as he laid Dean on the bed and adjusted him so he looked comfortable. At the end of the bed was a chest of clean bedding, and Sam took a blanket from it and covered Dean then straightened up and stepped away. Now he had him there, he didn’t know what to do. He planned to just keep him until he was conscious again, and then he would have Anna take him back. He needn’t even see Sam. He would just be kept safe until he was awake.

He heard someone approach and stop in the doorway, and Missouri hissed, “What did you do, Sam?”

Sam sighed and said, “Anna can you stay with him? Keep him safe.”

“Of course,” she said.

Sam thanked her then passed Missouri out of the room and into the living room where George stood, leaning against the back of his chair.

“Missouri told me what happened. You brought him back?”

Sam nodded.

“Why?” Missouri asked plaintively, coming into the room behind him.

“I had to.”

Missouri sighed exasperatedly. “Sam, you have been so careful. Everything you have done has been thought out and planned. You haven’t allowed a single other hunter to know who you are, let alone have anyone see you that might know you in the future, but you brought Dean here. What were you thinking?”

“He was thinking it was Dean,” George answered for him. “How could he have resisted?”

“But this! Do you know how dangerous this is?” she asked. “You know what you’re risking.”

“He isn’t though,” George said calmly. “If Dean is here now, it means he was always here. Sam can’t change anything. Whatever happens, happened.”

“That’s an excuse,” Missouri said.

“Maybe it is,” Sam said quietly. “But I still had to do it. He was hurt. I couldn’t leave him there alone. I needed to help him.”

“And when he wakes up in a strange place and sees you, what happens then?”
“He doesn’t have to see me,” Sam said. “Anna can take him back as soon as he wakes up. If I just know he’s okay, I can bear it.”

“But you do know he’s okay,” Missouri said. “You have lived this already. Do you remember Dean ever getting seriously hurt on a hunt?”

Sam shook his head and averted his eyes. The only time he remembered anything really bad happening to Dean was when he’d gotten lost on a hunt and Sam had been shipped to Bobby’s while John searched for him. Sam remembered that clearly as he had been terrified for his brother. But that was years ago, when Sam was in seventh grade. He didn’t remember anything that could be linked to this, which meant it was going to work out.

“Then what were you thinking?” she asked.

“I need some air,” Sam said, striding through to the kitchen and out of the back door. He stopped on the porch and just breathed in the cool morning air for a moment. He needed to think. He could have make a serious mistake bringing Dean here, but it wasn’t going to change the future. He knew that. He did what he did because he already had. Even though he knew it could have been a mistake, he couldn’t regret it either. He had seen Dean, touched him; right now Dean was lying in Sam’s real bed in Sam’s real home instead of being left to wake up on the dirty floor with the charred remains of a monster.

That had to be better, didn’t it?

He reached for the door handle and opened the door, needing to get inside and see Dean again, when he heard a shout inside.

“Who the hell are you?”

Sam froze. Dean was awake.
1999 - Part Two

Chapter Forty-Seven - Part Two

Sam imagined having a little more time to sit with him before sending him back to Oregon with Anna when he started to wake. He didn’t imagine Anna would let him wake up without doing something about it. Why hadn’t she kept him asleep?

“Calm down, Dean,” Missouri said.

“How do you know my name? I don’t know you. What the hell am I doing here?”

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Anna said calmly.

“Damn right you’re not. You chose the wrong person to kidnap. I am going to end… What is that?”

Sam walked inside, through the small kitchen and into the living room to see Dean facing the mantelpiece and pointing at the picture in the very center.

Sam kept a lot of photographs on the mantle. There was one of him, James and Missouri at James’ graduation. A wedding shot of James and Tess, and another of them with Patience taken shortly after she was born. The photo a stranger had snapped of him and Dieter standing on the wall was framed there, too, and there was a picture of him and George on the front porch, laughing at the camera with a bottle of whiskey in the background. In the center of them all was the photo of Dean. It had been enlarged from the shot he carried in his wallet in case of emergency, and in it, Dean was smiling the trademarked Dean grin he had usually sported before the world went to hell.

That was what Dean had seen.

“That’s not me,” Dean said, still pointing at the picture. “Why does it look like me? What the hell is going on?”

Sam stepped into the living room. “It’s you, Dean, but not from now. I am Sam, but I’m not your Sam from now.”

Dean spun on his heel to face Sam and his mouth dropped open. For a moment he stared at Sam, agape, and then he reached for the gun that would usually have been kept in the back of his pants. Finding it missing, he bent and pulled out a switchblade from his boot in an eerily fast movement. He held it out in front of him and his eyes darted from face to face, looking to see who would attack first.

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Sam said, raising his hand placatingly.

“Damn right you’re not,” Dean growled. “I’m going to hurt you!”

Sam gestured Missouri and George back, and they obeyed without a word. Dean was dangerous under attack, and that was what he perceived himself to be.

Sam walked forward slowly, his hands still raised.
Dean jabbed the switchblade at him. “You’re not Sam,” he snarled.

“I am. But I’m not your Sam.”

Dean shook his head jerkily. “This is a dream. It has to be. Where did my mom go?”

Sam’s heart contracted painfully in his chest as he realized what the djinn had showed Dean—the same thing he’d seen last time he’d been poisoned. He’d seen Mary again.

“You were taken by a djinn,” Sam said. “You know what they can do.”

“Taylor told me they create a kinda fantasy dream thing,” Dean said, still gripping the switchblade in his hand. “They make you see…”

“Mom,” Sam said. “You saw her. She was alive.”

Dean looked stricken, and then Sam saw him push it down and ignore it to face the threat that he saw Sam as. “Okay. That was a dream. But you’re not Sam. You look like him, maybe, but I just saw Sam this morning, and he sure as hell didn’t have a beard. He doesn’t even need to shave a few stragglers yet.”

“And yet here you are,” George said.

Sam held up a hand to silence him. “That Sam is real. He’s wherever you left him, and he’s fine.”

“Am I dead?” Dean asked. “Did the djinn kill me and that’s why I’m seeing you. Are you like an angel or something?”

Anna smiled at Sam but he didn’t acknowledge it. He had to calm Dean down.

“You’re not dead, and I’m not an angel. I don’t look like Sam as you know him because I am Sam from 2010.”

Dean snorted. “Sure you are.”

“Sit down and I will explain.”

“Not a chance,” Dean sneered.

“I’ll sit then.” Sam walked forward slowly and sat down in George’s usual chair. George and Missouri were still standing against the wall and Anna was in the doorway. “I am Sam from 2010, and that picture of you is one I had enlarged from one I took in 2007. That’s why you look different. You were twenty-eight years old when I took it.”

“Bullshit.”

Sam sighed. “That necklace you wear is the one I gave you for Christmas when I was eight. I got it for Dad, but I gave it to you. It was the same Christmas I learned about the real world. I was upset and scared, and you were there for me, not Dad, so I knew you were the one that should have it.”

Dean touched the necklace and shook his head jerkily.

“In the back of the Impala is a plastic army man jammed in the ashtray that even Dad can’t get out. I put it there. Under the mat on the backboard of the trunk is our initials. We carved them in one day when Dad left us in the car while he was hunting a werewolf. We thought he would be mad when he saw it, but he laughed and told us to always leave our mark. When I was twelve, you got
Dad to buy me a toy rocket for my birthday because I was obsessed with space that year.”

Dean’s eyes narrowed but he didn’t speak, so Sam grappled his mind for more memories Dean would share at that age.

“Fourth of July, three years ago, we set off fireworks and the field caught fire. We had to get out of there before the fire trucks arrived because I made you call them.”

“You thought the forest would burn down,” Dean whispered.

“And I thought they'd send us to jail,” Sam said. “You told me I was being dumb.”

“I told you Winchesters weren’t stupid enough to get caught.”

Sam smiled. “Yeah, you did.”

Dean lowered his knife. “What the hell, man?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Can I get a drink to hear it with?”

Sam laughed. “Sure. Let’s go outside. I think George and Missouri will feel better if they have a little space from your knife.”

Dean looked at them where they stood and said, “Oh. Sorry, I guess.” He tucked the knife in his pocket and shrugged.

“It’s okay,” Missouri said with a smile, her anger and frustration at Sam apparently forgotten. “It’s good to see you again, Dean.”

Dean frowned. “Are you from the future, too?”

“No, we belong here,” George said.

“I knew you when you were a kid,” Missouri said. “And what a goofy kid you were. You grew up handsome.”

Dean grinned. “I’m the lucky one. Apparently, Sam’s going to grow up to be a moose.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Thanks, Dean.”

“No problem.”

Sam fetched them beers from the fridge and then gestured Dean into the hall. He pulled open the door and they went onto the porch. Sam sat and, after a moment’s hesitation, Dean did too. He unscrewed the cap of his beer and took a draw on the bottle.

“Don’t suppose I can get a whiskey to go with this, can I?” he asked. “It’s been a hell of a couple days.”

“No,” Sam said firmly, though his eyes were smiling. “You’re not legal yet. Be grateful you’re getting a beer.”

Dean gawped at him. “I gave you your first whiskey three weeks ago. You were sixteen.”
“I remember,” Sam said with a fond smile for the memory. “I was sick and Bobby reamed you out for it.”

“Good times.”

Sam laughed. “If you say so. I’m personally not a fan of puking.”

Dean took another drink of his beer and said. “I should call him. Sammy, I mean. He, I mean you, will be worried.”

“Do you want to use my phone?” Sam asked.

“No, I’ve got a cell.” Dean reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a boxy cell phone. He dialed in a number and brought the phone to his ear. It was apparently answered quickly as he said, “Yeah, it’s me. I’m fine.” He touched a hand to the cut on his temple and winced. “No, nothing at all. I’m just finishing up now. I’ll be there when you get home from school. Yeah, I’ll see you then. Bye, Sammy.” He ended the call and tucked the phone away. “You worried a lot at sixteen.”

“I still do,” Sam said. “My worries are bigger now though.”

Dean nodded somberly. “I guess they are if you’re from 2010. Why are you here?”

Sam took a swig of his beer to give himself a moment to think before answering. “There are things happening in 2010 that are big. I needed to come back because of them.”

It wasn’t a lie. In fact, it was as close to the truth as he could go without talking about the apocalypse.

Dean nodded slowly. “So you came to 1999 to fix it.”

“I came to 1978,” Sam said. “I just haven’t gotten back yet.”

Dean’s eyebrows flew up. “You’ve been here since 1978? But that’s… twenty-one years.”

“Yes.”

“Am I here somewhere, too?” Dean asked.

“No. I haven’t seen you since May ’78. We came back together, but you were sent home when I was trapped.”

“How do you do it?” Dean asked, sounding awed. “I could never go that long without seeing Sammy.”

“I have family here, George and Missouri, and James, and I have friends, but it’s not the same. I try to make as much of the time I have here as I can. I learned early on that I had to live this life if I wasn’t going to break, but it’s still hard. This, seeing you, is incredible. Even talking to you yesterday was more than I’d dreamed of having.”

“You spoke to me yesterday?”

“I’m Taylor,” Sam said, dropping his voice to the tones and drawl of Taylor.

“Wow, that’s freaky. You don’t sound like you at all.”

“Exactly,” Sam said. “It’s how I get away with it. I speak to Bobby and Dad, too.”
Dean’s eyes widened. “Wow. I didn’t think about that. It must be… Is it easier when you can talk to them when you can’t see them?”

“Sometimes,” Sam said. “I miss them both so much, but when I talk to them, it’s not really them as they don’t know me for who I really am. I’m just a lore man.”

Dean shook his head wonderingly. “That’s crazy. I think I’d lose my mind.”

“I thought I would a couple times,” Sam admitted. “But I am here for an important reason, and that means I have to be strong.”

“What is it you’re facing in 2010?” Dean asked. “I can’t believe I’m asking this question. You’re Sammy but not. You were a kid yesterday morning, just heading to school and bitching about Dad being gone, and now you’re a grown man. What is it that makes it worth coming back like this?” His eyes widened. “Is it what killed Mom?”

“No,” Sam said automatically. “That’s over for us. This is something new.”

Dean coughed and sputtered on his beer. “It’s over? It’s dead?”

Sam realized he’d slipped and said too much. Dean shouldn’t know any of this stuff. Sam was sure he didn’t in the future.

A wonderous thought occurred to Sam and his heart quickened. Was he changing the future? Was doing this proving Anna wrong? If he could change things, he could save John and Dean from Hell. He could stop Azazel before he took Sam to Cold Oak. He could save the world from the apocalypse.

The idea made him smile widely as he said, “Yeah, you killed it.”

“I killed it! Not Dad?”

“It was you,” Sam said. “But Dad played his part.” That was true. John had wrestled Azazel, expelling him from his body and making it possible for Dean to take the shot.

Dean drained his beer. “I need another, and I need a whiskey.”

Sam laughed, filled with excitement at the thought of what could be happening. “Okay. Fine. I’ll get you one.”

“Thanks,” Dean said, leaning back in his seat.

Sam walked back inside and into the kitchen. He grabbed two fresh glasses from the cupboard and went to the table beside George’s chair to fetch the whiskey. He poured two measures and then looked up as Missouri asked, “What are you telling him?”

Sam shook his head, smiling. “I’m telling him enough.”

“How much is enough?” George asked. “What are you risking?”

“I don’t think I’m risking anything. I think I’m changing it.”

“That’s impossible,” Anna said.

“No, it’s not. I’ve already told him things he never knew in the future. He knows them now, but he didn’t then, which means things are different. I can change the future. I can save them all. They
don’t need to die. Lucifer doesn’t need to be freed. I can stop the apocalypse ever happening”

“Apocalypse?” a stunned voice asked from the hall.

Sam’s heart sank as Dean staggered into the room. His face was white and his eyes wide. He looked ill.

Missouri scrambled out of her seat and hurried over to him. He pulled back from her touch, though, and gripped the wall instead to support himself.

Sam was frozen in place as he realized what he’d inadvertently put his brother through.

This wasn’t Dean in 2009, when the apocalypse had started. He’d not had a year to get used to the idea that it might happen while they fought to save the seals. He’d never seen the worst that could happened to a person the way he had in Hell. He was basically innocent, and Sam had just thrown this at him.

Sam had failed him in the worst way.

He had failed himself.

He knew what had to happen now and he knew what it meant. He wasn’t changing the future by telling Dean what he was because he couldn’t. Dean wouldn’t go on with his life knowing all Sam had revealed because that would destroy him. Sam had to strip him of that knowledge.

“What do you mean apocalypse?” Dean asked.

George looked at Sam, waiting for him to pull some excuse or answer out of nowhere, but there was nothing he could do.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said.

Dean laughed mirthlessly “Doesn’t matter! You’re here to save the world from an apocalypse in 2010 and you say it doesn’t matter!”

In lieu of an answer, Sam addressed Anna. “Can you help?”

She frowned. “How?”

“The way Michael helped my parents?”

“Make him forget?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Make me forget?” Dean asked. “No! You can’t do that! I have to know. If I know what’s coming, I can stop it. You have to tell me how!”

Sam shook his head dolefully. “You can’t, Dean. No one can change it. I’ve tried and I’ve failed. The world is what it is because of me. I am here and I remember these things, so they have happened. They will happen for you. I can’t let you go on remembering, trying to change things, because it will drive you mad. You will suffer and be scared for the next eleven years of your life. I can’t do that to you.”

“You have to!” Dean’s voice rose to a shout. “I can stop it!”
“You can’t,” Anna said. “It’s impossible. Sam’s right, you can’t remember.” She walked towards him and Dean dodged back.

“Don’t come near me!” he snapped.

“Leave him, Anna,” Sam said in a hoarse voice. “Let me explain.”

Dean glared at him. “You’re not doing this, Sam. I won’t let you.”

“I have to,” Sam said. “I have destroyed your life in your future. I can’t destroy it in my past, too. There is no possible way to change anything. Believe me, I’ve tried.”

“No,” Dean said, though his voice was weaker now, fear for himself was creeping in.

“You will destroy yourself knowing,” Sam said. “It won’t change anything for anyone but you. You will be scared for the next eleven years for nothing.”

He would do this at whatever cost, but he didn’t want to overpower Dean’s will by doing it against what he wanted. He needed Dean to agree. He couldn’t violate him like this, not after everything else he’d done to him and would do. He was going to die and leave Dean, and he wouldn’t give Dean a chance to stop him. Dean would see that as the ultimate of all Sam’s betrayals.

“I can’t,” Dean said, but Sam heard doubt in his voice now. Sam was wearing him down.

“You have to,” he said, “For you, for me, for Dad. Let me help. We can make you forget what you know. You will be able to live a happy life.” Or as happy as was possible, Sam thought. “You won’t be scared.”

“I’m not scared,” Dean said.

“I am,” Sam admitted. He was scared of what was to come, he was scared to die, he was scared to lose the scant connection he had to John when he died in just seven years. “Please,” he implored.

Dean closed his eyes, and when they opened, they were wet. “What do I have to do?” he asked.

“Sit down,” Anna said. “It won’t hurt.”

“What will I forget?” Dean asked. “Will I still remember my dad and Sammy?”

“Yes,” Sam said, “We will just take away the past day. You’ll forget meeting me and you won’t remember the djinn getting you. We’ll make it all go away.”

“I can reset the past twenty-four hours,” Anna said. “You won’t remember calling Sam or being here. We’ll make it so you can go home happy.”

Dean stood for a moment, tears coursing down his cheeks, and then he asked, “I really can’t change it?”

“You really can’t,” Anna said.

Dean walked to Sam’s chair and sat down. “Okay. Do it before I change my mind.” He looked at Sam. “I’ll see you soon. Or in eleven years. Whatever.”

“I’ll see you,” Sam lied.

Anna moved closer to Dean’s chair and then pressed her fingertips to his temple. Dean fell back
against the cushions, asleep before he hit.

Anna looked at Sam and asked. “Just twenty-four hours?”

Sam nodded. “Take away the djinn and me. I don’t want him to remember what he saw. He’s got a head injury, so he will think he just has concussion.”

Anna drew a breath then lay her palm on Dean’s forehead. There was a rush of blue-white light and Dean twitched, then it was done.

Anna straightened up and said, “We should move him.”

“Yeah,” Sam rasped and then cleared his throat. “We’ll get him back to the Impala.”

“I can do it,” she said.

Sam was torn. He wanted to have as much time with his brother as remained, but he wanted it to be over before he lost control. He was barely hanging on to his equilibrium as it was.

“Let her, Sam,” Missouri said.

Sam walked to Dean and laid his hand on Dean’s shoulder, feeling the solid mass of his brother. “Goodbye, Dean,” he said then turned away,

There was a flutter, and when he turned back, Dean and Anna were gone.

A cry of misery built in Sam’s throat and he battled to keep it down. It escaped him in a moan, and his knees buckled. He fell to his knees, his face pressed against the side of the chair Dean had vacated, and he started to cry.

He hadn’t cried in a long time, in what felt like a lifetime, but now the tears flowed from him and his breath came in gasps.

It was over; Dean was going back to his Sam and his life, not remembering the horror this encounter had ended up being for him. Sam was happy for him. His misery was for himself. He had said goodbye to Dean for the last time, and Dean would never remember.

Missouri knelt beside him and she wrapped her arms around him, making soft sounds of comfort. He knew she was trying to help, but Sam wished she would stop. He only wanted the arms of one person to comfort him, and that person had just been spirited away.

Dean was gone and Sam would never see him again.
“Here, Patience, you go to Uncle Sam,” Tess said, swooping Patience from James’ arms and setting her into Sam’s.

Sam held her against him awkwardly, looking down into her rich brown eyes and hoping she didn’t start to cry. He had held her when she was much smaller, more of a doll to cradle that the wriggling mass she was now, and he wasn’t sure what he was doing. His contact with babies before had been minimal. He’d seen Ray’s daughter and son when they were born, but the only child he’d really had close contact with was James, and he was eight when they’d met.

Patience seemed to stare back into his eyes, and Sam felt that she was weighing him up, deciding whether to let him have this moment or to start crying to be returned to her parents or grandmother who were all more practiced with babies. She seemed to decide to give him a chance, as she reached up and tugged on the strands of his beard with her tiny fingers and gurgled at him.

Sam sighed with relief and Missouri laughed. “I knew that beard would come in useful,” she said. “Patience has claimed it as her newest toy.”

“I wish I’d known,” Sam quipped. “I could have saved myself money on that teddy bear.”

“Oh, no,” Tess said. “It’s adorable, and she slept with it last night. I think it’s her favorite gift.”

Sam was glad. He’d had no idea what to buy for her, and the hour he’d spent in Toy Time had been a harrowing experience. He thought she was probably past the age in which a rattle would amuse her for long, but everything else had seemed too advanced. Eventually he’d caved and asked for help. He’d been advised that a soft toy was a good gift for a baby, and he’d taken time to choose the one with the softest fur. He’d wrapped it in pink tissue that he thought she would be able to tear with her small hands and waited for Christmas Day so he could give it to her during their visit to Kansas.

“Wish I’d known,” James grumbled. “I could have saved us money on that discovery station.”

“That’s your own fault,” Tess said. “I told you it was too old for her. You have to look at the recommended ages for these things.”

Missouri smiled fondly. “James’ favorite toy his first Christmas was his own feet. He ignored the toys Richard and I bought and spent the day sucking his toes.”

James scowled as everyone laughed. “Gee, thanks, Mom,” he said. “I’ll be sure to embarrass you in return later.”

“You can try,” Sam said. “You mom has no concept of shame.”

“What’s the point in shame?” Missouri asked.

“No point at all,” Sam said, and then winced as Patience caught a single strand in the crease of her finger and tugged. “That’s quite some grip,” he told her. “You’re going to be a strong woman like your momma and grandmother.”
Patience’s tongue crept out as if in response, and Sam smiled, looking up when he heard the click of a camera and saw Tess pointing her Kodak at him.

“She’s definitely a pretty little thing,” George said.

“Do you want to hold her?” Sam asked.

George was the only one that hadn’t held her yet. He’d not been able to make the trip to California to see her when she was born, and he’d not visited with them after Sam had gone to the airport to pick them up.

George looked at Tess, “Do you mind?”

“Oh course not,” she said. “We need a picture of the two of you.”

George positioned his arms into a cradle and Sam set Patience into them. George adjusted her so she lay comfortably, and then he smiled down at her. “Well, hello there, young lady.”

Sam had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing at the formal greeting for the baby. Patience seemed happy though. She squealed and waved her chubby fists. Tess snapped at picture, and George looked up as though he’d forgotten there was anyone else in the room.

It was a stark contrast to see George with the baby in his arms. Patience had her whole life ahead of her, so many firsts to experience and things to do. George had left almost all of his firsts behind, and he was slowing down. It was seeing them together that made Sam realize how old his friend was getting. He was seventy-seven now, slowed by his aging and injured body: a very different man to the one Sam had met all those years ago.

“Sam, you like technology as much as James, don’t you?” Tess asked, breaking into his thoughts.

He looked up. “Yeah, I guess.”

Missouri huffed a laugh. “He means yes, most definitely. He’s the one that taught James how computers worked in the first place.”

Tess nodded. “Then what do you think about this millennium bug thing?”

“It’s all scaremongering,” Sam said confidently. “Computers will handle it fine. The lights won’t even flicker.”

“You’re not prepared at all?” she asked.

“If you mean have I stockpiled food and water, then no, I haven’t. There’s no need. Trust me.”

“How do you know?” she asked.

“Sam’s done a lot of research,” James said guilelessly. “He’s done a test run on his own computer.”

“And if my little HP can handle it, the banks and hospitals will be fine,” Sam said. “Really, there’s nothing to worry about.”

Y2K fever was rife in the country, but Sam knew it was all panic over nothing. People would be embarrassed in a week over their hoarded supplies. James, Missouri and George knew that, but Tess was in the dark about his nature as a time traveler so she had no idea. James had never mentioned wanting to tell her the truth about his presence. Sam thought he preferred her innocence to the truth.
The millennium would come and the world would be fine. It was an event that would come a year later, when human monsters took control of airplanes and used them as weapons, that would change the world.

“What time is your flight tomorrow?” Missouri asked James.

“Noon,” he said. “We’ve got to get to Fisher and Meredith’s by dinner as the rest of the family are coming over.”

Tess’ parents saw more of Tess and her family as they were in California, too, but apparently it had still been a tense conversation to tell them they were coming to Kansas for Patience’s first Christmas, and they’d had to promise to be with them for New Years. It was something Sam had never had to deal with. He’d never had a family Christmas until his first year in the past—his new present—and that had been an easy decision to make as there was no other options. He didn’t envy James these complicated decisions of a married man.

“Then we will make tonight special,” Missouri said. “We’ll go to Genovese.”

James grinned. “You might not remember that far back, Mom, but I don’t think taking a baby out for Italian is a good idea.”

“I didn’t think of that.” Missouri’s face fell and then she looked at Sam and her expression brightened. “Sam, you’ll look after her, won’t you?”

“Sure,” Sam said automatically.

“Are you sure?” Tess asked. “She can be a handful.”

“We’ll be fine,” Sam said, sounding impressively confident for a man as nervous as he was. “Really, go out and enjoy yourselves.”

Tess still looked uncertain and James reassured her. “We’ll only be a phone call away. Come on. We haven’t been anywhere special like this since she was born.”

“If you’re sure it’s okay,” Tess said anxiously.

“I’m sure,” Sam said. “George?”

George looked up from Patience whom he had been staring at avidly. “Hm, what?”

Sam smiled at him. “We’re going to babysit tonight. That okay with you?”

“Of course,” he said, looking down at Patience again. “That will be just fine, won’t it, little lady?”

James laughed and exchanged a glance with Tess. “I think she’s in safe hands, honey. Seems George has fallen in love.”

George seemed oblivious to their conversation; his attention was fixed on Patience and her hand that was curling around a button of his shirt.

Tess smiled. “I think he has. In that case, thank you, Sam. We appreciate this.”

“No problem,” Sam said. “It will be great.”

xXx
Missouri’s living room looked like a page from a low budget nursery shopping catalogue. Patience’s travel crib was set up in the middle of the room, and her toys—including the advanced discovery center James had bought her—were spread around. The coffee table had been transformed into a changing station, complete with diaper pail and a cushioned mat to lay her on. In the kitchen was a sterilizer, and in the fridge were the bottles of milk Tess had expressed before she left and jars of baby food.

Patience was sitting in her highchair, banging a fist against the plastic tabletop and squealing.

“It’s coming,” Sam called from the kitchen.

“Hear that, Patience?” George asked. “Your dinner is coming, just as soon as Sam pulls his finger out and chooses something.”

“There’s a lot to choose from,” Sam said defensively.

He set down the jar of zucchini and broccoli medley and picked up one filled with vivid orange contents. He checked the label and saw it contained chicken and pumpkin. It sounded good to him, so he poured it into a bowl and placed it in the microwave. He’d been given instructions about heating the food by Tess and he’d done his own research, so he counted exactly fifteen seconds and pulled it out, stirred it to distribute the heat, and then counted off thirty seconds to let it stand.

“Really, Patience, I thought you were supposed to like that.” George said.

Sam went into the living room with the food in time to see George bending awkwardly to pick up the teddy Sam had brought her that had been thrown on the floor for the umpteenth time.

“I think she likes seeing you picking it up more,” Sam said. “Don’t give it back to her. It’s dinner time.”

George set the teddy down on the couch and settled himself again. “What are you feeding her?” George asked.

“Chicken and pumpkin,” Sam said.

George peered at the bowl. “It glows in the dark. Are you sure that’s supposed to be eaten?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “It looks good.”

“I strongly disagree, but if you’re going to feed it to her, you might want to get on with it. I think she’s tired of waiting.”

Sam saw her mouth was downturned and her eyes narrowed. He suspected a tantrum was on its way. He quickly tested the temperature of the food one more time and, finding it ready, he perched on the arm of a chair and scooped up a spoonful of the puree. He brought it to Patience’s mouth and tapped it against her bottom lip. “Open up.”

She opened her mouth and Sam fed her a spoonful. He held his breath as she mashed it with her gums and few teeth, seeming to consider the taste, and then she laughed and blew an orange bubble.

Sam sighed with relief. “See, she likes it,” he told George.

“That’s because she hasn’t tried rib-eye yet.”
“Let’s wait till she has a full complement of teeth and maybe a few years on her before introducing steak to her diet,” Sam said. “We’ll stick with pumpkin for now. Do you want to feed her some?”

“No, thank you. I won’t inflict that orange mush on her.”

Sam shook his head with a smile as he gave Patience another spoonful.

George’s reaction to Patience was unexpected but satisfying. Sam wouldn’t have believed how enamored he could be had he not seen it with his own eyes. He felt the same. Patience was perfect, innocent. She made every fight Sam had taken in his life worth it, and she made the future seem less scary. Sam could face Lucifer to protect her and the other people he loved.

When she had finished her jar of food, Sam cleaned her face with a baby wipe and then went into the kitchen to warm her bottle while George entertained her. He couldn’t help but listen to them as he set the bottle in a bowl of hot water to warm.

“Was it good, little lady? It didn’t look it. I will make sure you have something worth eating when you have a few more teeth.”

When the bottle was warm, Sam tested the temperature on his inner wrist and then carried it through to the living room. He set it down on the end table and asked George, “Do you want to feed her?”

He saw a spark in George’s eyes, but when he answered, his voice was mild, concealing his excitement. “I can do that.”

Sam swept Patience out of the high chair and placed her in George’s waiting arms. George positioned her comfortably, and then Sam handed him the bottle. He brought it to her lips and Patience began to suck on it at once, her hands coming up to hold the bottle with George. Her tiny brown fingers gripped the plastic with George’s old and liver-spotted white ones. Sam wished he had a camera to capture the moment.

“I thought I knew you well, Sam,” George said thoughtfully.

Sam frowned. “You do.”

“Then how did I not know you were a baby expert? I saw the initial look of panic when you held her earlier, but now you looked like a regular mom.”

Sam blushed. “I might have done a little research.”

“When?”

“You know I went home to check the messages earlier?” he said.

“Yes.”

“Well I took some time to check some Mom Blogs online before I came back. They were full of tips and tricks.”

“You’re a regular Boy Scout, aren’t you, preparation like this.” George grinned. “But what’s a blog?”

“It’s a kind of article written by regular people talking about their lives or interests on a website. They’re not as big now as they will be in the future, but moms apparently like sharing tips already.”
“Interesting,” George said distractedly. “Look, she likes this. She’s gulping it down.”

Sam frowned. “She’s going to get air in her tummy.”

George shrugged. “Then we will burp her.”

Sam wiped a cloth over the highchair then folded it and put it in the hall closet. He washed up her bowl and spoon and set them to dry over the counter. He wasn’t used to being in Missouri’s home without her or James there. She came and went with her key to his and George’s home all the time, but, though he had a key to hers, too, Sam had never really had need to be at her place without her.

When she came to him, she usually brought something for the visit: cookies when she came for coffee or a meal for him to heat later for him and George. Sometimes she brought ingredients and cooked there while Sam assisted and George sat at the kitchen table, keeping them company. When Sam was away, hunting or travelling, she visited often to make sure George was okay, always under the pretense of needing something from him. George was a proud man, and he wouldn’t like to think he was being monitored.

“There we go,” George said when Patience had finished the last of her bottle. “That’s better, isn’t it? Would you like to do the honors, Sam?”

Sam picked up a burp cloth and lay it over his shoulder before taking Patience from George and resting her against his chest and patting her back. She began to whine so Sam walked up and down as he patted her, trying to help her bring up any air bubbles. He murmured to her as he walked, talking nonsense words in a soft tone as he’d seen James do.

Patience let out a huge burp and George laughed. “I bet that feels better.”

Sam repositioned her in his arms and wiped her mouth with the cloth. She looked up at him with bright eyes and bunched fists, and Sam realized a moment before it happened what was coming. “Oh,” he said.

“Oh what?” George asked.

In answer, Patience began to wail.

George nodded somberly. “Oh dear.”

Sam put her back on his shoulder and began to pat her back again, but she brought up no more wind. Instead, she continued to cry.

“Maybe she’s wet,” Sam said.

“Oh dirty,” George said.

“I sure hope not,” Sam murmured. He’d seen diapers changed and he’d read about it, but he didn’t particularly want to experience that aspect of childcare. He’d prefer facing a werewolf.

He laid her down on the changing mat and tore open the fasteners of her onesie. He teased her legs out then opened the diaper, braced for the worst. There was no poop, but her diaper was damp, so he took it off and replaced it with a clean one after wiping her clean and drying her with talcum powder. The fasteners for the diaper were easy to work out but trying to get her legs back in the onesie seemed impossible while they kicked and she wailed.

“You can do this, Sam,” George encouraged. “You’ve faced plenty worse.”
“I’ve never faced anything as complicated as this,” Sam said, trying to catch a kicking leg.

“Then leave it off. There’s no need to upset her more. Just wrap her in a blanket to keep her warm.”

Sam took a blanket from the crib and bundled her in it then stood with her in his arms and rocked her gently. It seemed to make no difference. Her face was contorted with fury and her cries seemed to be growing louder.

Sam felt out of his depth. He’d read up on it and they’d been doing so well that he’d allowed himself to grow confident, but it seemed Patience had been lulling him into a false sense of security. Now it was time for her to rebel against the fact her parents had abandoned her to these two inexperienced hunters.

He walked her to the window and looked out, searching for a hopeful sign of the adults who were equipped to deal with a crying baby. There were no headlights, but there were fine white puffs falling in the light of the street lamp.

“Look, Patience,” he said. “It’s snowing.”

Patience continued to wail.

“Do you think I should call them?” Sam asked worriedly. It didn’t sound like a pained cry, which he’d read about, but he wasn’t familiar enough with babies to know the different cries for sure.

At that moment his phone beeped with an incoming message. “Check that for me,” he said.

George picked up his phone from the table and read the message. He smiled. “Their timing is impeccable. They’re just leaving the restaurant now.”

“They can’t come yet!” Sam said. “She’s crying.”

George rolled his eyes. “You were just thinking of calling them back yourself.”

“Yeah, but we’ll look like complete idiots if they come home and see her like this. They’ll never trust me with her again.”

“Do you want them to?” George asked. “She’s making a lot of noise.”

Sam glared at him. “She’s a baby.”

“I know that. Give her to me.”

Thinking he had nothing to lose, Sam put her into George arms and sank down onto the couch.

“Now, Patience, you’re putting Uncle Sam into a tail spin,” George said. “The man who is going to save the world is scared of a crying baby. Yes, I quite agree, that is stupid. But let’s give him a helping hand. Do you think you could stop crying for me?”

Patience wailed in response.

George sighed. “Very well. Let’s try this.” He cleared his throat and began to sing. “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know…”

Sam’s mouth dropped open. George’s voice was a perfect baritone. Sam had never heard him sing before, and he’d never imagined he had this kind of talent. Patience seemed just as enthralled. Her cries ceased and she looked up at him, her hands reaching for his face.
George smiled down at her. “Where the treetops glisten and children listen, to hear sleigh bells in the snow…”

Sam stared out of the window at the snow that fell and he smiled to himself. Their white Christmas was a day late, but it was here now, and it seemed to cast a spell as much as George’s voice.

He had learned something about his friend that night and something about himself as well. Perhaps George was right, he would save the world, but in the form of a crying child he had met his match. He loved Patience, but he thought he would save babysitting again for when she was older. James had been easy to deal with when Sam met him. Maybe he should wait until Patience was eight. That seemed to a good age to try again.

On the heels of that thought came another. He was a forty-seven-year-old man that had faced some of the worst creatures that the world had to offer, but he was at a loss with a baby. How had Dean handled taking care of Sam when he was only four? He knew enough of their story to know childcare fell on Dean’s shoulders when John had been in the grips of his initial grief, so how had Dean managed?

It gave him a new respect for his brother, and also a wave of guilt. Dean had done everything for him and Sam had repaid him by betraying him. He wished there was a way he could make Dean understand how grateful he was for everything he had done and how sorry he was for what he had done in return.

As highly as Sam knew George and Missouri valued him, he knew Dean was the better man. Even if Sam did manage to defeat Lucifer and save the world, Dean would still be the better of them.
It should have been an easy hunt.

The case was in Topeka, practically Sam’s backyard, and it was a vengeful spirit with a pretty clear history once Sam went looking for it. He’d taken dozens of ghost hunts in his time, and he thought he’d be home by morning. He’d even arranged to go to Missouri’s for breakfast with George when he got back. There was nothing to hint at the fact he was going to have a problem at all. That was until he got to the graveyard where the ghost had been located.

Mr. Brian Clough had been a middle-aged man that died in the eighties. He was using his afterlife to punish his widow and her new partner for moving on without him. There had been no deaths, but there had been injuries that had been growing gradually worse. Sam thought he was building up to a kill and he had to be stopped before he reached that point.

He’d salted and burned more ghosts than he could count, and there was always a fear when lurking in a graveyard at night, quietly desecrating a grave. He’d gone unnoticed so far though, and he thought he’d be lucky enough to get it over with and be home within an hour.

That was before Mr. Clough arrived as Sam reached the coffin and started to climb out of the grave.

Sam’s first sight of him was a dark shape rushing at him and knocking him back into the grave he’d dug. Sam scrambled out and grabbed his salt-loaded shotgun. The ghost came at him again, and Sam fired off a round then quickly tucked the gun under his arm as he tore open the box of salt and shook it over the body.

He dropped the empty box and reached for the gasoline, but Clough was back. He charged at Sam, and before Sam could fire off a shot, he’d been knocked backwards into a large stone grave marker with an angel perched on it. His head hit, and he felt a wave of sickness that passed quickly.

He tried getting to his feet but Clough kicked his feet out from under him. Feigning an injury he did not feel, Sam crawled toward his shotgun. When his fingers found the stock, he rolled onto his back and fired into Clough’s chest. The ghost vanished and Sam got quickly to his feet and grabbed the gasoline can. He uncapped it and poured it over the grave. He reached into his pocket for his matchbook and pulled it out, but before he could strike the matches, Clough was back.

He snarled at Sam as he reached for the angel that sat atop the neighboring grave. Sam was stunned to see he was able to tear it from its concrete base and raise it in the air. This was strength of the kind Sam hadn’t seen in years. Sam fumbled with the matches, but Clough swung the statue through the air with incredible strength and it hit Sam hard on the side of the head.

As the pain burst over him like a firework, his vision whitened and then darkened. The blow had knocked him against the gravestone behind him, and he slid down it. Had he been an ordinary human, the blow would have crushed his skull, but as his vision cleared, he felt only the warm dampness of blood and a lingering throbbing that was already starting to fade.

“Asshole,” he muttered as he picked up the matches and struck them. The flame built, and Sam
tossed it into the grave without getting to his feet.

The fire erupted, licking up the sides of the hole, and Clough’s body was eaten away by the flames. Sam noticed he looked surprised in the seconds before he disappeared completely.

Sam touched the side of his head and felt the stickiness there. He hoped George would still be sleeping when he got home so that he could wash the blood away before he was seen.

Pushing himself to his feet, Sam surveyed the burning grave. That was probably the toughest salt and burn he’d ever taken. He would have been dead if not for Michael.

He picked up his fallen shotgun and put it in his duffel then dropped the salt box into the fire and picked up the gas can. He figured he could get a few hours’ sleep before morning and then he could spend some time with George and Missouri, not mentioning the fact he’d almost had his head caved in. He was content, looking forward to it, when he heard a sound behind him.

He spun around and saw a man approaching him, giving him a slow round of applause. He was wearing black pants and a grey peacoat.

“Impressive,” the man said. “Very impressive. How did you do that?”

Sam immediately knew this wasn’t an ordinary man. He was a hunter at least to not react to the fact a ghost had just been eaten by flame in front of him.

“Practice,” Sam said casually. “He wasn’t my first.”

“You practice having your skull smashed? That seems a strange pastime.”

“He didn’t get me that hard,” Sam said. “It probably looked worse that it was. I just got scraped. Excuse me, I have to get out of here.”

“I’d prefer it if you stayed,” the man said.

“Sorry, there’s somewhere I’ve got to be.” Sam started walking away in the opposite direction, his footsteps hurried.

“I must insist.”

“I’m sorry but—” He came to a dead stop as the man appeared in front of him. There was only one being Sam knew that could do that, move in an instant without taking a step, and it was one that wasn’t supposed to be on earth for another eight years. An angel. He had been rumbled.

“Stay,” the man said. “Talk to me.”

“Who are you?” Sam asked.

“Of course. How rude of me. I am unpracticed with social graces. It’s been a long time since I had a conversation even. My name is Eli. And you are…”

“Leaving,” Sam said. He turned and took one step forward before a hand clapped down on his shoulder and turned him.

“I think your social graces are in need of improvement, too. It’s rude to walk away when someone is trying to talk to you.”

Sam let the duffel slide down his arm, and he grabbed his Taurus from his pocket. It was no threat
against an angel, but to be completely unarmed felt wrong in a situation like this. Though the angel hadn’t made any threatening move yet, Sam knew that there was only one angel in this time that he could almost trust, and she wasn’t here.

“Are you planning to shoot me?” Eli asked.

“Only if you make me,” Sam said. “I just want to go.”

“And I want you to stay. I want to know what you are.”

“I’m a man.”

“Yes, but that’s not the whole truth, is it?” Eli smirked. “You and I are going to talk.”

“Afraid not,” Sam said, bringing his Taurus up to aim between Eli’s eyes.

In less than the blink of an eye, before Sam could pull the trigger, Eli plucked the gun from his grip and threw it away carelessly then grabbed Sam’s shoulders. Sam tried to pull free, but Eli was too strong. He smiled into Sam’s face and then Sam felt the disconcerting sensation of being shifted through space without his own impetus.

They came to rest in a stonewalled room without windows. The floor was either made of dirt or so filthy that the stone beneath Sam’s feet was completely hidden. It smelled bad, like damp and something far worse that Sam didn’t want to think about. There was a flight of stairs that led to a door above, and as soon as he’d been released, Sam had walked towards them. He had no expectations that he would be able to escape but he refused to accept this turn of events as a bystander to his own capture. He would do everything he could to get away and show he was not going to be held there, even though he was aware his power was limited.

Before he could plant his foot on the first step though, Eli had grabbed his shoulders and dragged him back. He tossed him as if he was weightless into the middle of the large room and Sam fell onto the dirty floor on his hands and knees. He got quickly to his feet, not wanting to be looked down on by Eli, and crossed his arms over his chest.

“You can’t keep me here,” he said.

“Perhaps, perhaps not” Eli said. “I suppose it all depends on what you are.”

He moved into Sam’s space and reached up to touch his face. Sam was too stunned to move back at first. It took feeling Eli’s fingers stroking his cheek to make him jerk back.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked angrily.

“I can feel it,” Eli said with longing that made Sam feel distinctly uncomfortable. “What are you?”

“I’m a man,” Sam said. “I don’t know why I wasn’t hurt more when that ghost clocked me.”

“Are you Fallen?”

Sam understood what he was asking at once, and it confirmed to him what he’d already suspected about Eli’s identity.

Why Anna had never mentioned there was a fallen angel in the country, he didn’t know. He’d assumed she’d been the only one that had made the choice to give up Heaven the way she had.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.
Eli walked slowly round him in a circle. “Were you an angel?”

“No, I’m not and I never was.”

“Ha! But you know them. An ordinary man, even a hunter, would say there’s no such things as angels. You know they’re real.”

“Of course they’re real,” Sam said. “They’re God’s messengers.”

Eli frowned. “A religious man, are you?”

“Yes. I’m a true believer.”

Eli leaned close and Sam stepped back. “I don’t believe you,” he said. “I think someone broke the rules. I know for a fact they’re not supposed to be walking among us until the end of days, and it’s not time for that. Who is your guardian angel?”

“How would I know?” Sam asked, warming to his theme. “It’s the Lord’s choice as to who to send for protection.” He wondered if he would be able to get through this all pretending to be ignorant.

“Did you forget? Is that what happened? Did the Fall take your memories, or were you stripped of them?”

“Forget what?” Sam asked.

“GOHVS OLLOG DS OL G-CHIS-GE!”

Sam recognized the words as Enochian but he had no idea what Eli was saying to him.

“I don’t understand.”

“Tell me who you are!” Eli raged.

“I’m Sam Taylor.”

“What are you?”

“A hunter. I don’t know why I wasn’t hurt more. I’ve never known. It’s been happening a long time.”

Eli narrowed his eyes and stepped closer to Sam again, reaching for his face.

“Quit touching me!” Sam snapped.

He tried to push Eli’s hand away, but it was immovable, and Eli kept him from backing away with a hand on the back of his neck as he stroked Sam’s cheek again.

He drew in a shaky breath and whispered, talking to himself, “I have to know.” He released Sam and then stepped back. He seemed to brace himself and then he snapped his right wrist back and a blade slid from the cuff of his peacoat into his hand.

Sam had seen Castiel make the same move when drawing his angel blade, and it was the same shape as the one Eli held, but while Castiel’s was almost too bright to look at, this one was dark. The metal was dull and scratched and it had none of the same obvious power as Castiel’s. Sam wondered what had happened to it.
The question lasted for all of a second before Eli came at him with the blade raised. Sam backed away until his shoulders reached the stone wall.

“I am sorry for this,” Eli said. “But if I am right, you’ll live.”

He tore Sam’s shirt, baring his chest to the air. He placed one hand on Sam’s throat and then pulled back the other, aiming the blade over the center of Sam’s chest. Sam drew a breath and prepared himself for the pain, and then he felt the burn as the blade sank into his chest. He cried out and would have fallen to his knees if not for Eli’s grip. The room around him dimmed momentarily, and then he gasped as Eli withdrew the blade, moaning with what was unmistakably pleasure.

Sam felt sickened and shocked by what had just happened. Being stabbed was bad enough, but the fact Eli had seemed to gain pleasure from it made Sam feel so much worse. He felt dirtied, violated.

“I felt it,” Eli said in an awed voice.

“Me too,” Sam said bitterly. “Being stabbed in the heart is a memorable experience.”

Eli turned away without commenting and rubbed a hand over his cheek. “I need to think.”

“And I need to go,” Sam said.

He stepped around Eli and ran at the stairs. He didn’t know where he was or how he would escape from this creature, be it angel or something else, but he had to try. He would not accept this as his fate.

Eli was obviously distracted by whatever he felt, but he wasn’t so distracted that Sam could get away. Sam was at the top of the stairs, his hand on the doorknob, when he was dragged backwards by the collar of his jacket and tossed down the stairs. He landed hard and the air rushed out of him. He stared with hatred at Eli who looked down at him with something that looked like sympathy.

“Don’t try that again or I will be forced to hurt you.”

“More than stabbing me in the chest, you mean?”

Eli didn’t answer. He opened the door and slipped out. It slammed closed behind him, and Sam heard the sound of many bolts engaging.

Sam got heavily to his feet and zipped his jacket over his bare chest, warding off the chill of the cold basement.

He looked around and then closed his eyes and said, “Anna, it’s me. Something has happened. I was in Mount Hope Cemetery in Topeka when I was grabbed by some kind of angel. I have no idea where I am now. I need help. You have to find me.”

He opened his eyes and looked around, hoping by some miracle Anna would be there. He knew on the intellectual level that she couldn’t be, as he had the sigils on his ribs that hid him from her, but in his heart he had hoped for some kind of miracle. He was alone and had been attacked, and he had no idea how he was going to get home.

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For someone that was so aware of time passing—at first bringing him closer to Dean and then closer to Lucifer and death—Sam was surprised by how easy it was to lose track of time when
there was no sun or moon to reference from. It felt like he’d been held in that place forever, but it couldn’t have been that long. The only thing he had to gauge time passing was how often Eli brought food and water, but he didn’t know if the sandwiches and cups of water came thrice daily or once. The paper plates they came on were piling up though.

He couldn’t gauge his attacks as time passing as they came too often to count. At first Eli had spaced them out so Sam had time to eat and sometimes sleep between each time, but like a junkie becoming more and more dependent on his drug, he came to Sam more and more often. Each wound should have been mortal but wasn’t, thanks to Michael, and each healing seemed to give Eli the same kind of almost erotic pleasure.

It was hard to keep fighting against an enemy that was so powerful, but Sam tried each time at first—before the depression came. He struggled and tried to run, but Eli was too fast and too strong. Other than the fact he tried to kill Sam, he didn’t seem to want to be cruel. He spoke kindly and always apologized for what he was doing, though he never explained. Not until the day he came to Sam during one of the depressive phases of his captivity, seeing that Sam remained sitting on the floor, leaning against the cold stone wall.

“Are you okay. Sam?” he asked.

Sam raised an eyebrow but didn’t speak.

Eli frowned. “I understand it’s hard for you to be down here, but I can’t trust you to not try to escape if I was to move you.”

“Yeah, it’s being down here that’s hard,” Sam said sardonically. “It’s not the constant stabbing.”

“I’m sorry for that, too. I can’t help it though.”

“What are you even getting from it?” Sam asked. “Why do you do it? What is it you feel?”

Eli toyed with his blade, turning it in his hand, then he sat down opposite Sam and set it down on his lap. Sam thought for a moment of grabbing it and trying to kill Eli, but he knew he would be too slow. He had barely moved for hours, staying slumped against the wall, and his muscles were stiff from lack of use. He would be stabbed before he could move and Eli would never make the same mistake again. He needed to recreate this situation when he was in better shape, which meant he had to lull Eli into a false sense of security. As hard as it was, he had to wait and prepare himself when he was left alone.

“I feel the grace,” Eli said. “When you’re healed, it is with a rush of grace. I don’t understand how, I don’t understand what you are, but each time I feel it, I feel my home.”

“What are you?” Sam asked. “Where is your home?”

The corner of Eli’s mouth tugged up in a smile. “I think you already know the answer to that, Sam. If you’re still determined to hide that part of your life from me, I will play along. I am an angel. At least I was. I made a mistake many centuries ago, and I have lived with the consequences ever since.”

“What did you do?” Sam asked. He knew Eli hadn’t fallen as Anna had, as he clearly wasn’t human whereas she had been, but the fact he was taking the feeling of home from Sam made him think he was locked out of Heaven somehow. Why angels would kick someone out instead of killing them as Castiel and Uriel had tried to do to Anna he didn’t know though.

“I followed the wrong leader.” He sighed and lifted the blade again, pressing it to his hand. “You
have heard of Lucifer.”

“The devil,” Sam said.

“Not when I knew him,” Eli said. “He was The Morningstar then. When our Father asked us to bow to humanity, we did, but some of us didn’t want to. Disobedience wasn’t a part of our vocabulary though; it had never happened before. But Lucifer refused. You can’t imagine how that felt for us, to see him disobey God’s command. They quarreled and Lucifer was cast out. He was still an angel though, and he spoke to us on angel radio. He told us we didn’t have to obey. He asked us to come with him, to live a different life, one with freedom. I was caught up in the idea. I wasn’t the only one. A handful of us bound ourselves to Lucifer and abandoned Heaven.”

“You Fell,” Sam said.

“To a fashion. For a while, everything was good. Lucifer was an easier father to serve than God. He didn’t expect blind obedience. I thought it was a better way to live. But he began to change. He took a human and corrupted her. This was not the freedom I had Fallen for. I fled. I hid myself, and so I was spared. When Michael banished Lucifer to the Cage, the others that had fallen, those he’d corrupted, were killed. They did not search for me. Perhaps they thought Lucifer had killed me already. I was left to this life.”

“So you’re a fallen angel.”

“There is no word for me as it’s never happened before,” Eli said somberly. “I was an angel at first, but as the centuries passed, I began to change. My blade tarnished and my grace changed, and my state of mind with it. You know what a demon is?”

“A human soul that’s been corrupted by Hell.”

“Yes. I am an angel that has been corrupted by Earth. I have no pure grace anymore, just the dark and bitter trace that I was left with. All I have from before is this blade and my wings, and they’re shameful. You can see that, though, can’t you, Sam?”

“I can’t see your wings,” Sam said, frustration bleeding into his tone. “I’m just a man.”

“A man doesn’t have grace healing every injury.”

“An angel doesn’t use people like a drug to get a hit of home.”

Eli smiled slightly. “I thought you understood. I’m not really an angel anymore. I am lost. I know what I am doing to you doesn’t seem fair, but you can’t imagine what it feels like to be alone the way I am, with nothing of the life you knew before. I had brothers, a family that loved me, and I will never see them again. Do you really blame me for taking a ‘hit of home’ when I find a source?”

Sam remembered how it felt to be in 1978, when he realized he was trapped. He hadn’t had the family he had now back then. He’d just had a burning need to get back to his brother.

“I do understand,” he said. “And I still blame you. I would never do this to someone.”

Eli shrugged and got to his feet. “Then you are better than me.” He grabbed Sam by the throat and dragged him upright and drew back the blade with his right hand. Sam knew what was coming and he knew there was no way to brace himself for it. He stared into Eli’s eyes as he shoved the blade into Sam’s chest. There was something different this time. Eli was more violent that usual; he wasn’t happy to just stab Sam, he wanted to injure him. With his incredible strength, he dragged
the blade across his chest, baring his flesh to the cold air, creating agony. Sam felt ribs break and blood flow slick down his skin, and he wished for unconsciousness.

Suddenly, Eli pulled back and looked around him. “What was that?” he asked.

Sam couldn’t answer. He had fallen to his knees as soon as Eli had released him and he was desperately trying to pull air into his healing lungs. Even as his skin was closing and the wound disappearing, he could feel the burn of his ribs healing. The pain was still unbearable.

“What was it?” he shouted, turning back to Sam.

“What was what?” Sam panted. “You stabbed me, remember? I was distracted.”

“I felt something. A presence. It was home but stronger. What did you do?”

Sam used his already bloody shirt to wipe his chest. “I didn’t do anything.”

“When your ribs broke, I felt it,” he said. “The touch was even more than usual.”

Sam closed his eyes, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

Perhaps because the injury was greater than usual, he thought. Could that have been what Eli felt when his ribs broke?

“I don’t…”

He trailed off as he remembered. His ribs! Castiel had carved the sigils into them, making him invisible to an angel’s searching sight. Those sigils were what blocked Anna from being able to find him.


“Nothing,” Sam lied.

“You were going to say something.”

“I was going to say I didn’t know, but the damn great slash you cut into my chest cavity was healing at the time, so I was a little distracted.”

Eli’s lips pressed together in a thin line. “I don’t believe you.”

Sam shrugged. He needed Eli to go so he could reach out to Anna. He had a plan now, and he wanted to put it in motion before Eli decided to take his next fix.

He let himself sink down to lay on the floor as if he didn’t have the strength to hold himself upright anymore, when in fact he was feeling energized and alive for the first time since Eli took him.

“I need to sleep,” he slurred.

Eli glared down at him and then turned on his heel and walked up the stairs and through the door. Sam waited with his eyes closed until he thought it had been long enough for Eli to get away from the door, and then he spoke in a whisper.

“Anna, I have a plan. I need you to be searching for me hard. I am going to be traceable soon, but it won’t last long, so you have to come as soon as you feel it. Please, Anna. I can’t…” He stopped himself before he could finish the sentence.
She didn’t need to know he couldn’t take it much longer without losing his mind.

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For the first time, Sam was eager for Eli to come back and hurt him. He had whispered to Anna many times since Eli had left him, wanting to make sure she got the message and was ready to act. He imagined her now, waiting with her blade in hand, ready to rescue him. He wondered whether she would tell George and Missouri what was happening. He hoped so; he had asked her to reassure them that he was okay, that he was working his way back to them.

When he heard the bolts disengage, he got to his feet and prepared himself as best he could. For once, he wanted the injury to be as bad as it could be, and he thought he knew how he was going to make that happen.

Eli came down the stairs, his eyes fixed on Sam with longing. Sam moved to the middle of the room and fixed a glare on the fallen angel.

“This is unexpected,” Eli said. “Are you feeling better today, Sam?”

Sam clenched his fist and braced himself. “I am feeling amused,” he said.

Eli looked interested. “You are? Why is that?”

“Because of you. I am finally ready to tell you my secret.” He sneered at him. “I do know who I am, and I know who you are. I knew before you shared your sob story. Your story is known by all angels. It’s bandied about on angel radio as a cautionary tale and joke.”

Eli frowned. “And how would you know that?”

“I hear angel radio, of course,” Sam said.

“What are you?”

Sam smiled. “The fact you haven’t worked it out proves all the stories true. You’re too stupid to see, just as they said you were.”

Eli’s blade dropped into his hand and Sam knew the moment he needed was approaching.

“Unlike you, I hear angel radio,” Sam said smugly. “I am a nephilim.”

“An abomination?” Eli said quietly. “You can’t be.”

“Really? Know many, do you? You can’t because I am the only one. Why do I have grace? Why can’t you see my wings? I am not an angel, you know that, so what am I?” He laughed and then dealt what he hoped would be the killing blow. “I can see your wings, Eli, and they’re a monstrosity. Look what you did to yourself. I’ve never seen anything so pathetic. They told me you were a travesty of an angel, but even that didn’t prepare me. You’re nothing anymore. No wonder you need to use me to feel home. You have lost everything else that makes you divine.”

Eli’s face twisted with anger and he came at Sam with the blade outstretched, not even reaching for him to feel the grace. He just wanted to hurt.

“Go on!” Sam shouted. “Make yourself feel powerful! Hurt me and touch the grace you will never have for yourself again!”

The blade entered below Sam’s left shoulder and slashed down to his right side, tearing flesh and
breaking bone. Sam had never felt pain like it, and he thought he had to lose consciousness from the agony, so he used his last vestige of strength to shout for help.

“Anna!”

Eli slammed a hand to his throat and squeezed. “I will kill you!” he bellowed.

Sam felt panic as his body tried to draw air that was impossible to take. He screamed out in his mind for help as he felt the burn of healing. Anna had seconds to find him, and she wasn’t there yet.

Suddenly there was the crack of a gun and Eli jerked and released Sam. Sam bowed over, his eyes watering, and only found the strength to look up when he heard the most unexpected voice: Missouri’s.

“Get your hands off of him!”

She was livid. As Sam straightened up slowly, he saw that she was standing across from Eli with Sam’s own Taurus held in front of her, aimed at Eli.

Sam had known she used to hunt, but he had never been able to picture it before. She was almost frightening with her face twisted with fury and the gleam in her eyes that told him she would shoot without a moment’s hesitation.

Almost as shocking was George. He was standing with his legs spread and a machete in his hand. For the first time in a long time, there was no sign of pain on his face. He stood tall and proud, the virile hunter Sam had first met two decades ago.

Anna stood between them, her angel blade gleaming in her hand, and she looked shocked. “Elias,” she said. “How?”

“Anna,” he said, and there was more than shock in his voice. He sounded awed by happiness. Sam supposed that, after having lived millennia without seeing another angel, it was incredible to be suddenly facing someone that had been his sister.

“Kill him, Anna,” Sam growled.

George walked forward, his machete raised, and Anna seemed to come out of her stupor. She advanced on Eli who backed up.

“Kill him!” Sam shouted now, terrified he would disappear before she cast the killing blow.

Anna’s eyes snapped from Sam to Eli and then she acted. It was too fast for Sam to follow, but one moment Eli was edging backwards, and the next Anna had plunged the blade through his throat so it pierced the back of his neck.

Sam expected a lightshow of some sort as he died, but it was an almost human end. Anticlimactically. As Anna dragged back the blade, Eli fell to the floor and smudged shadows of tattered wings spread beneath him. Sam could tell he had hit the mark when he said Eli’s wings were pathetic. If the shadows were a true representation, they were ruined.

As the reality of Eli’s death settled over him, Sam staggered back against the wall and slid down to the floor.

Missouri rushed at him, “Oh god, Sam,” she moaned. “Look at you.”
“I’m fine,” Sam said. “What are you doing here? You could have been killed.” He looked up at Anna who stood back from them, staring down at Eli’s body. “Why did you bring them?”

Anna smiled. “I didn’t plan it this way, believe me. They were insistent though.”

“And you couldn’t just have left them behind anyway?”

“No. I thought they deserved to come.”

Sam sighed. He couldn’t work out her logic, and he was pissed she’d risked his family like this, but his relief to be free overwhelmed it.

He looked down at his blood-coated chest and stained clothes. He looked a mess. No wonder Missouri looked horrified. Even George, still standing tall, looked stricken, and he wasn’t a man to show emotions easily.

“Thanks, Anna, really,” he said, both in response to her words and what she had done.

Missouri held his arm as he struggled to his feet and then he felt the disconnect of being shifted through space. As he left that dirty basement behind, coated with his own blood and exhausted, he felt a wave of relief.

It was over.

xXx

Sam had showered and changed into sleep clothes as soon as Anna had brought him home. Now he was sitting on his couch with a glass of whiskey in his hand and Missouri pressed close to his side.

“How long was I gone?” he asked.

“Almost three weeks,” Missouri said.

It had felt longer to Sam, but he supposed the systematic torture of anticipating being attacked as well as the actual attacks would add hours to any day.

“Did James notice?” he asked.

“Yes. I told him you were on a retreat in the desert without cell service.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “And he believed that?”

“He thinks I’m very honest,” Missouri said sadly. “I play my part well.”

“You are honest,” Sam said. “You only lie to protect him.”

She nodded, though she still looked upset.

“What happened on this end?”

“Anna came to us with your duffel and gun and said you had been taken,” George said. “We did what we could to find you, but without your face known to any other hunters, we were limited.”

“I searched,” Anna said. “Without knowing who or what had you, I was limited, too, but I did look.”
Sam smiled at her. “Thanks.”

“When I heard your prayer, I stopped,” she said. “I waited for you to appear to my senses again. When you did, we came.”

“Who was that man?” Missouri asked. “You called him Elias, Anna.”

“He was an angel once,” Anna said. “He was one of the handful that Fell when Lucifer was cast out. Some supported him. They were all killed when Michael banished Lucifer to the Cage, but Elias wasn’t there. We believed he had been killed already. Did he tell you more, Sam?”

“He didn’t like it when Lucifer made Lilith. He ran away then and had been hiding ever since.”

“What did he want with you though, Sam?” George asked.

Sam sipped his whiskey, taking a minute before answering. “He wanted the grace. Whatever Michael did to make me immortal involves grace somehow. Eli lost his after he Fell and… He wanted to touch home. I think he regretted the choice he made and when I was healing, he could sense the grace.”

“When you were healing?” Missouri said shrewdly. “How were you hurt?”

Sam wasn’t sure whether to answer honestly. He didn’t want to upset Missouri but to lie to her seemed wrong. She was always honest with him.

“Sam,” she prompted.

“He would stab me so he could touch me while I healed,” he said regretfully.

Missouri sucked in a breath and George scowled. Anna merely looked as though she had already guessed the answer.

“It’s okay though,” he said bracingly. “I’m fine now.”

“Are you?” George asked.

“Yes,” Sam said.

And he was. He suffered under Eli’s hands, and he’d been scared, but he’d been through worse in his time since 1978. It wasn’t as hard as losing his mother or saying goodbye to Dean. It wasn’t even as bad as talking to his father on the phone. Those were emotionally painful, metaphorical knives to the heart. He had suffered with a literal knife to the heart for weeks, but that he could handle. It was just pain. He was stronger than the suffering.

Michael had trapped him in 1978 to break him, to make him prey for Lucifer and an easier target for their battle. Sam had lived through a lot since then, he had suffered immensely, but he was still strong. He wasn’t going to break. He was going to come out of this stronger.

“I’m sorry we didn’t find you sooner,” Anna said.

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “I’m fine now.”

Missouri wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder. Sam rested his face against her hair and smiled. He was fine. He was back with his family and Eli was dead. He would call James the next day and tell him all about his desert retreat, and he would smile while he did it.
Sure, it had been hard, but he was back thanks to Anna, and he was stronger than before because of it.

He was fine.
This chapter – and the following four – deal with the September 11th attacks on America, the World Trade Center specifically. If this is not a topic you feel comfortable reading, it’s best to come back for Chapter 56 when we’ll move on from these events.

The thing that struck Sam the most was how normal it was. The sky was an almost cloudless blue and the air was warm. It was a beautiful September Tuesday in New York.

He felt hot in his suit. He wasn’t used to wearing a one anymore; it was a rare occurrence that he wore a suit for a hunt these days. This one was new. He’d gone to a tailor in the city to have it made so he could give the right impression for his cover.

He had a meeting arranged for nine-thirty with Morgan Stanley to discuss his investment plan. It was the first time he’d ever used the influence of his money for something. Most of the time he behaved as he always had. Missouri didn’t show it either. She’d made sure James had enough money for the essentials when he was in college, and he’d never wanted for anything, but she’d made sure he wasn’t spoiled. He had a paper route when he was old enough and he’d worked at the multiplex when he was in high school. Few people that knew them had any idea just how much money they’d earned over the years playing the stock market.

Sam wasn’t hiding it today though. He wore the custom-made suit and shoes, and he carried a Dunhill briefcase. His beard and hair had been treated to a barbershop trim. He had checked into the Four Seasons and he’d been driven over in a chauffeur-driven Bentley. He looked like what he was: a wealthy man. Uncomfortable as it made him, there was a reason for it. Sam’s meeting today was in the South Tower of the World Trade Center.

Even thinking the name felt strange to him. It was only going to be the World Trade Center for a few more hours and then it would become Ground Zero, a place known the world over as the scene of one of the greatest tragedies to ever occur in the United States.

Missouri had told him not to come. She didn’t want him to witness the horror he’d warned her about. George hadn’t tried to persuade him in either direction. As much as he wanted to spare Sam from this, he understood why Sam had to come. He could do nothing to prevent this tragedy, but he could be there to help people after.

Sam was there now though, and he had to forget George and Missouri for a while and concentrate on what was happening. He needed to be present more than ever before.

The street was louder than Sam thought it would be. He’d only ever been into New York a few times in his life, the most memorable time being when he and Dean were kids and they’d persuaded John to bring them into the city. That visit had ended with Dean sneaking into the CBGB and the ride out of the city being spent in tense silence. Sam had known his father was mad because Dean had snuck out and gone to a concert, and he’d been mad, too, that Dean hadn’t taken him with him. Dean had always seemed to do the fun stuff in those days.
There were a lot of people on Greenwich street. Some were walking the New Yorker hustle, avoiding other people’s eyes, focused wholly on what they were doing; perhaps some of them were heading into the towers for work; maybe they had appointments like Sam. Others were obviously tourists. They had fanny packs around their waists and large cameras in their hands. They stopped in the middle of the flow of human traffic to snap pictures, drawing irritated sounds from the New Yorkers trying to go about their days.

Sam dodged around them and walked to the Starbucks a little along the street. He wanted to stop for a coffee, one last moment of normal, before the worst came. There was less than an hour to go until the first plane would hit, and Sam was telling himself to appreciate America, the world, before it changed.

He joined the queue behind two women in business suits. One was perusing the front page of the New York Times. Joe Biden was pictured and the headline declared a war of words between him and George Bush over antimissile defense. Sam knew what the headlines would be the next day, how this dispute would be forgotten as the country came together in shock and mourning.

The queue moved along and Sam took a step forward, trying to keep a hold of himself. It felt impossible though, as he alone of all of the millions of people in the city knew what was coming. He had seen it before from a distance. Now he was going to live it.

He got to the counter and put in his order. He paid and moved along to the counter to collect his drink. The woman reading the newspaper ahead of him took her paper cup and Sam took her place, watching her walk away. A part of him hoped she was going somewhere other than the towers today, that she would escape, but that thought made him feel guilty. Was her life worth more because Sam had seen her before it happened? Did she count for more because Sam knew her coffee order and that she read the New York Times? Of course she didn’t. She was a person like any of the 2,700 people that were going to die in the towers. The only person in New York that could say with certainty that they were going to live through the next twenty-four hours was Sam. Everyone else was a possible victim.

Sam’s order was called out and he took his drink and carried on along the street. It was time to go inside, he knew, but he was afraid of it. He was going to become a part of it the minute he stepped inside the tower, and though he had no fear for himself physically, he was scared of what he was going to see. No hunt he had taken in his life would prepare him for this. The LA Riots were next to nothing in terms of the suffering he was about to see. He had to do it though. He could save lives.

With a sense of foreboding, he walked through the glass doors and into the lobby of the South Tower. People were milling around, and Sam walked through them to the elevators, thinking that perhaps these people, here on the first floor, would be among the lucky ones that escaped.

He stepped into a car with a group of others and hit the button for the sky lobby where he would need to change elevators. Musac played on the discreet speakers, and Sam marveled at the normalcy of it. This was any other day in the towers, except it wasn’t; a monster unlike any other Sam had faced was coming.

He changed elevators in the sky lobby and carried on upwards. His appointment was on the seventy-fourth floor, the appointment he would never keep, and he stepped out and into another lobby area.

The windows were large and they gave Sam a spectacular view out over the north-west of the city. Sam could see the North Tower standing proud opposite them. Sam turned away from the sight and took a seat on a couch and sipped his coffee. He was too early to check in for his meeting, even if it
hadn’t been a ruse, and his spot was close to the staircase and entrance to the Morgan Stanley offices. He was positioned to help people in the immediate aftermath.

A woman came and sat opposite him and pulled a pair of black heels out of her canvas bag. She toed off the sneakers she was wearing and replaced them with the heels. Sam remembered Jessica suddenly. She would wear incredible heels when they went out together, but the first thing she did when they got home was kick them off and complain about how uncomfortable they were. Thinking about her on this day in this place made him wonder where she was now. How would the news reach her of what had happened?

The first time Sam had lived through these days, he’d been a senior at a school in West Virginia. He’d been in his second class of the day, English, and the school secretary had rushed into the room and whispered to the teacher. He had been an older man, and Sam had thought he was a dick with his strict rules and propensity tolecture at them rather than engage and teach. He had stood from his desk that day and told them that there had been an incident in New York—an airplane had hit the World Trade Center. There had been a beat of absolute silence and then people had begun to react. Some asked each other questions while others just spoke their disbelief. Sam had been frozen. He was prepared for supernatural dangers and attacks, but this was so human, an accident. At least that was what they had believed at the time. It was later that terrorism became part of it.

They were instructed to leave their belongings where they were and go to the auditorium. Sam had slipped his cell into his pocket and filed out after the rest of his class and walked through the halls to the auditorium. Other kids joined them there and they were directed to sit as the principal stood on the stage, waiting for them to be seated. When they had, he said, “The world is watching New York, and the administration and I have decided we should join them. He had pressed a button on a TV and every eye had fixed on the image of the burning tower that filled the screen.

Sam had sat with his breath held, watching the horror unfold. He had been one of the people that had shouted out in shock as the second plane came into view. He’d watched the collision and he’d known, even then, that the world as he’d known it was changed forever.

Thirty minutes later, his phone had rang and the terse voice of his father had said, “We’re outside. Come now.”

Sam had stood from his seat and, ignoring the commands for him to come back and sit down, he had walked out of the auditorium and through the halls to the exit.

The sleek black Impala was parked on the street outside the school boundaries, and Dean and John were standing beside it. At the sight of him, Dean had run forward and dragged him into his arms. Sam had let himself be held, not feeling like the adult he so desperately wanted to be treated as at that time but a child. Dean had released him and patted his cheek. “You okay, little brother?”

Sam started to nod and then he faltered. “Not really,” he said.

“Me either,” Dean said. “Come on. Dad’s getting us out of here.”

Sam walked with him to the car where John was standing, and he looked into his father’s eyes. It had been the time in which they’d been butting heads on a regular basis—Sam’s need for a normal life coming against his father’s need to protect—but in that moment, John was just a father in shock like the rest of America. He walked to Sam, embraced him quickly and said, “Let’s get you out of here.”

For once, Sam hadn’t argued.
Somewhere out there Sam was in English class, and the world was a familiar place to him still. Here and now he was a scared man that knew what was coming and wanted to flee from it but couldn’t. What kind of man would he be if he didn’t do his best for the people here?

He checked his watch and looked out of the window again. It was soon. The plane was already approaching.

“It’s a hell of a view, isn’t it?”

Sam turned toward the voice and saw the woman that had been changing shoes looking at him.

“It’s incredible,” Sam said.

She smiled. “Best view on a commute there is.”

“You work here?” Sam asked.

“Morgan Stanley,” she said with a nod, holding out her hand. “Nina Loren.”

He shook her hand. “Sam Taylor. I’m here for a meeting.”

“In that case enjoy the view while you’re here, Sam,” she said.

“I will,” Sam said, smiling. “Thank you, Nina.”

She waved to him as she walked away and through the double doors of the offices. Sam watched her go, his heart aching. She was Nina. She worked for Morgan Stanley. She wore Skechers sneakers to walk to work before swapping them out for heels, and she appreciated the view. She was a person to him now, and she was here on this day. Would she make it out alive? This building was full of people like her, people with lives he knew nothing about, and they wouldn’t all make it out.

He wanted to flee. He wanted to run from the building until he was so far away he wouldn’t even see the dust that would billow as the buildings fell. He didn’t want to be here. He had to be here. He was a part of this. He had to save as many as he could. He had to make it count. This fear, this sickness, was his penance for what he had done in his life.

“Hey, look at that,” someone said, and Sam’s attention snapped to the window again. The first plane was coming. Sam saw the wing disappear behind the corner of the North Tower. It was close enough that Sam could clearly see the American Airlines logo on the tail. It was suddenly very real, what was coming, and Sam swallowed hard.

“Whoa, that’s low,” someone else said.

“It’s going to hit!”

Sam squeezed his eyes shut and turned away from the window.

The sound was unlike anything Sam had ever heard in his life: a roar and then a booming that pressed in against his ears. People screamed and Sam was jostled. He reached out to steady himself against the window, and his eyes snapped open as he registered the heat. The glass was hot, as was his face. The fire that was exploding out of the North Tower was spilling its heat at them.

There was paper falling through the air, some of it was burning, but other pieces were just falling down like ticker tape at a parade. Sam wondered what was on those papers. Had they been
important contracts and plans that people had labored over or were they spare sheets for the copier? It was a stupid thing to think at the time, but even with his foreknowledge, Sam was in shock. Debris was falling, too. It whipped past too fast for Sam to make sense of what it was, but he thought of the people below, wondering where it would land.

“What was that?” someone asked behind him.

“A plane,” a stunned voice replied. “I saw a plane. It hit Tower One.”

Sam forced himself to look up and he saw the enormous hole in the building that was spilling smoke and fire. The sight seemed to jerk him back to himself. He needed to act. He had chosen the South Tower because it would fall first and he thought he would be able to help more getting people out early than he would in the North Tower. The only floors between him and the floor the plane would hit in just over fifteen minutes were two mechanical floors. The people he had a chance of helping were here.

Sam snapped to attention and raised his voice above the clamor of noise. “Everybody out!”

Some people looked at him, seeming confused, and others scared.

“It hit the other tower,” a man said. “We’re safe here.”

“You’re not,” Sam said. “Get out now!”

Even as he said it, people began to spill out of the doors to the Morgan Stanley offices.

“Use the stairs,” Sam shouted at them. “Don’t go to the elevators.”

“We’re on the seventy-fourth floor,” a young woman said.

“Trust me,” Sam said. “Use the stairs.”

Other voices were added to his as more and more people came out of the offices. There was a man shouting above the voices. “Stay calm and walk carefully. Go down the stairs.”

Sam looked at the man, dressed in a suit and red tie, and felt a wave of relief. He had forgotten it wasn’t just him trying to save. The media had been full of stories of heroism, people that had stayed to see their friends and co-workers get to safety before they had left themselves. Many of them didn’t make it out because they had stayed to save others. They were real heroes.

People continued to spill out, and Sam watched them file away. There was no real panic. People were treating it like a drill. It was the best way to react. Only Sam wanted to make them run, get out faster, save themselves, even though he knew that was the worst thing they could do. Only Sam knew what was really coming for them, flying through the sky toward them like a missile.

For a moment, Sam was torn, unsure of whether to stay and continue to persuade people to leave or to move on to another floor. He realized this floor was already in motion. They had someone taking care of them. He wasn’t needed. There were seventy-three floors below that needed help.

He joined the people on the way to the stairs and allowed himself to be carried along in the flow. It was crowded but calm. People were moving along carefully. Sam had expected chaos, but people were doing the right thing. He knew chaos would come later.

He was down many floors when he saw an opening to get out of the staircase. He pushed out of the flow and through a door of people queued to access the stairs. There were people talking in the
lobby, talking as they had been upstairs, but a man and woman were directing them to the staircases and advising them as the man upstairs had.

As Sam stopped and looked around, the PA speaker above them crackled to life and a slightly strained voice said, “This is the Port Authority Buildings Association. There is a contained fire in Tower One. The emergency services are attending. There is no need to evacuate Tower Two. I repeat, no need to evacuate. Return to your desks for the safety of all.”

People stopped where they stood and began to discuss what was said. The stream of movement leading toward the staircases stopped.

“Ignore it,” the woman directing people shouted over them. “Evacuate. A day’s missed paycheck is nothing as long as you’re all safe.”

People seemed to absorb what she was saying, and they began to walk to the stairs again.

Sam went to the woman that seemed to be in charge and asked, “Is everyone moving?”

She shook her head. “Some won’t leave their desks, and there’s a meeting in the Culvert Suite that haven’t come out yet.”

“Culvert suite?” Sam asked.

“Far end of the hall,” she said.

Sam thanked her and rushed into the offices. The reception desk was empty and Sam ran past it to the room at the end of the hall. It had double frosted glass doors with decals declaring it the Culvert Suite. Sam pulled open the doors and went inside.

Around a long mahogany table sat thirteen men and women. At the top of the table was an older man with grey hair and a weathered face. He looked at Sam and Sam felt he was being sized up; the quality of his suit being compared to the length of his hair. “Can I help you?” he asked.

“You need to get out,” Sam said, raising his voice above the tannoy that was repeating its call for people to remain.

“It seems not everyone agrees with you,” the man said, drawing a few laughs from the men and women around the table.

“It doesn’t matter,” Sam said, glancing at his watch, there were only minutes until the second plane hit. “You need to get out of here.” When they still looked unconvinced, he spoke impassioned. “There is nothing important enough to make you stay in this building. No deal or decision you make today is going to count for anything tomorrow after what’s happened to Tower One. It’s all meaningless. If there is anyone in the world that you love waiting for you, needing you to be safe, get out of here now.”

The man stared him down and Sam implored him with his eyes to understand. He needed them to get out.

“Very well,” he said. “Ladies and gentlemen, this meeting is adjourned. We are evacuating.”

As if was any other day and the meeting had come to its natural completion, they closed notepads, screwed the caps on pens, and began to put their belongings into bags. Sam watched as they stood and began to file from the room. The man that had sat at the head of the table walked to Sam and then stopped.
“You have either just made a grave mistake or helped us greatly,” he said. “I don’t know which.”

“Believe me, I’ve helped,” Sam said.

He followed them out of the room and back towards the stairs. He checked his watch again. It was close now. The plane would be in sight, visible from the south windows.

He had just reached the receptionist desk when he heard the roar of a plane approaching.

It was time.

Chapter End Notes

So… Here we go. I was very nervous about covering these events, and I spoke to Gredelina and Jenjoremy about it first, but it was agreed between us all that there is no way to cover these years without these events. And there is no way Sam wouldn’t be there. He would want to help who he could.

I can only relate to how the world felt about that day. I’m a Brit so I can’t empathize with America about how it felt for you as I’ve never experienced what you did. I have done my best to be as respectful as I could with this sensitive subject, but I’m not perfect. I can only hope I don’t offend.

Until next time…
Clowns or Midgets xxx
Chapter Fifty-two

Through the noise of the room and the plane looming, Sam heard one voice clearly. It was a man, and he spoke with a strong Texan accent. “What the hell is that?”

Sam started to answer with a warning, he wanted to tell people to brace themselves, but it was too late. That was the moment the plane hit.

The noise was incredible. It pressed in at Sam, forcing the air from his lungs. He had never heard anything to compare it to. It chilled him to the bone and in that moment of terror, he knew that he was going to die. Michael’s protection was nothing compared to this threat. He would be brought back, he knew, but he would die. They were all going to die. No one could survive this.

The whole building shook as if caught in an earthquake. Sam had been in California once as a child when an earthquake hit. He had been terrified as the room shook, only Dean’s presence had saved him from outright panic, but that was nothing compared to this.

Sam grappled for something to hold on to, and his fingers caught the edge of the reception desk. He clung to it for dear life, his eyes squeezed shut and his heart pounding in his chest. He sucked in shaky, choking breaths.

There was an enormous thud and Sam’s hard-won breaths were knocked out of him again. He guessed it was the fuel exploding above him.

The floor seemed to sink beneath his feet, and the desk he was gripping began to move towards him. Instinctually, Sam let go of it and threw himself backward. He hit the floor hard and something fell on his chest, causing a searing pain that Sam guessed was broken ribs.

_The building is coming down!_ he thought. _I was wrong about how long it would take. It’s happening now!_

He was going to be trapped under the rubble until the angels came for him. That thought scared him more than the idea of outright death.

He could hear no screams over the roar of the impact, but he felt the fear in the place as if it was a tangible thing. He could taste it in his mouth, he could feel its grasping hands against his skin, it whispered in his ears. He cried out wordlessly.

Suddenly, the floor stilled. The sinking had stopped. Other sounds returned to him, screams and shouts. People were crying out for friends and family, for help. One man was shouting for his mother. Sam didn’t know whether she was in the building, too, or if he was just reacting to the instinctual need for the most basic comfort.

Sam had no mother to cry for, he had no one there at all, but he called for comfort anyway. “Dean,” he rasped. “Dean, help.”
For a moment he lay there, waiting for rescue to come, for Dean to do what he always did, before the sounds around him penetrated him. Dean couldn’t come. He wasn’t here. He was in West Virginia with John, probably watching this nightmare unfold, not knowing Sam was here.

Reason caught up to him. Sam hadn’t come here to be saved. He had come to do the saving. He was here to help people, and that meant he had to get off of the floor and do something. He was unhurt, Michael had seen to that, but he was possibly the only one. This floor, this building, was full of people that had no protection like he had.

He got slowly to his feet and took a breath of the dusty air. He allowed himself a second to gather himself and then he looked around. The floor was littered with unmoving people. A foot from Sam was a woman lying perfectly still with her eyes closed. Sam bent down and pressed his fingers to her throat, searching for a sign of life. There was none. Sam could see no sign of injury at all, she seemed perfect, but she was dead. Something inside her had been destroyed.

Sam moved on to the next person, a man lying on his stomach. He turned him but knew without checking for a pulse that he was gone. His injuries were catastrophic. The glass doors had broken and spread their killing shards everywhere.

The injured that had kept their feet and the lucky uninjured were at the stairs, waiting their turn to escape. They weren’t shoving their way forward. It was almost calm. Sam looked around for someone to help, needing to help, and saw the man that had chaired the meeting Sam had evacuated. He was sitting on the floor leaning against a wall. Sam could see no blood or outward injury, but he was pale and sweating. Sam walked quickly to him and squatted in front of him.

The man looked up at him and his lips quirked into a smile. “Hello again.”

“Are you hurt?” Sam asked.

“I believe I am, yes; I can’t seem to move properly.”

Sam reached for him, planning to get him up and out, but the man shook his head.

“No, I’m better here, I think. I shouldn’t get in the way.”

Sam just looked at him stunned. He sounded accepting, calm, as if the fact of his situation was of little concern to him.

“You have to get out,” Sam said. “This building is going to come down.”

“I think it’s too late for me. You should find someone else to help.”

Sam just frowned at him, then it sank in: this man was willing to give up his chance of escape for someone else. And there were so many. Around him, floors above him, people were already dead. Others were trapped. If this man had decided to make his last act one of sacrifice, Sam had to accept it and move on to someone that needed him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, standing up again.

“You did your best,” he said, looking past Sam. “Perhaps you could help her.”

Sam looked around and saw a woman standing by the fallen desk. She was staring down at her hands that were clasped in prayer. Her lips moved rapidly, but Sam couldn’t hear what she was saying. Tears were slipping down her cheeks, but she didn’t move to the stairs.
Sam rushed to her and said, “You have to get out. The staircase. Now.”

She didn’t even look at him, and when he grabbed her shoulders and shook her, she jostled but continued her silent litany.

Sam felt helpless. He looked around him for someone to help her, but the only people he could see were past helping or helping themselves already. “Come with me!” he snapped, taking her hand and towing her to the door that led to the stairs. She moved with him but didn’t speak still. Sam glanced back and saw the man leaning against the wall watching him. He nodded once, and Sam thought it looked like approval.

Sam wanted to go to him, to ease the end for him, but he realized he couldn’t. When he had taken that woman’s hand, he had accepted responsibility for her life. Her fate was his burden now.

He had come to the towers on this day as part of some grand plan to save lives. He’d plotted it out. He’d worn layers so that he could use his clothes as dressings for the injured and imagined how he would create a safe space for them. He had thought he would make a difference. He had been wrong. He couldn’t save them all. That wasn’t his job. He was here to help one person, this woman. He was supposed to get her out.

He lifted her chin so that he could look her in the eye and said, “I am Sam Winchester, and we’re getting out. Do you understand?”

Something seemed to spark in her eyes, though she didn’t speak. She nodded once, and her hand in his tightened.

Sam realized he had told her he was a Winchester. He hadn’t used his real name since Berlin. He had told everyone he was Sam Taylor, and that name had become his. He was only ever Winchester in his heart now. But it felt right that she knew the real him. He was going to save her as who he really was, not a man pretending.

With the woman held at his side, Sam got into the staircase, and he joined the people walking down. The first thing that struck him was that there weren’t enough people there. There were floors full of people above them, hundreds, but too few were coming down. They were trapped or already dead.

Water was streaming from the ceiling where pipes had burst, but it wasn’t enough to disperse the smoke that was funneling down from the upper levels. It clouded Sam’s eyes and scratched his throat. He wanted to cover his mouth, but he knew there was no need. He would be uncomfortable but there would be no physical damage to him. He was protected. The woman with him needed protecting though.

When they came to the next level there was a space of a few meters where the stairs turned and went in the other direction. Sam pulled the woman to the corner and stripped off his jacket and shirt, leaving himself in a white undershirt. He tied his jacket around his waist in case he needed it later and explained to the woman, “We’re going to tie this around your face. It will help with the smoke, okay?”

She nodded and stood still as Sam carefully tied his outer shirt around her head, tight enough to stay in place but not so tight it would restrict her breathing. Sam adjusted it so her nose was covered and then took her hand again and led her to the next staircase.

It was quieter here than on their floor, but there was one common theme among most of the voices. Sam could only hear one side of their conversations as they were on their cell phones. People were
reassuring others, friends and family, and others were expressing love. They were the ones that
made Sam’s throat swell closed as he knew people were preparing their loved ones for a final
goodbye. They were aware than they might not make it out.

Sam wondered how it must feel to be on the other end of one of those calls. How did you cope
when your loved one was far away and facing something like this? What words of comfort could
you offer them? How did you express your love with enough emphasis without them knowing you
were saying goodbye, too? Sam couldn’t imagine how they felt.

Just as Sam had the first time, most people experienced 9/11 through the medium of a television.
They watched it unfold and were shocked but distanced from it. How could you cope if you were
watching the screen and knowing someone you loved was there? What kind of strength did it take
to not break from that?

A woman beside him was clearly talking to a child, and the words she spoke were breaking Sam’s
heart. “Momma loves you, Katie. Momma loves you and Daddy and Jamie.”

Sam felt tears drip down his face that the knowledge that this woman would probably make it out
couldn’t staunch.

He checked his watch. They had less than half an hour to get out. They needed to be faster. That
was complicated when they reached the thirty-seventh floor, as people were slowing. As they had
descended, more people had joined the flow, but now it was as if they were fighting against
something. What it was became clear as they reached the level of the thirty-fifth floor and Sam
saw yellow helmets above the heads of people in front of them. The firefighters were on their way
up.

The sight of them choked the breath out of Sam’s lungs. They were ascending a staircase towards
something everyone else was fleeing, going to a literal hell to save lives that they couldn’t save and
a fire they couldn’t fight. Sam wondered if they knew. As they passed him, he saw that they did.
The knowledge was in their eyes, though they spoke easily to the people they passed, sharing their
strength.

“Keep going, guys. We can make it up, so you can make it down,” one said, and another added,
“Nice and calm, that’s it.”

Sam wanted to say something to them but he was without words. He just watched them pass. One
man, younger than James, coming at the rear of the flow of heroes caught Sam’s eye and smiled
slightly, a gesture of reassurance. The fact he was reassuring Sam while knowing what he was
heading into was the worst of the horrors Sam had already experienced that day.

They passed, and the way became clearer for a while until they reached the next floor. A
bottleneck of people had formed. Sam looked over the heads and saw an elderly woman being
helped down by two large men. They were encouraging her as they walked, and she moved with
her head held high. Sam knew he wasn’t going to be able to pass her and keep hold of the woman
with him, so he stopped and said, “We’re going to have to change it up. I want you to walk behind
me and hold onto my shoulders. Whatever happens, don’t let go, understand?”

She nodded quickly, her eyes afraid.

Sam stepped in front of her and felt her hands on his shoulders, gripping the cotton of his
undershirt. Confident she had a good hold of him, Sam started forward again. They reached the
woman and her helpers, and Sam stopped a moment to look at the closest man. “Do you need
help?” he asked, and he heard the woman behind him gasp.
“No, we’ve got it,” he said. “Looks like you’ve already got something you need to be doing.”

Sam nodded and patted the hand gripping his shoulder. They squeezed past them and carried on down the stairs. When they came to a level area, Sam said, “Flat, flat, flat, and down again,” to warn the woman.

His foot kicked something, and he glanced down and saw a purse on the floor. As he looked, he noticed other things. A single red high-heeled shoe, a jacket, a laptop bag. People were shedding the things that they had carried this far, making their exit easier. He thought for a moment of moving the things away, but he realized that would slow him down, slow the flight of each person behind him. He just said, “Mind your step. There’s stuff on the floor,” and carried on.

When they reached a certain point, people seemed to be moving faster. Sam looked up they reached the next level and saw a number painted on the wall. He breathed a gust of relief. They had reached the second floor at last. They were finally close to the exit.

“Look,” he said loudly. “We’re almost out.”

The hands on his shoulders tightened in response.

Sam kept his footsteps steady so she could keep pace with him, and people brushed past them. Sam understood their need. He wanted to run for the exit, too.

When their steps leveled out and Sam heard the rush of noise ahead of him, Sam almost let himself smile. They’d made it. He was getting her out. But hundreds more wouldn’t.

They walked into the vast lobby that was crowded with people. There were police and firefighters; some were speaking into walkie talkies while others were guiding people away from the stairs to allow the free flow of people.

Sam led the woman to the exit where a firefighter was standing with his arms raised and speaking loudly.

“There’s debris falling out there, so wait for my command and then run, understand? Don’t wait around to watch. Get yourselves as far away as you can. It’s not safe here. Don’t look up.”

He turned back and Sam saw a second firefighter give them the thumbs up from just outside.

“Go, go, go!” the fireman called to them.

Gripping the woman’s hand tightly, Sam ran at the door. Sam fled outside into the fresh air and then almost stopped stunned, only making himself move on by reminding himself that he wasn’t the only one he needed to think of. He glanced at his watch. There were only minutes to go.

He had seen a lot in his life, awful things, but he had never been in a warzone before, and that’s what this was. There was debris, blood and bodies spread on the ground. Sam looked at the bodies and remembered images from that day that had haunted him for a long time. People falling through the sky toward the ground, having fled the scorching heat of the upper floors. He remembered the iconic pair that had jumped hand in hand. Some of the falling debris they were talking about were people jumping to their deaths.

People were running around, some EMTs, firefighters and police, but others were civilians trying to help and escape in equal measure. Sam dragged the woman forward across what had been a busy street before it was coated with bodies and debris, and to the street beyond. She stumbled, and Sam turned and picked her up into his arms without a word. Carrying her bridal style, Sam ran at the
street opposite him, passing countless people. He shouted at them to get away as he ran but didn’t stop to see if they listened. He had a clear mission: save the woman in his arms. To try anything else was to risk her and his goal.

He ran as fast as he could. People were standing along the streets, staring up at the buildings. People were filming it on camcorders. Others were on their phones. They all wore identical expressions of horror.

The woman in his arms was crying now. Sam didn’t know whether it was relief at their escape or the next stage of shock reaching her. He understood the desire. He wanted to cry, to allow himself some release, too.

He saw a café with its door open and a man in a blue apron standing outside. “Look!” he shouted suddenly as a rumble began behind them.

Sam turned in spite of himself and saw the sight he had seen on news reports and tv shows more times than he could count. It was happening. With a cloud of smoke at the highest levels that seems to pulse out, the building began to collapse downwards.

He felt someone tugging his sleeve and he turned to the woman he’d come out of the towers with. She had pulled his shirt away from her face. “What’s happening, Sam?” she asked.

Sam swallowed hard. “The tower is falling.”

Chapter End Notes

So… Sam. I don’t know if you’ll agree with me on this, but I didn’t want Sam to be a great hero for this event. There were real heroes that day, and to give Sam their role would be to take away from their legacies. Sam went there to save as many as he could but only saved one woman. I think that’s pretty incredible as it is, and I didn’t want to give him more.

Until next time…
Clowns or Midgets xxx
Sam wanted to turn away, to hide from the sight in front of him, but his feet were frozen to the ground and his eyes fixed on the tower as it fell. It happened faster than he remembered. The tower sank, leaving behind a pillar of smoke. At first it looked as though the new smoke had just obscured the tower, and then his brain caught up to what his eyes were seeing. The South Tower was gone, reduced to rubble.

“Dear Lord,” the woman said.

Sam reached out and took her hand. There was something he was supposed to be doing, he knew, but he couldn’t think what it was. He was consumed by what he had just seen. It took a moment, long enough for the cloud of dust to start towards them, before Sam remembered.

“Inside!” he shouted, shoving the woman at the door to the café. “All of you, inside!”

The people on the street that had watched in horror with them suddenly seemed to see what was coming. Sam jumped aside to let them pass as they ran into the café.

“In! In! In!” Sam shouted.

The dust cloud was only feet away when he darted inside and closed the door. It whooshed past the window, casting darkness inside. There was a click and an overhead light came on above them. The dust continued to billow past the window, making Sam think of the demons the night the Devil’s Gate had opened, how they had radiated menace. The dust seemed to do that now. If felt to Sam that it was coming for them, wanting nothing more than to choke the life out of their lungs.

“What the hell is happening?” the man in the apron asked.

“The South Tower collapsed,” Sam said.

“But all those people…” the woman that Sam had come out of the tower with said. “All the people behind us on the stairs.”

Sam had no words of comfort to offer; there was nothing at all he could say. He bowed his head, and when she started to cry, he took her in his arms and held her. She shuddered against his chest and Sam stroked her back. His thoughts were with hers. All those people, the hundreds still trying to escape from the South Tower, were dead. There would be miracle stories from the rubble, people pulled out, but so few; a tiny number compared to the number that were lost. So many dead on this September morning.

He allowed himself a moment just to feel that shock and pain, and then he forced it down and locked it away. There were other things for him to do. He turned to the man in the apron and said, “What’s your name?”

“Marco.”

“Well, Marco, we’re going to help people now. We need as much bottled water as you have, and bowls, buckets, cups, whatever you’ve got that’s clean to hold water. Then we’re going to need cloths, paper towels, napkins, anything we can use to clean people up.”
“Clean them?” Marco asked.

“That cloud will have coated people in ash and dust. We need to clean their eyes and get them to drink to clear their throats.”

Marco nodded. “I can do that.”

“Good,” he turned to the woman with him. “Can you help us?”

“Yes. Tell me what to do?”

“I have many bowls,” Marco said. “They are in the kitchen.”

“Get them and fill them with clean water,” Sam said. “Save the bottled water for drinking. People aren’t going to care what we use as long as we help them.” He looked around the room at the handful of other people that had come in before the cloud had hit. “You have three choices. You can help here, come out with me, or stay out of the way.”

“I’m coming with you,” a man said, and the woman with him nodded.

“Find as many people as you can and bring them in here,” Sam said. “Cover your mouth and nose if you have something. Don’t go back to the Tower though.”

“Why not?” a girl asked, she looked as though she was college age, but it could have been the fear on her face that had stolen years from her. “We can help them.”

“Because one tower is down,” Sam said. “How long do you think the other will last?”

“You think it’ll come down, too?” Marco asked.

“I’m reasonably certain,” Sam said. “Do what you can here. It’s the safest way.”

He didn’t look to see if they agreed.

“I have things you can use for your faces,” Marco said. “My waitresses wear aprons. Will that work?”

“Perfect,” Sam said. “If you’re out there and another dust cloud comes, try to get in here. If you’re too far away, use whatever you can for shelter. Keep your eyes closed and mouths and noses covered. Understand?”

The people that had offered to come out with him nodded, and Sam reached for the door. He braced himself and opened it.

It was like stepped out into a different world, one that had been leech of all color. Everything was coated with dust. The ground, the walls, the fire hydrants, they were a uniform grey from the dust that coated everything and still clouded in the air. Sam tried to imagine how it would have felt to be outside when it happened, and he shuddered. It would have been like standing in the path of a volcano.

He saw two people struggling along the street, their clothes and hair as coated with dust as everything around them. The man’s mouth and nose were clean from where he had surely covered them with his hands, but his eyes with filmed with grey.

“Hey,” Sam said, jogging over to them. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?”
“I’m not hurt,” the woman said in a choked voice and the man shook his head.

“Come with me,” Sam said, extending a hand to the woman. “We’ll clean you up a little.”

She took his hand without hesitation and Sam led her to the café with the man following. He got them inside and said, “Sit down. I’ll be right back.”

In the time he had been gone, Marco and his helpers had been busy. The counter where people would have paid for coffee before was stacked with bottles of water, and a little further along, where you would have collected your drinks, were clean white bowls of water. Sam grabbed two bottles of water and then called over the counter, “Marco, I need a bucket, and one of you come help me.”

Marco came to him with a steel pail in his hand. Sam took it and set it down in the place the two people were sitting. The woman Sam had come out of the tower with appeared at his elbow and said, “What can I do?”

“Copy me,” Sam said.

He uncapped one of the bottles of water and handed it to the woman. “I know you want to drink, but you need to clean your mouth first or you’re going to be putting all that muck in your stomach. Rinse around and then spit it into the bucket.”

He had read an article not long before he came to 1978 about the aftermath for people involved in the clean-up of the World Trade Center. They had been breathing in all kinds of chemicals and substances with the dust and smoke, including asbestos. People were getting sick and dying, and they’d traced it back to what they had done that day. Sam didn’t want people ingesting more of the dust than they already had.

The woman rinsed her mouth thoroughly three times and then looked up at Sam. “Can I drink now?” she asked hopefully.

“You can. I’m going to clean up your eyes.”

She nodded gratefully as Sam went back to the counter to get a bowl of water. He grabbed an espresso cup too and clean cloth. As he made his way back to them, he saw the man they’d brought it rinsing his mouth, too, under the tower woman’s instruction.

“We’re going to clean around your eyes first,” Sam said. “And then we’ll rinse them out.”

He dipped the corner of the cloth in water and said, “Do you want to do it yourself?”

She nodded and lifted a shaking hand to take the cloth.

“Start in the corners and wipe outwards,” Sam said. “Don’t press too hard or you’re going to grind more into your lashes and then it might get into your eyes.”

She closed her eyes and carefully wiped the cloth across each eye one by one. When they were clear of the dust, Sam saw they were red and irritated, though she said, “That feels better.”

“Good,” Sam said. “I’m going to rinse the eyes themselves now. Tilt your head back and close your left eye.”

She obeyed and Sam filled an espresso cup with water and tilted it over her right eye. “Here goes,” he said. “Nice and wide.”
She stayed still as he trickled the water over her eye and wiped it away from her face as it slipped from the corner. When it was clear, he gave the left eye the same treatment, and then handed her a clean cloth to wipe her face.

“Thank you,” she said gratefully.

“You’re welcome,” he said. “I’m going out again now. Drink the rest of your water. Maybe see if you can help other people as they come in.”

He turned as the door opened and three dust-coated people came in. “I’ve got to go back out,” he said to the woman helping the man clean his eyes. “Will you be okay?”

“We’ll be fine,” she said.

She seemed a very different woman to the one that had come out of the tower with him, shaking with fear. It seemed helping other people was helping her as much as it was Sam.

He checked his watch and saw that he had fifteen minutes until the North Tower fell. He would help as many as he could until that had happened, and then it would be time to return to Ground Zero.

xXx

As Sam walked toward Ground Zero, a place that had been two famous skyscrapers only hours ago, he tried to prepare himself for what he was about to see.

He had waited until the North Tower had fallen and the dust cloud had passed its worst before leaving the café in the charge of Marco and his helpers. Now it was time to go back.

They had brought many people in off the street, and the café was crowded now with people recovering and others standing up to take care of those that needed help. It was unlike anything Sam had ever seen. He was used to hunters taking care of others, all assisted by knowledge and experience of the dangers out there, but these people were civilians. They had all been through something terrible to one extent or another, but they were helping each other as best they could. It was incredible to see, the real strength and resilience of the American people.

He didn’t feel the same strength as he approached the fallen towers. He had seen the site so many times on TV, but it was nothing compared to being there in person. It wasn’t a pile of rubble the way he’d expected; it was a mountain.

When he was close enough to take in more than the shape, he saw it was formed of concrete rubble, steel beams and dust, so much dust that coated everything. The mountain was smoking from the fires that burned beneath, the fires Sam knew would burn for nearly one hundred days.

What was worse was the part Sam couldn’t see—bodies, over two thousand of them. Two thousand people were hidden beneath the rubble, over two thousand people that would never get home, leaving two thousand families mourning.

The closer he got to the pile, the more people he saw. Some were just standing and staring at the disaster zone while others were clambering over the rubble and trying to dig down. There were firefighters, police officers, EMTs and paramedics, civilians and men and women in military fatigues all gathered there in the zone.

Sam was momentarily overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of what he was facing and what he could do—who did he help first? A woman stumbling past with blood dripping down her arm
made the decision of what to do next for him. He took her hand and looked around for a place to
take her for help. There were paramedics but they all seemed to be working already. There was a
man in army fatigues with a megaphone in his hand, but he seemed occupied with the crowd of
uniformed people around him. She needed Sam’s help, and he needed supplies.

He was leading her towards one of the ambulances he could see, thinking he would use their
equipment to do what he could, when he spotted a crowd of people in t-shirts that had been drained
to dull pink from the red they would have been by the dust. They were working under an American
Red Cross banner that had been hastily tacked to a building. There were folding tables with chairs
beside them and a smattering of proper gurneys. Sam led the woman there and sat her down in a
chair. She was crying, and she didn’t seem to notice that Sam was there, even when he positioned
her bleeding arm to rest on the table and said, “Okay, I’m going to help you now. I’ll be right back.
Stay here.”

Sam went to a stack of white boxes with a red cross on them and opened one. It was filled with
medical supplies: scissors, bandages, gloves, packages of suture kits and butterfly bandages, hand
sanitizer, pods of sterile saline and a box marked emergency medication. Sam took it back to the
table and set it down. He untied his jacket from around his waist and used the clean inside to rub as
much of the dust from his hands as he could. When he was done he slathered his hands in
antibacterial gel and shook them as he waited for it to dry so that he could put on the gloves.

“What’s your name?” Sam asked the woman.

“Casey.” she whimpered.

Nice to meet you, Casey. I’m Sam. What are you doing in the city today?” He was babbling to
distract her as he snapped on his gloves and cut away the cloth of her bloody sleeve.

“I’m on vacation,” she said. “I wanted to see St Paul’s Chapel, and when it all started, I was too
scared to leave. A lot of us were. We got even more scared when the tower fell, thinking the chapel
would fall down, too, so we came out, but then I was hit by something.”

Sam peeled the cloth away from the wound and said, “Whatever it was, it was sharp. It’s not too
deep though, just quite long. I’ll be able to take care of it for you.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Sam tipped some sterile saline onto a gauze pad and wiped around the wound to clean it. The
bleeding seemed to have stopped now that she was still, and it would be an easy fix, using strips to
close the wound and a large bandage to cover it.

“I came for a business meeting,” Sam said as he unpackaged some sterile bandage strips. “Never
made it there.”

“In the tower?” she asked.

“Yes, the South Tower,” Sam said. “I got out after the plane hit.”

“You got out?” she asked, sounding awed. “How?”

Sam hid a shudder as he remembered his time in the tower. “By sticking together.”

“Did more people come out?”

“Yes,” Sam said, stopping his work and looking her in the eyes. “A lot didn’t, but some of us did. It
wasn’t everyone. People were saved as well as lost.”

She looked past him at the pile of rubble. “So many though. Look what they did to us.”

“Yes,” Sam said. “But this is not the end. They hit us hard, and we lost so many, but we’re not broken. They can’t break us. We’re going to keep fighting.”

“You really think?”

“I know,” Sam said confidently, thinking of the many things that would follow this day. “America is stronger than the monsters that did this.”

He turned his attention back to her arm and fixed the last strip in place. When it was sealed, he unwrapped a clean dressing and covered the wound.

“There you go,” he said. “Keep it clean and get it checked out properly when you can.”

“Thank you, Sam,” she said, getting to her feet. She started to walk away and then stopped and turned back to him. “You really think we’re not broken?”

“I know it,” Sam said. “We can get through this and we’ll be stronger for it, the whole country.”

She nodded and walked away again. Sam watched her go, wondering if he’d reached her. He knew they would make it through strong as he had seen it, but he understood her uncertainty. He would feel the same doubt if he was here, surrounded by the debris of what had happened.

Almost as soon as she was gone, another woman took her place, brought to Sam by a dust-coated friend. Sam sutured the wound on her temple from where she had been hit by falling debris and then advised her to get out of the immediate zone and home if she could. She was replaced by a man, and soon a stream of people were coming to Sam with minor wounds to be treated.

It was on a short break between people needing help that Sam stopped to take in what he was doing—helping people. This was why he had come. He had wanted to save lives from the towers, but he had only saved one. He was doing something now though, and people were being helped by him. He was making a difference in a small way.

His thoughts were interrupted when two men caught his attention and called for help. They were supporting a half-unconscious man between them. He was bleeding heavily from the abdomen. Sam rushed over to them and lifted the man hanging from their shoulders into his arms. He rushed back to the table he’d claimed and set the man down on it. Without missing a beat, he cut open the man’s t-shirt to expose the wound and sucked it a breath. It was bad. A deep bloody mess that no amount of stitches or sterile strips from him were going to heal. It needed a hospital’s care, a surgeon’s skill, equipment Sam didn’t have.

He grabbed a wad of gauze and pressed it over the wound and addressed the man that had been helping him.

“Find a paramedic now.”

“Can’t you help him?” one of them asked.

“I am helping,” Sam said. “But he needs more that I can do for him. Get a paramedic.”

The man ran away and the other came closer to the table. “Can I do anything?” he asked.
“Talk to him,” Sam said. “Keep him awake if you can.”

“Rich,” he said. “It’s me, Franklin. Hang on, okay? This guy’s helping you, and Sol’s gone to get a paramedic.”

The man on the table nodded slightly, though his eyes were still only at half-mast.

“We came to help,” Franklin said to Sam. “We’re construction workers. We were working uptown on a site when we heard what happened. We thought we could do something, so we came here, but then the tower came down. I got knocked out, and when I woke up, Rich was gone. We found him at the edge of the pile, but he was bleeding like this. We just lifted him out and came looking. We saw the red cross sign and brought him here.”

“You did the right thing,” Sam said. “It’s better for him to be lying still, and I am doing what I can for the bleeding.” He looked down at Rich and said. “Hey, Rich. I worked construction, too. What were you working on?”

Rich licked his lips and whispered, “Apartments.”

Sam nodded. “I like the high-rise places best. Working in the sky is a hell of a thrill, right?”

Rich didn’t answer, but Franklin said, “You’re better on the ground, right, Rich? It’s me and Sol that like the high stuff.”

“I’m the sane one,” Rich whispered.

Sam laughed softly, a sound that didn’t completely hide his fear. “You’re missing out. When you’re up high watching the world happen beneath you, you feel incredible.”

“See, Rich, he gets it,” Franklin said.

Rich smiled slightly. “You’re both crazy.”

Sam pressed harder on the wound and forced a smile for him. The gauze was soaking through under his hands and Rich’s breaths were growing shallow. He needed real help real fast.

Thankfully, at that moment, Sol came over waving a hand behind him. “Over here!”

A paramedic ran behind him with a gurney. He came to a skidding stop beside the table and fixed his eyes on Sam. “What do we have?”

“Open wound to the lower abdomen,” Sam said. “I’ve tried to control the bleeding.” He was apologetic that he hadn’t done more, but there was nothing he could do. He could sew small wounds and pluck a bullet out, but he was no doctor.

“Okay.” He addressed Sol and Franklin. “Can you guys help me get him on the gurney? We need to get him to the wagon.”

They both grabbed him and eased him up and over to the gurney the paramedic was sliding under him. Sam leaned across the table to hold the gauze in place and then leaned back as his hands were replaced and they wheeled him away without a backwards glance.

Sam stopped and took a breath, just taking in what was happening. He had no idea if Rich was going to make it with his awful wound, but he had a better chance since Sam had controlled the bleeding a while. If he’d been left unaided much longer, he would have bled to death. Sam hoped
he would be okay.

“Hey, you,” a voice said.

Sam turned and saw a man in a red and white Red Cross shirt coated with the same dust that coated Sam. He was pulling off bloody gloves and looking at Sam speculatively.

“I’ve been watching you,” he said. “Who are you with?”

“With?” Sam asked dumbly.

“Red Cross?” he suggested. “Military?”

“Oh. No, I’m a construction worker,” Sam said. It was easier to explain that rather than say he was a hunter.

“You’ve been helping people,” he stated.

“Yeah, uh, sorry. I didn’t mean to get in the way, but I saw a woman that needed help, so I grabbed some of your stuff and went ahead. People kept coming, so I kept helping.”

“You seem pretty good for a construction worker, calm and careful.”

“I’ve dealt with a few injuries before. I’m designated first aider on our site,” he invented wildly. “Do you need me to go?”

“I need you to stay,” he said. “There are too many people here for us to handle, and we need to let the paramedics take care of the serious injuries.” He walked to the pile of supplies and pulled out a red and white tabard emblazoned with the red cross logo and name. “Put this on so people know who you are with. If you come up against something you can’t handle, call for help again. I’ll be close. I’m Alan.”

“I will,” Sam said, taking the tabard and pulling it over his head. “Thank you.”

“No, thank you. Mess like this, we’ve got to come together to help, and you’ve stepped up.”

A man came close leading a woman with him. “Can you help?” he asked.

“Looks like you’re needed,” Alan said, walking away.

Sam thanked him again and turned to the woman that had just been helped into the chair, another person he could help.

Chapter End Notes

So… This was an easier chapter for me. Sam was able to help some people – as so many did that day – by doing little things. I didn’t feel I was taking away from someone else’s story and strength by having him help like this.

Until next time…
Clowns or Midgets xxx
Sam was still working with the Red Cross when night fell.

The floodlit site was more crowded now than it had been immediately after the towers fell as, though others were leaving now, people were traveling in to help. Sam was overwhelmed by the sheer number. So many people that couldn’t stay home and watch had come to do their bit. They were handing out bottled water and sandwiches that stores and restaurants had sent in for them. Others had joined the bucket brigades on the pile, clearing the site piece by small piece.

There were rescue dogs everywhere, climbing over the smoking rubble with their handlers, searching for signs of life beneath. Sometimes they found it. Sam had heard the excitement of a few rescues as he’d worked at the Red Cross station. It invigorated every person there, the idea that life still existed beneath. Sam felt the same rush of relief when he heard an account, but he also felt the dull ache that with each success that came, there were so many that weren’t going to be found. Sooner or later they would reach the place where a woman called Genelle Guzman lay, and she would be the last found alive.

Though there were more people, there were fewer injured. The comforting explanation was that people had been treated and left the site, leaving the paramedics able to handle the ones that remained, but more truthfully Sam knew it was because more people were now dead from their injuries. He didn’t know how many he had helped, but it didn’t feel like enough. It felt worse now that he was standing around doing nothing.

Soon it became unbearable to just stand there when there was so much need around him, and Sam wandered away from his table. He didn’t know where to start at first, so he just wandered, looking for someone that needed him.

He came to the flag flying over the rubble that he knew had been erected by firefighters, the evidence of a city still fighting. He stopped and stared at it for a moment, taking in the defiance and memorial it represented. It was a message to their enemies; they were still here. But it was also a memorial to the thousands that had died, the hundreds of members of fire houses, cops, and civilians that had been trapped beneath.

Sam remembered the fire crew that had passed them on the stairs, how they had walked knowingly into hell to try to help anyone that was left, how it had cost them their lives. He had come here to help and save lives, but he had known it wouldn’t come at the cost of his own. The men he had seen hadn’t had that comfort. They’d known it was probably going to cost them their lives. Sam wished he had thanked them after all.

He carried on past the flag and approached a man in a red vest who was speaking to a group of others. Sam waited behind them for his chance to speak, and when they wandered away and the man stopped to rake a hand over his dirty face, Sam asked. “Is there a place I can help?”

The man frowned at him. “I thought you Red Cross guys were all based near the Chapel.”

“I’m not really Red Cross,” Sam said. “I was just helping out. There’s no one else that needs me there now though. I need to do something else.”
“We all do, buddy,” he said tiredly. “I can use you. That crew I was just with are setting up a new chain. Grab a bucket and go with them.

“No problem,” Sam said.

He followed the group over to a stack of yellow buckets and picked one up then went with them back to the rubble. Sam took his place at the end of the line, quickly joined by others, and they began passing the buckets of rubble down along the chain.

As night crept on at the site, Sam became a part of the bucket brigade.

Sam was exhausted. He had moved past tired when the sun had come up again, and he was now almost drunk with tiredness. He was used to short sleep rations on a hunt, but everything he had done and seen had drained him more than he had ever been before. He felt like he could lie down on the ground away from the rubble and just sleep like so many others were.

The people around Sam had come and gone as they’d switched off with each other. He had stayed though. He hadn’t allowed himself to sleep yet. He kept telling himself he would see one more person saved and then he would stop, but each time news spread among them that a person had been pulled out alive, it was the wrong person. He needed to see all of the living people out before he stopped. After that, nothing he could do would matter so much anymore.

People brought coffee that was mostly cold by the time it reached him, but he was grateful for it regardless. He didn’t think he had ever needed caffeine more than he did now. There was food, too, but Sam had no stomach for it.

He learned things that he had never learned from the news stories he’d seen. The atmosphere of the place was different to what he’d imagined. People weren’t dour and depressed. While there were still rescues, spirits were high. Everyone felt they were doing something great, even if it was just passing buckets like Sam was. There was conversation. Sam learned about the people around him. One, a young woman called Gracelynn, was a grade school teacher in New Jersey. She had heard about the attacks as she taught her class math problems, and as soon as the last child had been collected, she had gotten in her car and come into the city, her work seeming unimportant compared to what was happening in the city. She had driven as far as she could and then she had started to walk. The man on his other side, Leo, worked a few blocks away from the towers, and he’d been close when the South Tower had come down. When the dust had settled after the North Tower was down, he’d come back to do what he could.

Sam told them he’d been in the area when the planes had struck and, like them, he’d come to help. He didn’t tell them he’d been in the South Tower or about the woman he’d come out with, though he thought about her sometimes. He didn’t even know her name or where she came from. He would never see her again, though from those short hours they’d spend together, Sam knew he would never forget her, and he doubted she would him. He wondered if she would recognize him when he became a wanted criminal with his brother and made the news in ten years. He hoped not.

Another thing the news stories didn’t tell them was that no one on the site called it Ground Zero. It was The Pile. A man that brought Sam coffee explained that it was because ground zero was what was left after a bomb, and this had been something far crueler than a clean and quick bomb blast. Sam preferred The Pile, too. It was exactly what it said it was; Sam stood on a pile of what had been buildings and people’s lives.

It was past noon when Sam heard a shout go up behind him. The bucket line that had been working
that area was moving faster than Sam’s, and they all wore excited smiles.

“What is it?” Leo shouted to one of them.

“We’ve got a survivor!” someone shouted back. “They found someone called Genelle. She’s
talking to them.”

“Do you need us?” Sam asked.

“No, man, we’ve got it. Just send up a prayer for her. She’s been under there a day.”

Gracelynn nodded eagerly. “We will.” She looked at Sam. “A whole day down there. Can you
imagine?”

“No,” Sam said honestly. “I really can’t.”

She frowned at him. “What’s wrong, Sam? You look awful.”

“I think I need a break,” Sam said. “Can you guys do without me?”

“Of course.”

Sam handed her the bucket that had come along the line to him and clambered down over the
rubble towards the edge.

He did need a break, that wasn’t a lie, but more than that, he needed some space. Until then
everything he did had been steeped in hope that he was going to be a part of the crew that saved
someone. He knew it was over now. Genelle was the last living person pulled out. It was recovery
now, not rescue, and Sam could let himself stop and rest at last.

He stopped as he jumped down from the beam he was walking along and looked back at the
people working like ants on the rubble. None of them knew—Sam was the only person in the
world that did—but it was over now. There would be no more miracle rescues. The only people
coming out now were the dead. The thought of it stole what little reserves he had left.

He walked away from the pile on autopilot, past the crews talking and the Red Cross tables. He
walked past the chapel where people were serving coffee and food to the rescuers, and along what
had been a bustling street the day before. It was still coated with the grey dust and ash, and Sam
remembered how he had felt only a day ago when it had swept towards him. It felt like it was a
lifetime ago. He had been scared then, still in shock after what had happened in the tower, but now
he was just tired and defeated. He needed to sleep.

When he got far enough away from The Pile that he reached the point that New York was still
whole and alive, he flagged down a cab. He wondered if any would stop for him, as filthy as he
was, but two did almost immediately.

Sam climbed into the first and said, “Four Seasons, please.”

“Sure thing, buddy,” the driver said.

They pulled away from the curb and Sam leaned back in his seat. He didn’t let his eyes close
though. He clung to the reserves of energy his body had miraculously stored, and just watched the
city pass the window.

“You were there, weren’t you,” the driver asked after a period of silence.
“Yes.”

“How close?”

Sam sighed. “I was close enough.” He wasn’t going to tell his story to this man that hadn’t been a part of it.

“I get ya.”

They drove on in silence until they reached the towering building and grand façade of the hotel where the cab came to a halt.

“Here you go, buddy.”

Sam reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, but the driver reset the meter before Sam could see the fare.

“How much?” he asked.

“No charge,” the driver said. “I could drive you from here to Florida and it wouldn’t be enough to make up for what you’ve been through.”

“Thank you,” Sam said quietly.

The man turned in his seat. “You made it out, buddy. I can’t imagine what you saw and did there, but you made it out. Get in there and rest. You deserve it.”

Sam smiled slightly. “That’s what I am planning to do.”

He climbed out and patted the roof. The taxi drove away slowly and Sam walked into the hotel. He didn’t realize what a sight he must be, coated in dust, wearing a blood-stained tabard, and stumbling from exhaustion, until he got into the lobby and people began to turn to look at him. It felt like every eye in the place was fixed on him. He ducked his head and walked through them.

He was halfway to the elevators when a man rushed up to him. He was wearing a navy suit and a discreet gold badge that identified him as the manager. “Sir,” he called.

Sam came to a stop and looked at him. He expected the man to look awkward as he told him he couldn’t come in looking as he did, perhaps to be offered a way to his room by the service stairs if he was lucky. Instead, the man looked at him with something like awe and said. “Is there anything we can do for you? Anything you need? Anything at all? Something to eat?”

Sam was stunned into silence for a moment and then he shook his head. “No, I’m okay thank you.”

“No, sir, thank you,” the manager said.

Sam nodded and him and walked away to the elevators. He stepped into a car and gave the attendant in his blue uniform the floor number. As they rose up, he could almost feel the young man’s questions in the air, but, respectfully, he didn’t ask them. But as Sam stepped out on his floor, he touched Sam’s arm and said, “Thank you,” very quietly.

Sam walked along the corridor to his room and let himself inside. Housekeeping had been in. Sam’s belongings that had been dotted around were neatly placed on the dresser and the bed was turned down. Sam wanted to collapse into it, but there was something he needed to do first.

He picked up the phone and pressed nine for an outside line then dialed in the number to his house.
It rang a few times until it was picked up. “George Collins.”

“It’s me,” Sam said tiredly.

He heard George take a deep breath. “Sam. How are you?”

“Tired,” Sam said.

“Are you just getting back to the hotel now?”

“Yeah. I had to stay to see the last person out.”

“That’s it then,” George said. “There’s no more coming out alive.”

“That’s it,” Sam said. “She was the last.”

George’s sigh crackled the line. “How are you, Sam, really?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said honestly. “It doesn’t feel real. How are you?”

“It doesn’t feel real for us either. Missouri was here yesterday, and she’s been calling this morning, too. So has James. Are you going to speak to her?”

“Later,” Sam said. “Right now I just need sleep. Can you call her and tell her I’m okay?”

“Of course. You get some rest and call me when you wake. It doesn’t matter how late; you know I don’t need much sleep.”

“Thank you, George. I’ll speak you later.”

“Okay.” He hesitated. “And, Sam, I know I can’t imagine what you have been through, but when you’re ready to talk about it, I will be here for you.”

“I know,” Sam said with a small smile. “Thank you.”

“Goodbye, Sam.”

“Bye.”

Sam set the phone down on its cradle and walked into the bathroom. He used the toilet then looked into the mirror as he washed his hands. He hadn’t seen himself since the morning before, when he had left in his pristine suit. He looked like a different man now. His skin, hair and beard were grey with dust, and his clothes were bloodied and dirty. The Red Cross tabard he wore was the brightest thing on him, and that was dusty, too. He had brought The Pile back with him.

He pulled off the tabard and tossed it into the bathtub, then stripped his clothes down to his boxers. He was still dirty, but he had no energy to clean up properly. He washed the dust from his face with cold water and then shut off the faucet. Turning away from his reflection, he walked out of the bathroom and into the bedroom. He collapsed into the bed and closed his eyes.

He thought he would struggle to sleep, despite his exhaustion, with the chaotic state of his mind, but his eyes fell closed and he felt sleep descend on him quickly.

He had barely pulled the bedclothes over him before he was asleep.

xxx
On Thursday something happened that boosted the depleted morale of the people working on the recovery and relief efforts of The Pile: George W. Bush visited.

The news he was coming created a kind of fever among the workers. Even those that didn’t support him politically were energized by the news. They were being seen for what they were doing; the tragedy wasn’t being ignored by the people that mattered. It was marked by America.

The Pile was an insular environment. Many people worked and slept there in the Salvation Army relief centers and so were isolated from the news stories and people talking about what was happening. They didn’t know they were being hailed as the bravest of America, the best the country had to offer. They only saw the tragedy of what they were doing.

It was made worse when you had to enter or leave the site. There were so many people at the borders. Family and friends of those that were lost waited there for news. They held out photographs of their lost loved ones and begged the workers to find them. They wanted news of rescues, and it was down to people there, military, fire service, cops and civilians, to tell them that there was no news. Those people weren’t ready to accept that it was too late.

The buildings around the area were papered with missing posters people had made themselves for the people they were looking for. They bore pictures of the smiling faces of the lost. It was like a hammer to Sam’s gut to see them there, knowing what he did. After the first time he passed them, he stopped going back to the hotel. He stayed in the relief center during his breaks and worked the rest of the time. He felt like a coward for avoiding them, but this was the second time for him, and he knew more than all of them put together about what was coming. Even the greatest foresight and experience couldn’t arm a person against what he had seen when he lived this time before.

There was a strong sense of camaraderie on The Pile. People that had been strangers before Tuesday were now brothers and sisters. Sam had met some amazing people whom he would never forget. They came from all walks of life, and their ages varied, but they all had one thing in common: they were there to help.

Sam had no will to resist building the bonds with them all that he had, though he sometimes thought he should. It was almost impossible though. People were reaching out their hearts to him in a way he’d never experienced before.

Sam was on a bucket line when he heard the president was coming. A firefighter came to talk to them, his face aglow with excitement. “He’s coming,” he said. “The president is coming to speak to us in person.”

A murmur went along the line of people, and the flow of buckets moving stopped for a moment.

“Really?” a young girl called Carisa said. “Here?”

“He’s on his way along Greenwich street now. He’s going to talk to us.”

He grinned at them once more them moved along to share his news with more of the workers.

“You know, I never voted for him,” Lorenzo, a man Sam had spent the day working with, said. “But I would bow down and do anything he asked of me today.”

Sam frowned. “You would?”

“He’s the most important man in the world right now. He’s the one that can make this right. He can make them pay.”
Sam nodded. He hadn’t thought of that. He already knew how payment for this would come. He realized now that he agreed with some of what Lorenzo was saying. He didn’t agree with all of the politics, but he accepted that George W. Bush was the most important person right now.

“Let’s go listen to him then,” Sam said, setting down his bucket. “He’s coming along Greenwich Street.”

“Yeah,” Carisa said excitedly. “I want to see him.”

They all clambered down the rubble and made their way to where a crowd of people with the same idea was forming. They joined it at the back and waited.

There was a flurry of action in front of them, and Sam straightened to see over the heads of people in front of him. A group of men climbed out of cars and then he was there; George W. Bush had arrived. He was met by a fire chief and cop and they led him forward. People began to crowd behind Sam, all wanting to hear the president speak.

There was a crackle of a loudspeaker, and then Sam listened as their leader began his address to them. It was an historic moment, and Sam was never more aware of his nature as an outsider to this time than he was in that moment.

The president thanked them and then spoke the words that meant everything to the people there listening. “I want you all to know that America today is on bended knee, in prayer for the people whose lives were lost here, for the workers who work here, for the families who mourn. The nation stands with the good people of New York City and New Jersey and Connecticut as we mourn the loss of thousands of our citizens.”

“I can't hear you!” someone shouted from the back.

“I can hear you!” he called back, “I can hear you! The rest of the world hears you! And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear all of us soon!”

Someone started a chant of, “USA! USA!” and it was taken up by the crowd until they were roaring it.

Speaking into the roar, Bush said, “The nation sends its love and compassion to everybody who is here. Thank you for your hard work. Thank you for making the nation proud, and may God bless America.”

The chant rose up again, and Sam found himself becoming a part of it without consciously deciding to. “USA! USA! USA!”

The noise overcame what the president was trying to say as people gloried in it. They were seen. They were heard. America noticed them and thanked them. It made every moment of working with blistered and burned hands worth it to them.

America knew and it was fighting back.

xXx

On Monday, almost a week after the towers fell, a disconcerted murmur moved along the line and people stopped with the buckets in their hands. A small crowd formed around a cop a little away from them. Sam joined it and listened as a man Sam knew was called Phil asked, “What’s going on?”
“They’ve made some changes,” the cop said. “The site is being assessed and it’s been decided that they want to keep the ground crew to accredited people only. If you’ve got anything with demolition or iron work on your resume, report to the American Express building.”

“And if we haven’t?” someone asked.

“Then you’ve done all you can here.”

People murmured angrily and he held up his hands.

“This isn’t because we’re not grateful for all you’ve done. Believe me, we are. You’re all heroes. But we need to keep you safe. People have been injured when the rubble has given way, and we don’t want any more of you hurt. You know it’s recovery now, not rescue, so you have to put your own safety first.”

Sam hadn’t known about this. When he’d come to New York, he’d been prepared for the long haul of work, to leave Lawrence and his life there for the duration. It made sense to him that they keep it to professionals only, but he still felt the burn of it. He had felt better helping people. To walk away now was to have to stop and face what had happened, and he wasn’t sure he was ready to do that. He didn’t know what to do now. There were still places among the Red Cross, but they were well staffed and didn’t really need him.

“Take a day to rest,” the cop said. “If you want to come back tomorrow and help with something else, there’s plenty you can do. The workers are going to need taking care of the way you have been. Think on it.”

Sam nodded and walked away from the grumbling crowd. He walked along Greenwich Street, passing the walls of missing posters and remaining family members gathered among a group of others leaving with the same look of stunned shock. Sam thought they were also dreading what came next now the need for action was passed for them.

He hailed a cab and took it back to the hotel, not engaging with the driver that seemed to want to talk.

When he got to his hotel room, he sat down onto the bed and put his head in his hands. He didn’t know what to do. He wanted to help people, but he also felt that his time would be better spent helping people away from the city. If he went home, he could take a hunt maybe. He could help George again.

He reached for the phone and called Missouri. He hadn’t spoken to her at all since he’d left Lawrence, choosing to pass messages through George instead. Missouri would want to talk about what had happened, and he couldn’t, not to someone that wasn’t there.

She answered after a few rings and Sam said, “Hey, Missouri. It’s me.”

“Sam! Oh, Sam. How are you?”

“I’m okay,” Sam said

“You don’t sound it. Are you at the site still?”

“No, I’m in my hotel. We got moved off the site. They need trained people now to clear it, demolitions experts and metal workers.”

“Does that mean you’re coming home?” she asked hopefully.
“I’m not sure,” Sam said. “There’s still more I can do here. But I don’t know how much of a difference I can make compared to taking up a hunt again.”

“Hmm… Do you feel you need to be there?” she asked. “Is it easier for you to cope with it if you’re still helping?”

“I don’t know. It’s not easy what I’ve been doing, but maybe it helped.”

“How do you feel?”


“Then come home. You can help people soon, but first you have to take care of yourself. George has only told me that you’re okay. He hasn’t told me what happened to you. I don’t know if you told him even. But I have seen the news reports. I can’t imagine what it must be like to be there, but I don’t think it’s a place where you can rest.”

“It’s not,” Sam said, thinking of the constant need to work and the sparse hours spent on a camp bed in the relief center.

“Then come home.”

“Okay. I will. I’ll see if I can get a flight home this afternoon.”

“Good. Call me when you get in.”

“I left my car at the airport,” Sam said. “I don’t need a ride.”

“No, but I need to know you’re back. I won’t come to the house. I’ll give you your space, but I want to at least know you’re home safe.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “I’ll speak to you later.”

“Sam,” she said hesitantly. “I love you.”

Sam smiled. “I love you too, Missouri. I’ll see you soon.”

They exchanged goodbyes and Sam set the phone down and looked around the room. He didn’t have much to pack, and he could be on his way soon. As he got to his feet and picked up an undershirt from the bed, he realized that what he really needed was to get away.

He needed to be home so he could start to process what he had seen and done.

Chapter End Notes

So… Sam is going home. There are so many things I want to say about the things Sam did and saw in this chapter — things that the people that had really been there did and saw — but it would sound trite and stupid. I read many witness accounts of the attack and the days after before writing these chapters, and the strength of the people I was reading about was incredible. Sam isn’t real, but there were people that really were did all the things he did in this and the preceding chapters, and they are heroes.
Until next time…
Clowns or Midgets xxx
Chapter Fifty-Five

Sam couldn’t talk about it.

He’d thought he would be able to. As he’d flown away from New York, heading home, he’d thought of all the things he wanted to tell them about what had happened. He’d thought it would help him, but before the plane touched down in Kansas City, the words had dried up. He just wanted to hide.

He moved through the airport in a daze, barely noticing the increased security presence, and went out to where he’d left his car in the long-term car lot. When he was in the car, he took a moment to gather himself before starting the engine. The radio came to life, playing a moody Lifehouse song, and Sam snapped it off quickly. He didn’t want to hear music recorded before the world had changed. It felt wrong.

He pulled out of his spot and directed the car onto the road, the motions coming automatically as his mind dwelled in New York. He wondered who had stayed after they’d been pull off the bucket brigade. Was Mary-Ann, the grandma from Connecticut, still delivering her trays of coffee to the workers? Was the Downtown Deli still bringing in sandwiches for them? Who had dared to leave, not knowing what waited for them outside the bubble of The Pile, and who had dared to stay? He wondered whether they felt the same way as him—as if his head was full of cotton.

The people in the airports had all shared the aura of fear as they’d passed through their gates toward their flights, perhaps wondering if their plane would be next to be attacked. America was, Sam knew, still in shock, and it would take time for life to return to normal for them. It would for Sam, too.

But that had been the airport, an extraordinary place in the post-attack country. Was Sam going to see the same shock on the faces of the people of Lawrence when he next ventured into the grocery store or bank? He couldn’t remember how it had been the first time he’d lived these days as he’d been younger and had lived in a bubble then, too. He remembered that John had driven them all the way to Florida before stopping for more than a night, and he didn’t take a hunt for weeks. They just stayed together, not even finding a school for Sam, just trying to make sense of what had happened.

He wondered what George and Missouri were doing, apart from waiting for him.

The drive into Lawrence wasn’t a long one, and soon Sam was pulling up outside his house. As he got out of the car, he saw there was an empty glass and book on the table beside the Coleman lantern. George had apparently been spending the last cool nights of summer outside as was his habit. Sam usually joined him. He picked up the glass and unlocked the door, taking a breath before going inside.

“Missouri?” George called from the living room.

“It’s me,” Sam said.

He walked into the living room and saw George reclining on his chair. He looked drowsy, as if
Sam had interrupted a nap.

George rubbed his eyes and said, “How was your flight?”

Sam was relieved he wasn’t going to refer to what had happened. It was a standard question he asked after one of Sam’s trips.

“It was okay,” he said. “The airport was busy still. Some people are still stranded.”

“But you got a flight okay?”

“Yes. They’re only running one a day to Kansas City, but I got one of the last spots.”

“That’s good,” George said. “Do you want a drink?”

“No, I’m good,” Sam said. “I think I’ll crash for a while.”

George nodded. “That’s a good idea. You’re probably tired from the flight.”

The flight had only been three hours and it hadn’t tired Sam out; it was the sleepless night he’d had in the hotel that had exhausted him. When he was sleeping in the relief center, he’d been able to rest better, knowing he was close if he was needed—not that there was a reason for him to be needed. When he’d gone to bed in the hotel the day before, he had been twisted up with doubts about what he was doing, wondering if he should stay after all, to find something he could do to help. That and memories of what had happened in the previous week combined to make sleep impossible.

Sam carried the empty glass through to the kitchen and set it in the sink before walking back past George and to his bedroom. He kicked off his boots and shrugged off his jacket and tossed them into a corner then collapsed fully clothed onto the bed.

He thought he would struggle to sleep, but with the drone of the television in the living room as background noise, Sam drifted off almost at once, into dreams of what had happened in the South Tower.

xXx

Though Sam had only been in New York a week, it felt so much longer, and he struggled to adjust to being back at first. Missouri stayed away for two days before arriving with a tuna casserole for them. She didn’t mention where Sam had been or what had happened. She just put the dish in the oven to heat and set the table for them. Only once did she allude to the disaster.

“I have kept newspapers,” she said gently. “There are photographs when you’re ready to see them.”

Sam shook his head. He would never be ready to see them. He had perfect recall of what he had seen in person already.

“Okay,” she said quietly. “Would you like another beer?”

“No, thanks,” Sam said, pushing away his half-eaten meal and wiping his mouth with his napkin. “Thanks, Missouri. That was great, but I guess I’m not that hungry.”

Missouri pushed away her own plate, as if she had been waiting for an excuse to finish, too. “I was thinking of taking down the mimosa and replanting some potted saplings. What do you think? Do
you want to help?"

Sam couldn’t take it. Though they were talking about things other than what had happened, he could feel the topic between them all like a cloud around their heads. Sam needed normal.

“I can’t,” he said. “I’m going to California to visit James tomorrow.”

He’d said it as an excuse to get away, but it seemed like the perfect idea on reflection. He could spend some time with them all, catch up on Patience’s development as he’d not seen her since Easter. There he would be distracted.

“James didn’t mention it,” Missouri said.

“I haven’t spoken to him yet,” Sam said. “But I’ve been thinking about it a while. I can get a hotel so I don’t get in the way.”

“You never get in the way, Sam,” Missouri said gently.

“Some space would be good anyway. Will you be okay, George?”

“I can manage perfectly well alone.” George said.

Sam could tell George was annoyed at the inference that he needed help, but he didn’t have the energy to mollify him. He just said, “Great, I’ll book a flight,” and took a draw on his beer.

He could feel the tension in the air and he thought George and Missouri were waiting to talk without him there, but he didn’t leave. He would be gone tomorrow, and they could talk all they wanted then.

Missouri didn’t stay long after dinner. She made an excuse about having things to do at home and picked up her purse. Sam walked her to the door and kissed her on the cheek. “I’m sorry, Missouri,” he said.

She wrapped her arms around him, resting her head on his chest, and said, “When you’re ready, I’ll be here to listen. We all will. There’s no rush.”

Sam hugged her tightly and then let her go. She patted his cheek, sniffed, and slipped out of the door. Sam walked back into the kitchen to see George standing at the sink, washing the dishes. Sam thought of offering to do them, but he held back. He’d already upset George once that evening.

“I’m going to bed,” he said.

George nodded. “Will I see you in the morning?”

“Probably not,” Sam said. “I’ll leave early so I can get the first flight.”

“Then send my regards to James and Tess and try to enjoy your break.”

“I will.”

Sam turned to leave but George called after him.

“Sam, will you do something for me?” he asked.

“Sure,” Sam said automatically. “What do you need?”
“Find someone you can talk to. I understand that it can’t be me or Missouri, but there will be someone out there. You can’t hold it all in forever.”

“I will,” Sam said without conviction.

He didn’t tell George that he couldn’t. He thought he would be unable to speak to anyone that hadn’t been there themselves, and the thought of finding one of the others that had been was too much. Would he be able to see the shadows of the towers in their eyes the way he did his own when he looked into the mirror?

xXx

Sam got to San Francisco around noon, and he rented a car then went straight to the Fairmont to book himself a room. He didn’t much care where he stayed, but nice hotels when traveling for pleasure were a part of his routine, and if Missouri and George heard he’d booked into a dingy motel, they’d be even more worried than they already were. He had to play the part of being better than he was for them.

He didn’t linger long in the hotel before setting out to James and Tess’ house in Cole Valley. He liked the neighborhood they’d chosen to make their home. Its tree-lined streets and Victorian houses gave it the feeling of a small town in the big city. People were friendly and it was quiet, within walking distance of the Golden Gate Park that Sam liked to visit sometimes with Riley, the family’s Irish Setter.

Sam pulled up in front of the house and took a moment to form his face into a smile before climbing out and walking up the path. He heard laughter from around the house, and he diverted his footsteps to the gate that led into the backyard. He opened it and walked around the side of the house to the lawn James kept tended for Patience to play on.

Tess and Patience were running around the yard. Tess would let Patience get away a dozen steps, and then she would run after her and scoop her into her arms with a whoop that made Patience laugh delightedly. They were so intent on their game that they didn’t notice Sam at first, but Riley did. He had been at the end of the yard, sniffing a flowerbed, but when his eyes caught Sam, he bounded towards him and jumped up at Sam, leaving muddy prints on Sam’s jeans.

Sam tousled Riley’s long hair. “Hey, boy. You doing good?”

“Unca Sam-Sam!”

Sam looked up to see Patience struggling to be released from her mother’s grip. When Tess set her down, she rushed to Sam. Well-trained, Riley settled at once on four paws and watched, tongue lolling out, as Patience collided with Sam and wrapped her small arms around his legs. Sam bent and swept her up, spinning her around and smiling as she squealed.

“How’s my favorite girl?” he asked.

“Sam-Sam!” She placed her hands on his cheeks and planted a wet kiss on his nose.

Sam laughed, feeling the pressure of everything that had been weighing him down for days lifting in the face of her sheer joy. For once, he wasn’t thinking of shoes abandoned on stairs, a grey cloud of dust coming towards him like a sentient monster, determined to choke the breath out of his lungs. He didn’t think about the sound a body made as it hit the concrete after a person pitched themselves out of a window a hundred floors up to escape the burning heat or the way the woman he’d helped had shook in his arms as he carried her away from the burning tower minutes before it
fell. He just thought of Patience, how happy she was to see him, how innocent she was, how she
was completely unaware of what had happened—how America had been attacked and irrevocably
changed.

“Sam,” Tess said gently, coming to them and touching his arm. Sam bent and she kissed his cheek.
“How are you?”

“Pretty good right now,” Sam said, kissing Patience’s nose and laughing as she cried, “No, Sam-
Sam! Ouchy!” as his beard tickled her.

Tess smiled. “I’m glad. I know Mom was worried.”

Sam’s smile fell. He didn’t like that he’d worried Missouri, but he hadn’t been able to hide what he
felt when it was so all consuming. He had lived through some terrible things, losing his parents and
Dean, but this was the whole country suffering, and Sam had felt it all like a weight on his
shoulders that he couldn’t shift while he had to carry on. When he’d lost Dean, he’d stopped
pretending to be fine. He’d run from Bobby and made it his mission to save Dean—a mission he’d
failed.

“Spin me, Sam-Sam,” Patience commanded.

Sam obeyed and her laughter soon brought the smile back to his face.

“Give Uncle Sam a break, Patience,” Tess said. “He’s been traveling all morning.”

“Yes,” Sam said, locking eyes with the little girl. “I flew in a plane through the sky all the way here
just so I could see you.”

She beamed at him. “Me!”

“You,” Sam agreed. “I needed some Patience hugs.”

Patience threw her arms around his neck and squeezed him with all her toddler strength.

“That was perfect,” Sam said. “Exactly what I needed. Thank you so much.”

“Come sit down,” Tess said.

Sam followed her to the Adirondack chairs and sat with Patience still in his arms. She wriggled
until she was comfortable, and then began to manipulate his fingers with the concentration of a
master potter working a piece of clay.

“Do you want a drink?” Tess asked.

“No, I’m fine,” Sam said.

She sat down and smiled at her daughter. “James said you were coming, so I gave the sitter the day
off,” she said. “I’ve cleared it with the partners to take some vacation days. James would have, too,
but he’s got a case coming to court next week so he needs to prepare.”

“You didn’t need to do that,” Sam said. “I don’t want to put you out.”

“It’s given me an excuse to have some time off,” she assured him. “And I get to have some extra
time with my little girl.” She leaned over and stroked Patience’s hair.

Tess worked for a law firm in the city that dealt with corporate law. It meant less time spent in
court so she had more time with Patience. James worked in criminal defense, a branch of law he had always wanted to pursue, but it gave him less time at home than he would have liked. He was putting more time in than usual lately as he was going for a junior partner spot. He was still young but he had proved himself already, and he thought he had a fighting chance for the promotion.

“He said he would be home by dinner though,” Tess went on.

“Dinner?” Patience asked interestedly.

Tess laughed. “Not yet, Miss Piggy. You’ve only just had lunch.”

Patience went back to her contemplation of Sam’s hands and Sam held her a little closer, wishing he could absorb her innocence by osmosis.

Seeing her daughter was absorbed, Tess looked at Sam and asked, “How are you doing really? Mom said you were there. Were you very close?”

“Close enough. I was in the South Tower when the plane hit.”

“Oh god,” she breathed.

Sam drew a breath and nodded.

He found it was easier to talk about it to Tess, with Patience held in his arms. She didn’t know the full story—that Sam had known it was coming and had gone to save but failed so many. She didn’t know he had purposefully put himself there that day with an ill-thought-out plan. She didn’t know that he had done this to himself.

“I’m so glad you’re okay,” she said. “I can’t imagine what it must have been like.”

She really couldn’t, and Sam couldn’t explain it. It was a singular experience.

“No one can,” he said.

“But Mom said you stayed after. What were you doing?”

“I worked on The Pile,” Sam said.

“Ground Zero?”

“We didn’t call it that,” Sam said. “It was The Pile to us. I worked on the bucket brigade—the people clearing the debris, looking for people.”

Though Sam had been looking for bodies rather than living people, he’d felt it was just as important after the last living person was found to find the dead so they could be reunited with their families.

“Did you find any?”

“No, on my crew, no, one living at least.”

Tess sighed. “That must have been very difficult.”

“Honestly, it was easier to be there than to be away. Today is the first time I’ve felt like myself since it happened.” He pressed a kiss to Patience’s hair and she beamed up at him. “When I was there, we were all going through the same thing and working to help. You didn’t have to talk to
understand what each other was feeling. It was the same for us all.”

“Why did you come home?”

“They didn’t need us on The Pile anymore. They needed experienced people, demolition experts and trained rescue and recovery workers. There were other things I could have done to help, but I thought coming home would be better. I was wrong.”

“Will you go back?”

Sam could hear the worry in her voice, and he forced a smile for her. “No. I couldn’t do that to Missouri. She wouldn’t understand, and I know it was hard for her when I was there. Besides, I needed to leave at some point anyway, and I think it would be even harder if I was there longer. I have to get back to my life. Only…”

“It’s not the life you had before, though, is it?”

“It’s really not,” Sam said, appreciating the fact she understood so easily what he meant.

Tess was a perceptive woman with a kind heart, and he was glad it was her he saw first and not James. James always wanted to fix things and that sometimes made for advice given instead of taking the time to listen and understand. He would probably recommend Sam talk about it, perhaps with a professional, and that Sam couldn’t do. He had too much to hide.

Patience began to rest more of her weight on Sam as she became drowsy, and Sam hugged her to him and brushed his cheek against her hair. She was pure and good in a world inhabited with monsters, and he felt that he could handle what had happened while he was with her.

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The announcer’s voice was designed to excite and draw you in as it described the events of the day on October 7th 2001. Sam and George sat with their eyes on the screen, George waiting to see what happened, and Sam waiting to see his history repeat in front of him.

“This is NBC Nightly News with Tom Brokaw.”

The banner faded to show a grey-haired man behind a desk with a map behind him with Afghanistan highlighted in yellow.

“Good evening,” Brokaw said. “American-led military attacks against the Taliban continue tonight, even as the first food and medical supplies for the beleaguered Afghan people are in the air. And if there was any doubt about the role of Osama Bin Laden in the September 11th attacks, his threats to America tonight were a chilling reminder of his hatred. NBC’s Jim Miklaszewski is at the Pentagon tonight with the latest on the early strikes and the continuing action in that part of the world. Jim?”

“Tom, the first of these strikes appear to have just about ended for the night, but officials here at the Pentagon say, these attacks are far from over.”

The screen displayed video of bombs falling and cities burning in Kabul. Sam couldn’t help but connect those fires to the ones he had seen at the towers.

He wondered what was happening to the people inside those buildings. Were they streaming down the stairs the way he and so many others had, trying to escape the fire and imminent fall? We they as scared as he had been? Would those buildings fall, too? How many civilians were dead and
trapped? Did they know it was over for them?

The video switched to a speech from George Bush that Sam remembered from the first time.

“Good afternoon. On my orders, the United States military has begun strikes against al Qaeda terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. These carefully targeted actions are designed to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations, and to attack the military capability of the Taliban regime.”

Sam turned away. He hadn’t truly understood, the first time he lived through these days, what this speech meant other than the fact America was fighting back. Dean had been happy, pleased they were doing something to avenge the people that died in the attack, but John had been quiet. At the time, Sam had thought he was just thinking of other things as he so often was, but now he wondered if, like Sam was, he was thinking of the men and women that were going to fight as he had in Vietnam, how many would die to bring a peace that never came in Sam’s life.

As the president’s speech came to a close, Sam turned his attention back to the TV.

“The battle is now joined on many fronts. We will not waver; we will not tire; we will not falter; and we will not fail. Peace and freedom will prevail. Thank you. May God continue to bless America.”

“He hasn’t done a good job so far,” Sam said bitterly. “I don’t see many blessings for us.”

George frowned. His religion was a private thing, and Sam rarely saw him demonstrate it, but Sam was usually more respectful of his friend’s faith. It was in private that he questioned, knowing what he knew now of the world and what would happen in the future without God’s assistance.

“He will,” George said quietly. “Things happen that we can’t control. God gave us free will, after all. But that doesn’t mean He’s absent.”

Sam shook his head. “Those soldiers are landing in Afghanistan even now, and they’re going to die for nothing.”

“We won’t win?” George asked.

“The Taliban will be overthrown from power but the war won’t end there. They will continue to fight until 2010 at least, and there will be no end in sight then. Thousands are going to die, and it’s for nothing.”

When the president had come to The Pile, Sam had chanted with the crowd and he had wanted vengeance. He’d known this war was coming, and it had felt right, but he hadn’t been remembering what he knew about the future then; he’d been focused on the immediate past. He knew now that it was in vain.

“Not for nothing, Sam. For freedom of those that cannot fight for themselves.”

Sam sighed but did not speak.

George straightened in his chair and lifted the remote to turn off the TV. When the screen went black, Sam turned to look at him.

“You have faced many things, Sam, more than anyone should have to, but you have never been in a war like that. I have, and I know how those soldiers feel. Their lives are not being thrown away. They’re giving them to a cause they believe in.”
“You don’t think they’re just following orders?” Sam asked.

“No. I think they’re doing what they believe is right. I was. My friends were, too. Those that died were probably scared at the end, but I believe they went with the pride of knowing what they were making the ultimate sacrifice for. You say the Taliban will be overthrown.”

“There will be a new government,” Sam agreed. “The Taliban won’t be in power the same way, but they will still have power. Bin Laden, the man behind the horror of September 11th, won’t be caught. He was still at large when I came back, and for all I know he will be another decade after that.”

“He is just one man. It was not him alone that sent those planes. It was a network of people, and they’re who we’re fighting. Can you tell me none of them will die?”

Sam shook his head. “No.”

“Then it’s for a reason. And it’s different for the people fighting them now. When I went to war, we knew not all Germans were evil. Some of them were just soldiers drafted into a war they didn’t want either. They were forced to be there. But I still killed them without hesitation because they were the enemy, and I knew I was doing the right thing. I was defending the people that couldn’t defend themselves.”

“But people are going to die,” Sam said. “Not just soldiers. Civilians were killed by those bombs today. They were no more at fault that the people in the towers, but they lost their lives anyway.”

“That is war.” George picked up the whiskey from the table at his elbow and sipped it then set the glass down again. “In April 1945, my unit was attached to the 89th Infantry Division. We fought out way to Ohrdruf and found the concentration camp there. I won’t say we liberated it, because the battle was won when we arrived, but we were the first troops those poor people saw. Some of them found the strength to lift us into the air. I never understood the power of joy before that day.”

Sam had heard of Ohrdruf. It was a subcamp of the Buchenwald installation. The Germans had known the troops were coming, and they had evacuated most of the camp before they arrived, leading thousands of prisoners on a death march to Buchenwald. It had been a part of Sam’s education because it was liberated by the Americans and became a rallying point for the government to show the atrocities of the Germans. He had never imagined George would have been there.

“They called us Amerikanische Engel,” he said.

“Angels,” Sam said, remembering the woman in Berlin.

“Yes. I never felt less than an angel as I did in that camp though. There were so many dead, people we’d been too late to save. They lay in piles coated in lime and in half-cremated pyres from where the fire hadn’t burned long enough before the rain came. But there were living, too. People that looked like skeletons and were scarred and covered with sores. I tell you, Sam, I have never seen smiles like theirs before or since. Even the ones that were too sick to move to us smiled. They thought we were there to save them.”

“You were,” Sam said.

“We were,” George said. “But there is only so much saving you can do after something like that. You know yourself, Sam, that there are some wounds that cannot be healed by medicine or time. Scars in the mind that will haunt you forever.” He sighed. “We gave them candy from our rations.
Most of the ones that ate it were sick. The others held it as if it was a treasure they'd never dreamed of having again. Some hid it—used to protecting their meager rations at all costs—and other cradled it and kissed the wrappers. They tried to help us, too. I was detailed to dig a mass grave with the rest of my unit. The prisoners tried to help us. Some of them could barely stand, but they wanted to honor their dead, people that had been just like them, people that could have been them if they’d not been lucky enough to be overlooked.”

“You were fighting for a cause that counted,” Sam said, understanding now why George had shared this story after so long.

“I was, just like those soldiers heading to Afghanistan are now. They are why I stayed in the army after the war was over. I wanted to be there, trained and ready, to protect the next person that needed it. And I wanted revenge. If there was another war like that, people that suffered to that extreme, I want to be a part of making it right.”

“So it’s about revenge?” Sam asked.

“It’s about both. I can tell you each of those soldiers will have the image of the burning towers in their mind every day, but they will also have the faces of the people they see there that need to be protected. I think that is something worth fighting for. Can you really tell me you don’t after what you did and saw there?”

Sam thought he understood what George was saying, but he couldn’t forget the number of flag-draped coffins he would see coming back.

“You did something great, going to New York for that day, and they’re doing something great, going to Afghanistan.”

“I didn’t do anything great,” Sam said. “I was as much a victim as anyone.”

He hadn’t told anyone what had happened before the towers fell, how he had been so scared or that he’d initially been unable to help anyone at all, least of all the many he’d planned to save. He thought he should tell George though. He had shared this part of his past and he deserved the same honesty from Sam.

“I went to save as many as I could,” he said. “But I only saved one. When the plane hit, I was useless, terrified. I didn’t think of Michael and what he had done to protect me. I just thought I was going to die. And there were so many people there that needed me. I didn’t know how to help though, so I found one woman and I helped her. I led her out of the tower, leaving everyone else behind.”

“I know about the woman,” George said quietly.

“How?” Sam asked.

“There was a picture of you in the New York Times with her.”

Sam’s heart skipped. He had no idea he’d been captured by a photographer. Nothing but getting her away had seemed to matter in that moment. He wondered at the miracle it was the photo had even made it out of there before the towers fell.

“You were carrying her,” George said.

“I had to,” Sam said. “We were nearly out of time.”
“And by doing that, you saved her. Perhaps you couldn’t do what you had gone to do, but I don’t think you failed. I think that was the reality of the day. You could only save one woman, but that’s one more than many others. I can’t imagine what you went through, but I know you have nothing to be ashamed of. It’s human to be scared, but it’s also human to protect yourself. You didn’t. You put her first and saved a life. Even if you cannot see it, Missouri and I are proud of what you did. We look at that picture and see an amazing man.”

“And the fact I didn’t even try to stop it happening in the first place?” Sam asked.

“You couldn’t have,” George said. “You know that better than anyone. No one could have stopped it but the monsters that flew the planes. It was them that failed, not you. They failed at being human. They became demons that day.” He frowned. “Is that what this is really about? Are you seeing the soldiers that are going to war as more people you can’t save?”

Sam looked away. George had been able to see what he hadn’t even been able to admit to himself. He felt guilty that there was going to be more death that he couldn’t stop.

“It’s not your fault,” George said, hearing the answer in Sam’s silence. “You have lived with more than anyone should have to, and you have done more. You have to give up the responsibility to a higher power.”

Sam’s lips twisted into a mirthless smile. “Like God?”

“Only if you choose Him. Give it up to whatever force you can find believe in. Just let it go. There is nothing you could have done then and nothing you can do now. Do you understand?”

Sam didn’t think there was a higher power he could give this up to. His faith was Dean. He was the one Sam believed in. and he could never give this burden to him, even in thought. As little as he wanted it, it was his alone to bear.

“Let it go, Sam,” George said. “It will break you otherwise, and you know you cannot let that happen.”

That was the truth. Sam had to be strong to face Lucifer and win. As cowardly as it seemed, he was going to have to give up what had happened and how he felt about it if he was going to save next time.

“Thanks,” he said quietly. “I needed to hear that.”

“I know,” George said blandly. “Can we turn the TV on again now? Wheel of Fortune will be on, and I don’t want to miss humanity at its most illiterate worst.”

Sam laughed. “Sure, George. Whatever you want.”

George turned on the TV and settled against his cushions to watch. Sam watched with him, but his mind was working. The next years were going to be tough, there was a lot of loss coming, but he had to be strong for it. He couldn’t let himself wallow in guilt again.

Not if he wanted to save the world.
Chapter Fifty-Six

Sam checked his reflection in the mirror and adjusted his black tie. The suit he was wearing was grey, almost silver, and it was one of the outfits he was glad Dean wasn’t there to see. He was in Vegas though, in 2002, and he was going to blend in at the casino, even if it was his first time visiting one in formal attire.

He and Dean made a yearly pilgrimage to Vegas, but theirs was usually a low budget excursion in a motel on the outskirts of the city, sticking to the El Cortez and Arizona Charlie’s for betting—despite Dean’s protests—and venturing into the bigger casinos on the strip to soak up the atmosphere and for Dean to scout for a date for the night. At least they had. Dean hadn’t been in the mood to visit in 2010, no more than Sam had. He was back this year, though, as it was his birthday and he wanted to celebrate in style. It wasn’t every day you turned fifty.

It was strange to him to celebrate such a milestone birthday, especially as he didn’t really feel it, at least not physically. Surely an ordinary fifty-year-old would be different to a man frozen at twenty-six. He had noticed the differences in Missouri creeping up on them over the years. Her features became softer and fine lines had begun to appear on her face, and she was only a few years older than Sam.

With each year that passed, Sam expected to start fielding questions about his unchanged appearance and age. He had concealed what he could with his beard, but he saw the fact it was wrong, even if no one else did. Perhaps they were just so accustomed to Sam’s preserved face that they didn’t notice it anymore. Perhaps they didn’t want to notice, knowing there was no logical explanation for it. Ray and Carl were only a little older than him, but they looked their age now. Hard labor and stress had aged them along with nature. Sam always expected them to be the ones to question him as they had known him since the beginning. They didn’t though, so Sam breathed a sigh of relief and carried on as normal each time he saw them.

He was enjoying being in Vegas alone. He’d gotten a suite at the Bellagio with a spectacular view of the fountains, and he had spent the first night of his stay in the hotel’s casino, working through the tables. He’d not had much luck, but he’d not cared. He always allowed himself more financial freedom when away from home.

His plan for that night was to go to Caesar’s Palace to tour the tables and maybe catch a show at the Magical Empire.

Though he wasn’t lonely, a part of him wished he’d brought Missouri with him. Unlike George, who would have hated the noise and crowds, Missouri would have been excited. He thought he would bring her next year for her fifty-fourth birthday. Perhaps he could persuade James and Tess to join them. They could leave Patience with Tess’ parents for a weekend, and they could make it a family affair.

Satisfied with his appearance, he grabbed his wallet and made his way out of his room and to the elevators. He passed through the vast lobby, skirting his way around guests and visitors, and went out onto The Strip. There was a show in progress, and Sam stopped a moment to watch the fountains dance to the tune of God Bless America before moving onto the Boulevard and heading north. The crowds were out in force, and Sam had to square his shoulders and not allow himself to
be buffeted by people pushing in the opposite direction. Pamphlets were slapped at him by smut peddlers, but he let them fall away from him instead of taking them. They fell to carpet the sidewalk with thousands of others. There were pan handlers, too, dodging the cops that moved them along routinely, and Sam kept a roll of bills in his pocket to give to them as he passed.

Crowded as it was, as annoying as the peddlers were and how he felt like he was barging his way through a mosh pit, Sam was enjoying himself. There was something uplifting about the bright lights and chatter of tourists enjoying Vegas. He felt like an anonymous part of them. No one there knew who he was or what he had done in his life. He was just another man. There was no weight on his shoulders for a while.

He cut right and walked past the impressive statue of Augustus Caesar that people were posing in front of for photographs. In 2010, Sam had a photo of Dean imitating the pose in front of the statue from a previous trip. Sam had always liked the picture because it was one of the rare times Dean let himself be a normal guy. You could see in his eyes that he wasn’t thinking of what they had lost or stood to lose; he was just enjoying himself. That day hadn’t happened yet for Dean, but it would, and Sam knew his past self was going to feel great that day, seeing Dean happy.

He walked through the lobby that separated the stores from the casino and went into the world of music, voices, and the bells and whistles of slot machines. Feeling his heart lift with excitement, Sam strode towards the roulette table and took out his wallet. A game was already in progress, and Sam watched the white ball spin around the wheel. It landed on black twenty, and a man whooped and said, “Cashing out,” with glee.

The croupier nodded and counted out the winnings in chips then handed them to the man who slung his arm around a woman in a red cocktail dress as they strode away from the table.

Sam stepped into his place and pulled out his wallet. He counted out five hundred-dollar bills and set them down on the table. “Change, please,” he said.

The croupier took the money and posted it into a lock box and slid across five yellow chips. Sam waited until the four other people playing had received their chips, and at the croupier’s call of, “Place your bets,” Sam set them down on red two, thinking it might be a lucky number for the day since he was there to celebrate his birthday.

The croupier started the wheel spinning and said, “No more bets.”

Sam watched the ball spin with a wide smile on his face, feeling the buzz of the bet. The smile didn’t fade when the ball came to a rest on black thirty as there were other people celebrating. He knew the only real winners in a casino were the owners, but people were always pleased, even with the smallest wins.

The croupier paid out and Sam swapped another five bills for chips. He was deciding where to put them, thinking maybe five for May would be a better lucky charm, when a woman in a black mini-dress sidled up beside him and said, “Black thirteen.”

Sam turned to her and raised an eyebrow. “Thirteen? Don’t you think that’s maybe unlucky advice to give?”

“Trust me,” she said with a wink.

Sam shrugged and, when instructed, he laid his chips down on black thirteen. The woman looped her arm through Sam’s and said, “Hold your breath. It’s lucky.”
Sam laughed and then obeyed, drawing it in deep and then holding the air in his lungs.

The croupier spun the wheel. “No more bets.”

Sam’s eyes followed the ball as it made its rotations and came to a bouncing stop. The breath rushed out of him, and the woman that had advised him threw her arms around his neck. She was tall enough to not need to stretch high, a rarity for Sam. The last person that had come close was Jessica.

“She’s thirteen,” the croupier said.

Sam extricated himself from the woman and held up his hand. “Yeah. Cashing out.”

The croupier paid out on the lesser winnings first and then counted Sam’s chips into a velvet bag which he handed to Sam. “Congratulations, Sir.”

“Thanks,” Sam said in a wondering tone, then he turned to the woman that had given him the tip. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” she said with a wink. “Are you going to find a new table for us to clear or are you giving up while your luck is in?”

“I’m cashing out,” Sam said. “I think my luck is spent for the night. You have to come with me.”

She grinned. “Sure thing. Let’s go…”

“Sam,” he supplied.

“Nice to meet you, Sam,” she said. “I’m Nancy.” She looped her arm through his and they walked to the cash desk together.

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Sam had to go through the process of showing his ID and filling out a tax form before they would give him his winnings. When they finally handed him a plastic wallet emblazoned with the Caesar’s logo, Sam thought that was pretty poor anti-theft protection. Anyone that saw them with one of those wallets in their hands was going to tag them as prime targets to be mugged.

He thanked the attendant and turned to Nancy where she leaned against the counter. “Your winnings,” he said, holding out the wallet.

Her mouth dropped open. “No! I can’t do that!”

“You can and should,” Sam said. “It was your tip that won it for me. I’d have been a loser on red five without you.”

She held up her hands, palms facing him. “Really, I can’t!”

“Why not?” Sam asked.

“It wouldn’t be right.”

Sam tugged her away from the people that were queuing to cash out, listening to their conversation with interest. “I mean this in the least rich asshole-ish way possible, really, but I don’t need this money. If you tell me the same thing, we’ll find the first pan handler outside and give it to them. If not, why not take it?”
She pressed her lips together in a thin line as she considered and then they curved into a wide smile and she threw her arms around him. “Thank you!” she squealed in his ear.

Sam laughed and, when she stepped back from him, her eyes wide and bright with excitement, he handed her the wallet. “Do you have a safe in your room?”

She hugged the money against her chest and shook her head. “I’m amazed my room even has a coffee maker it’s such a dump. I definitely don’t have a safe.”

“You can put it in mine,” Sam offered. “I’m at the Bellagio.”

She began to nod and then shook her head. “The hell with that. I’m getting myself a room here. I can afford it.”

“You can,” Sam said, grinning at her. “Let’s go.”

They rushed out of the casino and into the forum. Sam was directing Nancy to the hotel foyer when she stopped dead suddenly.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Have you ever wanted something that you knew was a bad idea but you wanted it anyway?”

Sam thought of Ruby and demon blood, of bringing Dean back to his house after he’d been attacked by the djinn, of a hundred other mistakes. “Yes,” he said.

“Me too.” She looked him full in the face, her own shining with excitement. “Ever since I was a kid, I’ve wanted to march into a store I couldn’t afford to shop in and buy something so ridiculously extravagant and pointless I’d never forgive myself for it. It was a cake in the fancy French bakery window when I was young and all I had was my allowance, a dress in Rodeo Drive when I grew up. I’ve never done it.”

Sam looked around at the stores. “Well, there are stores here… Where do you want to go?”

Nancy scanned the store fronts and said, “Shoes!”

Sam laughed and followed her as she danced across the forum towards Christian Louboutin. She came to a stop just inside the door and looked around, her eyes gleaming.

“Shoes aren’t pointless,” Sam said.

“Louboutin heels when you work in a call center are.”

“Okay then. Let’s shop.”

Nancy danced over to a display of heels, each standing alone on a small shelf and ran her hand over the edge of the shelf with a look of longing.

“How pointless are we going?” Sam asked, looking at the heels with awe. Some of them were so high Sam couldn’t imagine how they could be worn. “Do you want to be able to walk in them at least?”

Nancy picked up a black shoe with the iconic red sole and white ribbons to be wrapped around the ankle and said, “Do you think I could walk in these?”

“I don’t think anyone human could,” Sam said.
“Then I’m trying them.”

She caught the eye on a sales assistant in a black pantsuit and a pair of impressively high heels and she hurried over.

“I’d like to try these in an eight,” she said.

The assistant nodded and walked Nancy over to a cushioned seating area. She instructed her to make herself comfortable and then disappeared though a door at the back of the store.

Nancy shivered. “I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

“Neither can I,” Sam said. “You’ll never be able to walk in them.”

“Don’t be such an old man.”

Sam grinned, thinking of what she would say if he explained just how much of an old man he was.

“Are you going to tell me I’ll break my ankle in them?” she asked, a teasing glint in her eyes.

Sam shook his head. “I’m all about free will. It’s your ankles you’re risking. You can buy and wear what you like.”

“Thanks,” she said brightly, then smiled as the assistant came back with a tan box in her hands.

She set it down on the seat beside Nancy and opened it. She took out one of the shoes and made a point of showing it at every angle before giving it to Nancy. Nancy toed off the black, glittery heels that she was wearing—which Sam noticed were also quite high—and slid the new shoe onto her foot with a look of such innocent joy that Sam had to smile at her. She put on the other shoe and tied the ribbons around her ankles then rose to her feet with Sam’s hand steadying her. She took three steps across the carpeted floor and clapped her hands. “This is them. These are the ones I want.”

“Very good, madam. Would you like to wear them out of the store?”

“Yes, please.”

The assistant put Nancy’s abandoned heels into the box and carried it to the register. She rang up the sale and put the box in a paper bag with the Christian Louboutin signature logo on the side. Nancy’s hands shook as she took the money from the wallet and paid.

As they walked from the store, Nancy hook her arm through his. Sam wondered if she was doing it as a friendly gesture or to steady herself. She could walk perfectly well in the shoes, but she seemed so happy Sam thought she might float away if she didn’t tether herself to something solid.

“Where next?” Sam asked.

“I’m going to get a room and then we’re going to get some drinks,” she said.

“Sounds good,” Sam said, walking toward the hotel entrance.

xXx

They sat in the Shadow Bar, watching the women dance behind the screens. It was mesmerizing, the way they moved, just the silhouettes of the women that looked naked but Sam knew weren’t.
“Enjoying the view?” Nancy asked, nudging Sam’s side with her elbow.

“It’s pretty impressive,” Sam said.

“It is,” she said appreciatively. “Becky would have loved it.”

“Becky?”

“My ex-girlfriend,” she said with an impish grin. “The reason I came to Vegas in the first place.”

“Tell me about her,” Sam said.

Nancy raised an eyebrow. “That’s it? My big reveal that I’m gay and you have nothing else to say? You’re not going to stomp off because I’ve ruined your plans for a wild weekend of sex and partying in Las Vegas?”

“No,” Sam said. “You’re far too interesting to waste a weekend with on sex, and I do want to hear about your ex.”

The truth was Sam’s interest in Nancy had never been sexual. She was enthralling and Sam wanted to get to know her, but he had no desire for physical company. He could not explain it to himself properly, much less anyone else, but with Jess alive in the world, living her life as it would be before she met Sam, it would feel like cheating.

The woman he had loved, would always love, was out there somewhere, and in only two short years, Sam’s past self would meet her and they would fall in love. For Sam to spend a weekend with another woman would be wrong. It was strange as he had been with other women since her death and it hadn’t troubled him after a while, but knowing he was so close to being with her in some form made the situation feel complicated.

“Becky…” She sighed. “She’s beautiful, smart, funny, ambitious, but also a massive bitch.”

Sam choked on his mouthful of beer and Nancy laughed.

“We met through work. I was in the call center and she was management. Unofficially, you weren’t supposed to have relationships with co-workers, not that they had any right to an opinion, but Becky and I didn’t care. We were together a year and things were great. We were talking about moving in together.” She scowled. “Then I got fired.”

“What happened?” Sam asked.

“Some asshole made a complaint about my ‘telephone manner’. I was dealing with his initial insurance claim for a car crash, getting the information for the investigator, and in the process of getting the details of the accident, he told me the person that allegedly hit him was Asian. He didn’t say Asian though. He said some pretty awful things about them that made it clear he was a raging racist, and I pointed out the errors in his thinking.”

“What did you do?” Sam asked.

“I explained, quite politely, that I had no interest in helping a bigot like him, and next time to forget the seatbelt so maybe the world would be spared one less asshole when a decent human ran him off the road.” She shrugged. “Maybe it wasn’t that polite. Anyway, we got into a shouting match that was heard by most of the call operators and a passing manager. I was summoned by management where I was raked over the coals and fired.”
“Becky fired you?” Sam asked incredulously.

“No. In fact, I thought she’d understand, but when she came to my apartment that night, it was with a box of my stuff and an explanation that she couldn’t be with someone that didn’t respect the reputation her senior position demanded. Apparently, I made a fool of her acting the way I had.”

“What a bitch!”

“Exactly. So I did what any sensible woman would do with no job and a broken heart. I cashed my last paycheck and drove to Vegas. I planned to burn through my money and then go home and find a new job. Maybe not the best idea I’ve ever had, but I was pissed.”

“Maybe not the best idea, but you’ve done okay out of it,” Sam said.

She patted her purse where she had stowed the money she’d not put away in her room safe.

“Tell me about you, Sam,” she said. “What brings you to Vegas?”

“It’s my birthday Thursday, so I came for an early celebration.”

“Alone?”

Sam shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea at the time. It was okay, but I’m having a much better time now I’ve found you.”

“Of course you are,” she said brightly. “I’m awesome.”

Sam laughed and shook his head. “And so modest.”

“Modesty’s for idiots. Why not blow your own horn. You won’t find many other people in life that will do it for you.”

Sam had Missouri to boost him up, though her view was skewed as she forgave all the mistakes he had made, too. He and Dean used to do it for each other, but that was before hunting became so much more than killing monsters, when the world was at stake. By the end they were just trying to keep their heads above water.

“What’s with the face?” Nancy asked.

Sam shook his head quickly and smiled. “Nothing. Just thinking.”

“No deep thoughts today,” she said. “It’s not the time or place to be serious. We’re in Vegas.”

A waitress came to their table then, halting Sam’s reply. “Can I get you another drink?” she asked.

“I’ll have another mimosa, please,” Nancy said. “Sam?”

“Beer, please.”

The waitress took Nancy’s empty glass and exchanged it for an advertising flier similar to the ones handed out on the strip, minus the naked women on them. Nancy picked it up and her eyes widened.

“Phyliss Diller!”

“Who?”
Nancy rolled her eyes. “Phyliss Diller. Actress, comedian, gay icon. She’s amazing. It says here she’s playing a show at the Suncoast tomorrow night. It must be her last. I heard she was retiring.”

“Why would a waitress in Caesar’s give us a flyer for a show in the Suncoast?” Sam asked. “Isn’t that kinda stupid from a promotional stand point?”

Nancy laughed. “Poor Sam. So innocent. She’s one of mine.”

“You?”

“You’ve heard of a gaydar, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well mine is pretty fine-tuned. So is hers apparently. She gave it to me, not us.”

“Okay,” Sam said slowly. “So are you going to the show?”

“If I can get tickets, I am. I’ll go by the box office in the morning.”

“Not now?”

Nancy rolled her eyes. “Sam, there is a beautiful woman slipping me Phyliss Diller fliers and bringing me drinks. I am going to capitalize on that this evening.”

Sam half-rose. “You want me to go?”

“Sit your ass down,” she commanded. “You can stay until she gets off work.”

Sam sat quickly and said, “Won’t that give the wrong message, you spending the evening with me?”

“No. I plan to flirt so incredibly well that she’ll be in no doubt who I am interested in, and you will keep me company. Besides, she already knows what I’m about. You’ll be a mysterious friend.”

“Me? A mystery?”

“Yes,” she said firmly. “And if she gets a good look in your eyes, she’ll see your secrets, too.”

“I don’t have secrets,” Sam lied.

She gave him a sympathetic smile and patted his hand. “Sam, you really, really do. And you’re not nearly so good at hiding them as you think.”

“What do you think they are then?” Sam asked.

“I don’t know yet. But I intend to find out.”

Sam took a draw on his beer and tried to school his features into a politely confused expression, one of a man without secret. From Nancy’s knowing smile, he was pretty sure he’d failed.

xXx

Nancy called Sam the next morning on the number he’d written on a napkin for her and announced that she had two tickets to the show and he was coming. He’d had no idea what to expect from Phyliss Diller, having somehow missed her before then—something Nancy said should have been
a statistical impossibility. He’d enjoyed it though, and he had been smiling widely when they left the Suncoast.

They didn’t talk as they walked through the crowds back to Sam’s hotel; they just walked hand in hand and enjoyed the bright lights and atmosphere. When they reached the Bellagio, a crowd had formed to see the last fountain show of the day.

“Let’s stay and watch,” Nancy said.

Sam checked his watch. “We have five minutes still. Let’s watch from my room. The view is great.”

Nancy nodded and they hurried into the hotel and up to Sam’s room. He unlocked the door with the keycard and gestured Nancy in ahead of him. She wandered into the living room and sighed out a breath.

“This is… wow. You really weren’t kidding when you said you didn’t need the money.”

“I really wasn’t,” Sam said, shrugging off his jacket and throwing it onto the armchair before loosening his tie.

“Are you some little rich boy that inherited it all from Mummy and Daddy?” she teased.

“No, but I can’t say I really worked for it. I got lucky on the stock market and have been building from that ever since.”

“A dotcom billionaire?” she asked.

“Not even close, but my friend and I did well. Would you believe I worked construction at the same time?”

She looked him up and down. “No, I really wouldn’t.”

Sam laughed and walked to open the window. “You’re going to miss it,” he said.

She hurried over and peered out. “Look at that view,” she said. “You can see the whole strip from here. Oh! They’re starting.”

Sam caught the strains of “My Heart Will Go On” as the fountains began to dance. The terrible song aside, it was an impressive sight that didn’t lose its magic, no matter how many times he saw it. He knew Nancy had seen it before, but she seemed to appreciate the view from a higher point. She watched, enchanted by the show, and when it came to a close, she sighed happily.

“That was perfect.”

“Do you want a drink?” Sam asked.

“Don’t suppose you’ve got mimosas in that mini bar, have you?”

“It’s not so mini,” Sam said, opening a cabinet to reveal the large concealed fridge. “And I am sure I have all the fixings.”

He took a bottle of champagne from the fridge and some orange juice and set them down on the cabinet to retrieve a glass from a separate side of the cabinet. He tore off the foil and unwound the wire cage from the champagne bottle, Nancy watching him with interest. “I’ve not done this much before,” Sam said.
“You’re a strange rich boy.”

Sam winked. “I stick close to my roots.”

She looked around the opulent room and raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, I can tell.”

Sam gripped the cork and slowly turned the bottle. He thought he was doing a good job until the cork flew from his grip and champagne flowed out. He held it away from him, and when it had settled, he poured some into the glass and topped it up with juice, ignoring Nancy’s laughter at his ineptness.

He handed her the glass and took out a beer for himself.

“I want to see the bedroom,” Nancy announced.

Sam pointed her to the door that led into the second bathroom, grinning as she turned back at the door and scowled at him. “This isn’t the bedroom, Sam.”

“No, but I thought it was impressive and you should see that, too,” Sam said.

She shook her head and went into the bedroom. “Oh wow,” she said, walking inside.

Sam followed her in and watched her face as she admired the vast bed with its gold and cream eiderdown and piled pillows.

“Okay,” she said. “This is where I’m staying next time I’m here.”

“You can stay here tonight,” Sam offered. “I can crash on the couch.”

She smiled at him. “That’s sweet, but I have a hot date at 3am. I’m meeting Holly when she gets off work.”

“Holly? Oh, the waitress last night.” Sam had left the bar late, while she was still working, but Nancy had stayed, seemingly involved in flirting each time Holly passed their table.

“Yep.”

“Did you have a good night?” Sam asked.

“A lady doesn’t give details, Sam.”

Sam choked. “That’s not what I meant.”

She laughed. “I know. I was teasing you. We did have a good night. We just talked until she got off work, and then we went back to my room to talk some more. That’s all we did. Talk. She’s a really interesting person. I’m hoping we can talk more tonight.” She winked. “But I’m in town a few more days, so I’m hoping we’ll get to a third date.” She set down her glass on the bedside table and flopped down on the bed. “Now, it’s your turn, Sam.” She patted the bed beside her. “Come on. Let’s talk.”

Sam toed off his loafers, even though Nancy was still wearing her new shoes, the red soles standing out starkly against the cream and gold bedding, before throwing himself down beside her, making her bounce and laugh.

“What do you want to talk about?” Sam asked.
“Your secrets.”

“I told you I don’t have any.”

“But you lied. Tell me about your life.”

Sam sighed. “Okay. I live in Kansas, and I worked construction until recently. I share my house with my friend called George. He’s seventy-nine, and he’s one of the most amazing men I’ve ever met.”

“You live with an old guy,” she asked, her brow wrinkled. “Is he like a grandparent?”

“More like a father really,” Sam said. “And you wouldn’t know how old he was just talking to him. He’s still really sharp. I have another friend called Missouri. She’s the best woman in the world.”

“I’ll try not to be insulted,” Nancy said.

Sam patted her arm. “Don’t be. Missouri is great. She’s an actual psychic. She runs a business in town, helping people.”

“A genuine psychic?”

“Yes. It seems crazy if you’re not a believer, but if you get to know her, you’ll understand. She’s completely honest.”

“I am a believer,” she said. “I’ve wasted a bunch of money on frauds, trying to find the real deal for years.”

“You’ll have to meet her,” Sam said.

She adjusted herself against the pillows and smiled. “I’d like that. Now, since they’re not secret, tell me about other people in your life.”

“I have a brother,” Sam said. “But I’ve not seen him in a while.”

“Why not?” she asked interestedly.

“Our lives took different paths.”

“Do you miss him?”

“More than anything,” Sam said seriously.

“Then you should find him again. No fight can be worth losing a brother over.”

“It wasn’t like that,” Sam said. “He’s just far away, and I can’t reach him.”

“Don’t they have cell phones where he is?”

Sam redirected rather than lie to her. “What about you? Family?”

“Yes. Very All-American,” she said. “Dad is an accountant and Mom volunteers at the hospital when she’s not working at the library. I have two brothers that I get on okay with. They’re older than me, and we never really had much in common, apart from our taste in women.”

Sam laughed. “Well that’s a conversation starter at least.”
“We don’t really talk about it. I had all the anxiety before coming out when I was a teenager, but they took it in their stride. I don’t think they were that surprised. I had a crazy obsession with Winona Ryder going on. I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world and I didn’t hide it.”

“She’s one of the most,” Sam said.

“What about you though? You’ve told me about family, but what about romance?”

Sam sighed. “There’s only been one woman in my life I’ve really loved like that. Her name was Jess, and she was everything I ever wanted.”

“How did you lose her?” Nancy asked.

“How did you know I lost her?”

“Past tense. What happened?”

“She died when she was twenty-one. She was murdered,”

Nancy rolled onto her side and laid a hand over Sam’s heart. “I’m so sorry,” she said gently.

“Thanks,” Sam said. “It was a long time ago, but it feels very close now. I’m missing her more than ever.”

“Did they catch the person that did it?” she asked.

“Yeah, he was killed.”

“That’s something.”

“Yes,” Sam said firmly. “It is.”

Azazel had died at Dean’s hands, and for a handful of minutes, Sam had been elated, but that had lasted until Dean admitted that he’d made a deal for Sam, and suddenly Azazel didn’t seem so important anymore.

“That’s your secret,” she stated.

“Yes,” Sam said, thinking it was certainly one of them, the only one he could share in any form with her.

He expected her to say something else, but she adjusted herself so she was lying down with her head on Sam’s chest. It felt good to have contact like this without expectation of more. He could hold her and not feel like he was betraying Jess. It was just about comfort and friendship.

Sam wrapped his arm around her and smiled when she sighed against him. “You mind if I stay awhile?”

“Stay as long as you like,” Sam said. “But don’t forget your date.”

“I won’t,” she said.

She nestled closer to him and said, “Tell me something else. What’s your favorite color?”

Sam chuckled. “You wanted my secrets and now you want to know my favorite color? That’s
“I’m a random person. Haven’t you noticed?”

Sam thought of the way she had entered his world only a day before with a tip for the roulette table and how they now found themselves lying together in Sam’s bed, perfectly comfortable.

“Yeah, I noticed.”

“So, what color?”

Sam thought of Jessica’s piercing eyes, the way her mood had always shone in them, bright cerulean when she was happy, and stormy navy when she was upset.

“Blue. My favorite color is blue…”

xXx

Sam’s flight was delayed, so instead of being able to spend his actual birthday at home, he didn’t arrive until almost evening. He was disappointed, but he supposed it didn’t matter. He’d already had his celebration in Vegas with Nancy.

He’d been sad to say goodbye to her in the middle of the night, before she left for her date with Holly, and he hoped she would keep in contact. She had his number and they’d exchanged email addresses before they parted. He planned to email her a copy of the photograph they’d had taken of the pair of them with a Centurion in Caesar’s.

As he pulled up in front of the house, he saw Missouri’s car. He was pleased to see it there as he wanted to see her, and he smiled as he parked beside it and climbed out. He strode up the steps and unlocked the door, calling, “Hey, guys.”

“In here,” Missouri called from the living room.

Sam dropped his bag down onto the floor and went toward the voice, stopping dead as he caught sight of Missouri and George.

“Happy Birthday!” they cheered together.

Missouri was wearing deep blue evening dress and a cone shaped, colorful party hat; in her hand was a bunch of balloons. George had foregone the party hat, but he had a noisemaker that he was blowing. There were more balloons around the room and hanging above the arch that led into the kitchen was a banner emblazoned with: Happy Birthday Sam!

Missouri released the balloons and they floated to the ceiling as she rushed forward and pulled him into a hug. Sam hugged her in return and when she pulled back, he kissed her cheek.

“Thank you,” he said. “This is great.” His eyes found George. “Really.”

Missouri patted his cheek. “I thought you were going to miss it. What happened?”

“My flight was delayed,” Sam said. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” George said. “You’ll want to change though. Missouri has made us a reservation.”

“What am I changing into?” Sam asked.
“Your black pinstripe,” Missouri said. “You need to change, too, George.”

Sam went into his bedroom and stripped off his travel clothes and tossed them into the laundry hamper then took his black pinstripe suit from the closet and began to dress, choosing a grey tie to complete the outfit. When he was dressed, he went to retrieve his dress loafers from his bag. He went into the living room to wait for George. Missouri set down the phone and said. “I’ve called us a cab.”

“We’re not driving?” Sam asked.

“No,” she said firmly. “Tonight, we’re celebrating.”

George came into the room then, dressed in a brown suit and adjusting his tie.

“Look at you both,” Missouri said. “I’m going to have two handsome men on my arms tonight.”

George raised an eyebrow, but Sam smiled. He was feeling good that they’d chosen to mark his birthday like this, and he was looking forward to an evening out with the people he loved.

As Missouri had said, they were going to celebrate.

xXx

Missouri had booked them a table at Café Provence in Kansas City. They’d been there only twice before and had loved it both times. They rarely had an excuse for a meal this fancy though, and Sam was touched that the occasion of his birthday warranted it.

They’d been seated at a table in the corner, where they could speak in peace, and Sam was enjoying watching the people around them, trying to guess at their lives, wondering what brought them there that evening.

A waiter in a white shirt and black vest came to their table and handed out black leather-bound menus. “Here you are, madame, messieurs.”

“Thank you,” Missouri said.

“May I get you anything while you wait? Would you like a selection of breads?”

“No, thank you,” Sam said.

The waiter spirited away to another table and they opened their menus. Sam stared at the wealth on offer and felt a pang of hunger.

“What’s Filet Mignon Bordelaise?” George asked.

“Steak,” Sam said.

George rolled his eyes. “I know that much. I want to know what the Bordelaise is.”

Sam checked the menu, seeing the writing underneath the names of the meals. It was smaller than the rest, and he guessed George hadn’t been able to read it. He needed glasses, Sam was sure, but he wouldn’t talk about it.

“It’s a red wine sauce,” Sam said.

“I’ll have that then,” George said, snapping his menu closed.
“Missouri?” Sam asked.

“Hmm?” She looked up vaguely. “Oh. Sorry. I was enjoying the menu. It’s almost as good as the eating itself. I’m going to have the salmon.”

Sam grinned. “And I’m having lamb.”

He caught the eye of the waiter again he came to their table. They placed their orders, Sam and Missouri attempting the French names and George stubbornly saying, “Steak.” As much as Sam and Missouri enjoyed eating out like this, George would have been happier eating in Daisy’s Diner. Sam was pleased he was willing to come along today though.

“Would you like to see some selections of wine to suit your orders?” the waiter asked.

George scowled down at the table top.

“I’ll just take a beer please,” Sam said.

“Make that two beers,” George said.

“Madame?”

“I’d like a glass of white wine, please, whatever you recommend, and a bottle of champagne.”

“Of course.”

“Champagne?” Sam asked when he was gone.

“We’re celebrating, Sam,” Missouri said. “It’s not every day you turn fifty.”

“And you don’t look a day over twenty-six,” George said.

Sam grinned. “Which is so convenient for everyday life in Lawrence.”

“It will be better when you’re with Dean again though,” Missouri said. “You wouldn’t want to look old when he’s still so young.”

Sam felt a pang of discomfort at what he was hiding from her. It would have been better if he was going to see Dean again, but as he wasn’t, it seemed stupid. It would be easier for him to look his age.

The waiter came back to their table with three glasses hanging from their stems in one hand and a bottle of champagne in the other. He set down glasses for each of them and expertly opened the champagne without spilling a drop—Sam had to smile as he compared it to his own messy attempts in Vegas. He poured them each a glass and then put the bottle in an ice bucket.

Missouri handed out the drinks and raised hers in a toast. “To Sam. To fifty years, and to eight more left to go.”

Sam and George clinked their glasses against hers and Sam forced a smile, but he was thinking of what those eight years really meant. After twenty-four years of life without Dean, he had eight left to live before he would die. It was a lifetime to some people, others with clocks hanging over their heads because of disease, but after living fifty years, Sam felt that it wasn’t enough. It was harder as there would be no reunion with Dean to cushion the blow, nor would he see Bobby or Castiel. Missouri and George were going to see him to the end alone.
He pushed away the dour thoughts and concentrated on how it felt to be out with his family, enjoying his birthday with them.

xXx

After dinner, Missouri wanted to continue the evening, so they went to the Jazzhaus in the city’s downtown district.

Sam hadn’t thought George would want to join them, but when Missouri explained there would be live jazz, he was eager to come along. They paid the cover at the door and went down the short flight of steps into the club’s stage area. There was a band playing an unfamiliar song, and a woman crooning along at the microphone. They chose a table close to the dancefloor with a candle in a red jar illuminating their faces with a rosy glow. They ordered drinks from a drifting waitress and Missouri took her brand-new digital camera from her purse. She’d bought it for their last trip to visit James and his family. It was an indulgence, as they were very expensive, but she wanted to be able to capture Patience’s milestone moments with them without needing to pause to change rolls of film so often.

“Pose, you two,” she said, switching the camera on and aiming it at them.

Sam leaned closer to George and smiled as the flash lit and blinded them for a moment.

Missouri checked the picture on the screen and nodded to herself. “That’s perfect.”

“I’ll get one of you both if you explain how it works,” George said, holding out his hand.

Missouri explained the controls and then shifted her chair closer to Sam. Sam wrapped his arm around her and she leaned her head on his shoulder. The flash blinded again and then Missouri took back the camera and checked the photograph.

“Well?” George asked. “Did I do it right?”

“You did it perfectly,” Missouri said. “Thank you.”

Their drinks arrived, and Sam took a swig of his beer, feeling the warmth in his veins from the beers he’d drunk at dinner and the champagne of which they’d drunk two bottles between them. He’d not drunk champagne in a long time, not since he and Dean had gone to that awful swanky party when working with Bela on the ghost ship hunt. He’d spent the night with Gert draped over him, and the champagne had been a blessing then to ease his discomfort.

The music changed to a slower number, and Sam saw George’s face light up with a smile. “I haven’t heard this in the longest time,” he said.

“It’s ‘Round Midnight, isn’t it?” Missouri asked.

George nodded. “I remember the Thelonious Monk original being released in ‘44. I was in London on R&R after being released from hospital, and I danced with a young nurse called Elizabeth at the Cahoots club. She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen in my life. Excepting you, of course, Missouri.”

“Of course,” Missouri said with a laugh. “What happened next?”

“Unfortunately nothing of consequence,” George said. “The Luftwaffe came and interrupted our evening. The sirens went off and we had to part, her to the Clapham South shelter and I to join the efforts of the fire brigade for the bombed houses.” He sighed. “I often wondered what happened to
her. I didn’t even know her surname. Many relationships burned hot and short in the war. None of us knew what lay ahead for us.”

“I bet,” Missouri said. “I can imagine you as quite the heartbreaker.”

George shook his head. “I never broke a heart knowingly.”

“But you were handsome?” Missouri asked.

“I couldn’t judge,” George said. “I have a photograph in my case at home. I’ll show you one day and you can tell me.”

Missouri raised her glass of wine to him. “I’ll hold you to that.”

For a moment, they sat in silence, just listening to the music and sipping their drinks, then Missouri set down her glass and took Sam’s hand. “Dance with me,” she said.

Sam put down his beer and stood. George winked at Sam and then smiled as they walked onto the dance floor. It wasn’t that crowded, but there were enough people swaying to the gentle music that Sam didn’t feel uncomfortable. He took one of Missouri’s hands and held her waist and then they began to move. Sam didn’t think he had ever danced so much in his own time as he did during two years in the past. There were always more important things to do than something so self-serving, but he liked to feel Missouri’s hand in his and her head leaning on his chest. It was comfortable, just like his time had been with Nancy. There were never any expectations with Missouri. Sam loved her but it was an innocent love. It was something he’d never had with a woman before he was trapped in ’78.

Missouri raised her head and looked up at him. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking how much I like this,” Sam said.

She smiled widely. “Do you ever think of how far you’ve come since you’ve been here? The man I first met would never be happy doing this.”

“It was a lifetime ago,” Sam said. “I’ve changed.”

“You have,” she said. “And it’s all for the better. You seem freer now.”

“I feel it now,” Sam said, thinking of the distinction of the last word. He was freer, but the world was still turning as it should. There weren’t many more years until Lucifer, and Sam knew he would have to change then to fight him. The civilian trappings of his life would have to fall away and he would be a true hunter again. Until then he would enjoy himself.

“Don’t look so serious, Sam,” she said. “Not today. Have deep thoughts tomorrow.”

Sam smiled at her, but apparently, she wasn’t fooled. She released him and said, “Wait here,” before disappearing off to the stage. She whispered something to a man who was holding a cigarette in one hand and a trumpet in the other. He nodded and climbed on to the stage again and Missouri came back to Sam.

“What are you plotting, Missouri?” he asked.

Missouri merely smiled impishly as the song came to a close and then a rapid drum beat began. It was quickly joined by a trumpet and then a clarinet. Sam recognized the tune from somewhere, but it was Missouri that gave him the title.
“It’s Sing, Sing, Sing, Sam. My favorite.”

“It’s nice,” Sam said, edging backwards. The music was nice enough but way too fast for him to dance to authentically.

“Oh no you don’t,” Missouri said. “We’re dancing.” She took his hand and began to sway her hips to the beat.

“No way, Missouri. This is swing. I cannot swing dance!”

“Have you ever tried?” she asked then answered herself. “No, so how do you know you can’t?”

“I haven’t tried for a reason,” Sam said. “I wasn’t born in the twenties.”

She tugged his arm. “Neither was I, thank you very much, but we’re damn well going to try.”

Sam looked at her excited face, so eager, and he laughed. “Okay. Fine.”

Sure he couldn’t dance to this properly, but he could still have fun. He pulled Missouri close and said. “Fine, but if I fall on my ass, you’re picking me up.”

“Don’t I always?” she asked.

For a moment Sam thought of all the times he had nearly fallen in his time in the past, and each time Missouri and George had been there for him. He trusted them completely. They were his family.

He looked over Missouri’s shoulder at George who was smiling widely at them as he raised the camera. Sam nodded to him then fixed his attention on Missouri.

“You do,” he said. “Let’s dance.”

He spun and then dipped Missouri and she laughed.

“See, you’re getting it,” she said.

Sam nodded. “Yeah, I think I really am.”

Eight years to go. Eight years of his family before the end. If he could have days like today sprinkled among them, he could even be happy.
“All in,” Sam said, sliding his pile of pretzels to the middle of the kitchen table.

George raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“No,” Sam said defiantly.

George nodded and pushed across his own pile of the pretzels they were using as poker chips. “What have you got?”

Sam grinned as he laid his cards face up on the table.

“Four aces,” George said. “Very impressive.” Sam reached for the pot but George raised a hand. “Not as impressive as a straight flush though.” He laid down his cards and Sam saw the lined up eight through queen in spades.

“Damn,” Sam said, leaning back in his chair and watching George claim the pot. “You’re too good at this.”

“I’ve been playing longer,” George said. “And I can stay calm. Your hand is practically tattooed on your forehead. You have no face for the game.”

“My face once saved my brother’s life,” Sam said defensively.

George picked up a pretzel and snapped it between his teeth. “Go on.”

“There was this witch working out of a bar in Chicago that was using years as chips. You win, you got years of your life back. You lose… well, you aged pretty damn fast. Bobby played and lost twenty-five years. He didn’t have many more to spare. Dean went to play to win them back. He got Bobby’s but then lost fifty of his own. I got back to the hotel to find an old guy wearing his clothes and calling me Sammy.”

“And you won back his years?” George asked, sounding amazed.

“I did,” Sam said proudly. “Though he and Bobby didn’t want to let me in on the game. Like you, they thought I didn’t have the skill.”

“I understand their fear,” George said, eating another pretzel. Sam made a face and George laughed. “Shall we play again? I can float you a handful or two to bring you back into the game.”

“You just finished telling me I suck,” Sam pointed out.

“I did, but I do enjoy winning, and it’s early still.”

Sam checked the clock above the stove. “It’s past one, and we have been playing and drinking since eight.”
“That’s true,” George said. “And you can’t hold your drink any better than you can play poker.”

Sam picked up his glass of whiskey and knocked back the remainder of the liquor. “Which is why I’m going to bed. Are you crashing, too?”

“I’m an old man, Sam, I don’t need as much sleep as you immortal youngsters. I will watch some TV and eat my winnings.”

“Okay, you enjoy that,” Sam said getting to his feet. “Do you want waffles for breakfast tomorrow? I can swing by Daisy’s in the morning and pick some up, or we can go there.”

“If you bring them, I will eat them,” George said cheerfully.

Sam waved a hand as he walked away. “Night, George.”

“Goodnight, Sam.”

Sam went into the bathroom and squeezed Crest onto his toothbrush, thinking that he really needed to stop staying up drinking with George. It wasn’t good for him. But tomorrow promised to be good. With thoughts of a good shared breakfast waiting for him, Sam brushed his teeth and then went to bed, perfectly happy and having no inkling of what he would face in the morning.

xXx

Sam was always glad for Michael’s influence when he woke after a hard night’s drinking without a hangover. Instead of an aching head and rolling stomach, he woke feeling refreshed and happy after a good evening spent with his friend.

He climbed out of bed and padded barefoot out of the bedroom and into the bathroom to clean up. The shower felt good, and he was anticipating a good breakfast with George before they went to Missouri’s for their usual Sunday dinner and afternoon together.

When he was done, he went back into his bedroom and toweled off then dressed in jeans and an old and comfortable shirt. Pushing his wet hair back from his face, he hung up his towel and grabbed his boots.

It was only as he bent to lace them that he realized something was wrong. The house was too quiet. He usually woke to the sounds of the TV playing as George woke before him, but on the rare days he was up before his friend, he could hear George’s snores.

All was silent though apart from the ticking of the clock on the living room mantelpiece.

Sam went into the hall and knocked on George’s bedroom door. “You up, George?” he asked. “I’m just going to head to Daisy’s.”

There was no response, and Sam felt a knot in his stomach tighten. With a shaking hand, he knocked again, and when there was no response, he turned the handle.

He didn’t usually go into George’s bedroom except to change the bedding and collect his laundry hamper, and only then when George was in the house, too. It was George’s only space that was his alone, just as Sam’s bedroom was for him. They shared all other places: the kitchen, living room and study. George would no more enter Sam’s room without him there than Sam usually would. It was about respect. But Sam had a feeling something was wrong, and he had to go in.

The drapes were open, and the room was bathed in the morning light streaming through the east-
facing window, and George was in his bed with the blankets pulled up to his chest. He lay on his back, and Sam could see what was wrong with the scene at once.

George’s chest was unmoving.

An inarticulate cry bubbled up Sam’s throat and escaped him before he could call it back. He staggered forward, his whole body shaking now.

“George!” he said. “George, wake up!”

He knew on a rational level that George could not wake, but his heart refused to accept it. He felt that if he could just find the right words, George would wake, frowning and questioning why Sam was trying to wake him up on one of the rare mornings he was sleeping past dawn.

He reached out and touched George’s hand. It was icy cold and the flesh felt wrong against his fingers. He touched the curve of George’s throat, but there was no thrum of life there. George’s lips were slightly parted, as if the end had come on an indrawn breath, and his lips were slightly curved, as if he was happy at the end.

“No,” Sam moaned. “Please, no. Not like this.”

Nausea rose in his stomach and he rushed out of the room, reaching the toilet just in time to empty his stomach of bile that burned his throat. He rinsed his mouth with Listerine and stared into the mirror, gripping the sides of the basin. His eyes were wide and his face almost as pale as George’s had been.

There were things he needed to do, he knew, but in that moment, he couldn’t think of a single thing. He needed help. He walked slowly through the hall and into the living room where he picked up the phone and dialed a number he’d used a thousand times, but never in such a state of shock.

It rang a long time before Missouri answered, her voice clouded with sleep. “Hello.”

“You have to come,” Sam said.

“Sam? What’s wrong?”

“Please come.”

He dropped the phone onto the floor, Missouri’s voice still coming through the speaker in panicked tones, then walked back to George’s bedroom and the horror there. He looked at his friend again, and then sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Missouri is coming,” he said. “She’ll be here soon.”

Though he knew there could be no response, the silence still burned him. The old-fashioned alarm clock on George’s bedside table ticked and Sam breathed, but they were the only things in the room that moved. Everything else was still. George was still.

It seemed like it had only been moments before Sam heard the key in the lock and Missouri’s worried voice. “Sam?”

“I’m in here,” Sam said.

He heard her rushing footsteps that stopped abruptly as she reached the doorway and saw the scene inside.
“Oh,” she said weakly. “George.”

“I found him like this,” Sam said. “I don’t know what happened.”

“He must have gone in the night. Have you called an ambulance?”

“It’s too late,” Sam said dully.

Missouri came into the room and rested her hand on Sam’s head, stroking his still damp hair. “We have to do it properly, Sam,” she said.

“He wanted to be salted and burned,” Sam said.

“And he will be, but he has a doctor and people in town that know him. He can’t just disappear.”

Sam saw the sense in what she was saying, but he didn’t want it. He wanted to put George to rest now, before strangers put their hands on him and changed him.

“I’ll call them,” Missouri said.

Though it was the last thing he wanted to do, Sam nodded and turned back to George as she left the room.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said. “I’ll make sure you get what you need, but we have to do this first.”

Though George could give neither consent or argue, Sam imagined his scowl if he was able to hear. He would say he’d lived his whole life taking care of himself with the help of friends. He didn’t need strangers now just because he was dead.

Would he think Sam was failing him now?

Missouri came back into the room and said, “They’re on their way. I don’t know how long they’ll be. I told them what had happened.”

So they would not rush, Sam thought. There was no life to save here, so they could come when they were ready. It was too late to do anything for George. It was too late for all of them.

“Have you seen this, Sam?” she asked.

Sam looked up and saw she was holding an envelope in her hand. He took it from her and saw his name printed on it in George’s neat script.

“There’s one for me, too,” she said.

Sam folded the envelope and tucked it in his shirt pocket. He wasn’t ready to read it or consider what its presence meant, how much George had known.

He turned back to his friend lying still in he bed, and he waited.

xXx

The EMTs came and George was carried away into the ambulance and the doors slammed closed. Sam watched it drive away and then he got into his car and followed it down the drive to the road. It wasn’t until he was on the highway that he realized he’d left Missouri behind, but when he looked in his rearview mirror, he saw she was following in her own car.
Sam stayed as close to the ambulance as he could, wanting to be near George while he could be. It was easy to do as they weren’t rushing. The sirens were silent and the lights didn’t flash. It was almost a slow drive to Lawrence Memorial.

When they arrived, Sam found a parking spot and walked through the hospital’s main entrance and to the desk. “My friend has just been brought in,” he said to a man in a blue shirt and tie when it was his turn. “George Collins. I need to see him.”

“If he’s just been brought in, he’ll be with a doctor,” the man said. “You will need to wait for the doctors to assess him and decide a course of treatment before you can see him. Someone will find you. In the meantime, you’ll need to fill out these forms.”

He handed over a clipboard and Sam took it automatically. He tried to find the words to explain that there would be no treatment for George, but his mouth was dry and his mind empty.

“Thank you,” he said, making to walk away.

“Sam.” Missouri appeared at his elbow and she looked from Sam to the man at the desk. “I don’t think we need these forms,” she said. “Our friend was not brought in as a patient. He’s already deceased. We’re here to have him declared.”

“Oh. I see,” the man said. “Then there are different forms for you to fill out. I don’t have them. Someone will find you when it’s time and they’ll give you the forms.”

“Can’t I see him now?” Sam asked.

“They will be with you as soon as it is appropriate,” he said. “There are seats if you would like to sit while you wait.”

Missouri plucked the clipboard out of Sam’s hands and set it on the desk and then led Sam over to a chair. They sat and Sam clasped his hands in his lap to stop them shaking. Missouri put an arm around his back and rested her head on his shoulder. They didn’t talk. They didn’t need to. Their shared grief was a presence with them, replacing the man that should be there.

It seemed to take a long time before anyone came to them. Sam saw a doctor in green scrubs and a white coat approach the desk and be pointed in their direction by the man they’d spoken to. He came over and said, “George Collins?”

“Yes,” Sam said, getting to his feet. “Can I see him now?”

“We’re just moving him from the ER to a different department,” he said. “I can make arrangements for you to see him when he’s been settled.”

Sam knew that a different department meant the morgue, and the idea of George being placed in one of their industrial fridges made him feel sick.

“I am very sorry for your loss,” the doctor went on. “There are details we need to get from you before we can move forward. If you would like to come with me, I can take you somewhere private we can speak.”

Sam nodded, and they followed him through doors that led into a quiet corridor of what looked like offices. They were shown into a room with a brown desk and leather office chair, and a cream couch and chairs. They sat and Sam fixed his eyes on the doctor.
“What do I have to do?” he asked.

The doctor picked up a clipboard of forms and handed them to Sam. “When you feel ready, I need you to fill these out. There are decisions that need to be made when you can.”

“What decisions?” Sam asked. “I want to do what I need to do for him now.” He wanted to get George home so he could lay him to rest.

“Well, there is the question of an autopsy. I have seen nothing in my assessment that leads me to believe one will be necessary so, unless my colleagues disagree, it is down to you to decide whether you want one.”

“No,” Sam said firmly. “I don’t want him cut up like that. I just want to take him home.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow and Missouri took Sam’s hand between her own, uncurling the fisted fingers he hadn’t been aware of.

“We want to give him a home burial,” she said.

“Ah, I see. That is a little more complicated than releasing to a funeral home. You will need to file with the county clerk and he will explain what you need to do. I believe that you’ll need to take the deeds to your property with you, and it may need to be surveyed by a professional to make sure it’s suitable.”

Sam turned panicked eyes on Missouri. Did she have deeds? He thought it had been a handshake agreement with Mary that she could take over the house.

Missouri shook her head slightly and addressed the doctor. “And if we don’t have the deeds?”

“Then it will be impossible,” the doctor said. “It needs to be proven privately owned land.”

Sam bowed his head. George needed this from him, and he couldn’t do it.

“What are our options?” Missouri asked.

“You will need to speak to a funeral home, but there are many options for burial available. You can have a plot in a natural cemetery, where people are laid to rest in less formal settings than a regular cemetery. I understand that they don’t have traditional grave markers, but you can plant a tree to honor them.”

Sam shook his head. “He didn’t want that.”

The doctor held up his hands helplessly. “Then I am afraid I cannot help you. A funeral home is the best person to speak to.”

“I know someone,” Missouri said. “They made the arrangements for Richard, Sam. They’re very good.”

Sam shrugged. Did it matter who organized it if it wasn’t what George wanted? Did anything matter now?

“If you put the name on the form, we can contact them on your behalf,” the doctor said.

Missouri took the clipboard and offered pen and began to fill out the forms. Sam sat with his eyes fixed on the floor. How was he going to make this right? He couldn’t give George what he needed. He shouldn’t have brought him to the hospital. He should have kept him at home and given him
his funeral there, without this civilian interference.

He had let him down.

xXx

Dear Sam,

If you’re reading this, I am gone. Or you’ve been nosy and found your letter early. I truly doubt that’s the case, but if it is, put it back where you found it and wait for it to be the right time.

I am not good with words, that you know, and I am apparently not good with pen and paper either, as I still cannot seem to say what I want to say.

It’s Sunday today, and you and Missouri are at a flea market in Williamstown, probably finding more books to stack on your shelves and plan to read one day. Learn from an old man, Sam, find time to read them. No one knows as well as you that time can feel like it’s dragging, but really, it’s slipping away. You and I both have clocks ticking for us.

I suppose I should give you some instructions for what to do with me after. I told you once I wanted to be salted and burned, and I do, but I know that may not be possible anymore. I have researched since my accident, and I know it might be complicated for you to do that. I don’t live on the fringes anymore, and I probably can’t disappear the way I want to. Do whatever you need to do, just make sure I can’t come back. If you need to have a funeral for yourselves, I only ask that there is no preacher or priest. Religion will have a place, but not the formality of one I left behind years ago. Missouri will know what to do.

I feel I should give you more advice, but just because I am dead, it doesn’t mean I am suddenly wise. I make as many mistakes as any other man. I can say this now though, even though I never seem to find a chance or time in life. You are a great man, Sam, and I know you’re going to do great things. You have made mistakes, I know that, but you have also saved lives. Even in the time I have known you, you have saved countless lives. Do not let yourself forget that.

In that vein, I want you to look in my bedside cabinet. I have left a box there for you. They are things you deserve for what you have done and will do, but our life doesn’t give them, no matter how well earned they are.

I mean what I have said before. I believe there is a place waiting for us at the end of life, and, if it’s possible, I will be waiting for you with a beer. If I’m unable to wait for you, I expect you to find me. You’re a capable man, and I have no doubt you will succeed.

Thank you for making this grumpy old man happy.

Your friend,

George.

Sam dropped the letter down onto his lap and sighed. He remembered that trip to Williamstown as it had only been a few weeks ago. Had George felt that time was running out then? Had he perhaps even know the night he died that it was coming? Had that last evening of poker been his idea of a goodbye? Sam wasn’t sure, but he wished he had known it would be the last one. He would have made his final goodnight more meaningful. He’d thought there would be a new day that would follow together, and a new day after that. All the time he needed to find the words to tell George
how important he was to Sam. Any attempt would have been met with embarrassment, but Sam would at least know he had said it.

xXx

Even two days after George died, Sam still couldn’t always believe it had happened. When he woke in the mornings, he expected to hear the sounds of George starting his day. When he went to the kitchen to make a meal, he took two plates from the cupboard, he poured two cups of coffee. Some wonderful times he forgot George was gone. The happiness was almost worth the devastation when he remembered.

The funeral was arranged for the next day. James, Tess and Patience had flown in the day before. Sam hadn’t seen them yet, as he wasn’t sure he could cope with Patience’s exuberance. At four years old, she was a force of nature, just like her grandmother, and Sam wasn’t ready for that. He needed to mourn first.

The previous morning had been spent at the funeral home making the arrangements. Sam and Missouri had chosen a walnut coffin, and Missouri had instructed them to line it with navy satin. They had left the clothes for him to wear—the army dress uniform Sam had found in George’s closet when looking for a suit for him. He hadn’t known George still had his uniform. He wondered if it had been transported from motel to motel, hunt to hunt, over the years, or if George had stored it somewhere before he’d moved into the house with Sam.

The funeral director had asked about the kind of service they wanted, and Sam hadn’t been able to think. He’d only known that he wanted it to be a tribute to George that didn’t tie him to religion. George’s faith had been a private and personal one and limiting that to one religion would be wrong. He was relieved to find in his letter that George felt the same. He felt some relief that George had been aware that a traditional salt and burn might not be possible for him. Sam had wanted to give him what he needed, but he couldn’t deliver. He felt now that George understood.

The only thing Sam had been sure of for the arrangements was that he wanted ‘Round Midnight played. He wanted to see George off with the song he had danced with a woman to a lifetime ago, the same song they’d listened to the night they celebrated Sam’s birthday. It felt right. Missouri had decided everything else.

Sam got to his feet and went into George’s bedroom. He’d kept the door closed when he wasn’t in there, not wanting to see the reminder of the now empty bed that Missouri had stripped and remade with clean bedding. The drapes were still open, and the full moon illuminated the room enough that he didn’t need to turn on the light to find the drawer of the bedside table or the box inside. It was flat and wooden, something he hadn’t seen George with before. He carried it back out to the living room and sat down before opening it. He gasped as he saw the contents and remembered what George had said, how he’d deserved them.

It was his medals, the Medal of Honor in the center of the velvet lining. Sam reached out a finger and stroked the polished eagle.

George thought he deserved them.

Even with all the wrong Sam had done, George had believed he had done good, enough good to have earned these precious things. He had said it was for what he was still to do, too, Sam remembered, that in itself was a wonder. George knew how scared he had been of what he had to do, and how Sam doubted himself, but George had faith in Sam to make it right.

Sam felt that he had never missed his friend more than in that moment, when he wanted to ask how
he knew. He wanted to take some of George’s certainty for himself.

He checked the clock on the mantelpiece and saw it was time for him to leave. There was one thing left he had to do for his friend.

xXx

Sam had worried that George’s funeral would feel empty, with so few people and so many seats, but when he arrived at the funeral home, they were led into a room with only seats enough for what they needed. There would be no one else, as there was no one else George would have wanted. The death had been recorded in the Lawrence Journal World, but the funeral hadn’t been listed as they’d wanted it to be private for the people that had loved him, not a room of professional funeral-goers that were there for the spectacle and buffet after.

He was surprised when he saw the coffin, as it had been draped with a flag. It must be one of the things Missouri had organized while Sam moved through the arrangements in a daze. The casket was closed, one of Sam’s stipulations, as he hadn’t wanted James and Tess, or the funeral director, to see what Sam had done when he’d visited the funeral home in the early hours of that morning.

George had been in the chapel of rest, the casket closed, and Sam had opened it for the last time to fulfil his friend’s last wish. He had salted George’s body ready to be burned. He was making sure George couldn’t come back.

The door opened behind him and he turned to see Missouri coming in, followed by Tess and James. Missouri’s face was already tearstained, and James and Tess both wore expressions of sadness, but no shock. Sam supposed that to them it would have been expected. George was an old man. It was because Sam saw him as so alive and present that it had come as a shock.

James strode towards Sam and pulled him into a tight embrace. “I’m so sorry,” he said in Sam’s ear.

Sam held him in return for a moment and then slapped his back and stepped back. “Thanks, James.”

Tess came forward next and hugged Sam, too. As he bent to embrace her in return, she kissed his cheek. She didn’t speak, but Sam didn’t need words. He knew they were here for George and they would miss him, too. He had not belonged to Sam and Missouri alone.

They sat down. Sam flanked by Missouri and James, and Missouri held his hand, using her free hand to mop at her face. The funeral director stood beside the coffin and began to speak.

“We are here today to say goodbye to George Collins, a friend and veteran. I never had the pleasure of meeting George, but I have been told about him by people that did, and I regret that I never did meet what had been an extraordinary man. George was a brave man that chose to enlist the day after Pearl Harbor was bombed so that he could serve his country and protect others…”

Sam listened to the words about a man he’d loved coming from a man that had never known him. It didn’t feel right that he was telling these stories, but Sam had known when they made their plans that he wouldn’t be able to speak. Only when Missouri stood up did he feel comforted as words from her were something George would have approved of.

He noted how beautiful Missouri looked in her black lace dress, even with her sadness etched onto her features.

“I knew George a long time,” she started. “He was a part of my life, however distantly, since
before James was born. We grew closer over the years, but he only became family twelve years ago when he moved into Sam’s house. He changed then. He wouldn’t mind me telling you he was an ornery old man when the mood took him, and he didn’t connect with a lot of people. In fact, he was often difficult, but when he let you into his life, you found he was a sweet man with a big heart. George and I would often talk alone about the things we cared about and our worries.” She looked at Sam. “We discussed you a lot. One of the things that troubled George the most was that he knew his life was coming to a close, and he wanted to be here for whatever happens to come for us all.”

Sam felt a lump rise in his throat. He never knew George had discussed that with Missouri. He’d told Sam once that he didn’t expect to be here still when Sam faced Lucifer, and Sam thought he’d accepted that, but now he realized that must have been weighty knowledge for George to bear. He had wanted to be there for Sam at the end, and Sam had wanted him to be.

“He can’t be physically here, but that doesn’t mean he will not be watching still.”

Tess sniffed and James put his arm around her shoulders.

Missouri drew a shaky breath. “George and I didn’t share a faith. I believe in higher powers, and he believed in one power. He knew that I didn’t agree with him, and I think he must have laughed as he conspired to make me do what I must next. He left me a letter, written only weeks before his death, and in it he asked me to say a prayer for him. I thought it was a joke, his last laugh on me, until I saw the prayer he wanted me to read. I realized then that is was less about God and more about advice he wished to give us all.”

Sam lowered his head and closed his eyes and Missouri cleared her throat and read, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Living one day at a time; Enjoying one moment at a time; Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; Trusting that He will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; That I may be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him Forever in the next. Amen.”

“Amen,” Sam said quietly.

He knew who George was speaking to with that prayer, and he appreciated the way George knew it would resonate with his situation and what was coming. George had played a lot close to the chest, but he had understood Sam and his struggle better than Sam had ever realized.

“Now I have done that for him, I would like to read something for myself that speaks to me now today more than ever.” She lifted her notes and read, “We mourn him because he is gone, and we think of the things unsaid, but he is not truly gone from us, because he lives in our hearts instead. He’s not there to hear the details of our days, to offer comfort or to share the weight, but he still listens and still cares, as ours was for him, his love for us is still great. We grieve today as we know no better, and cry for the loss of a friend, but one day we will be reunited, because a death is merely a parting, not an end.”

Sam looked at Missouri and tried to communicate without words how much he loved her in that moment. The poem she’d found was perfect, and it comforted him on a deep level, even though he had thought he was beyond it. She smiled at him and he thought he had succeeded.

She touched the flag on the coffin and said, “Thank you for making our lives a richer place, George. Goodbye.”

Sam bowed his head. He was glad he hadn’t tried to speak now, as whatever he said would not
have been so perfect as what Missouri said. She had given George the farewell he deserved, and she’d said it for them all.

xXx

Sam woke lying on the couch the next morning. He didn’t remember falling asleep there, but he saw from the half empty whiskey bottle on the floor that there was probably a good reason for that.

He picked up the bottle and carried it back to the table beside George’s chair. They always kept one there, and just because he was gone, Sam didn’t see any reason that he should change that. He adjusted George’s cushion and patted the head rest, a silent good morning to his friend, before going into the bathroom and starting the shower.

He had just finished toweling off his hair when he heard voices in the hall. He quickly grabbed some pants and pulled them on before opening the door and peering out to see Missouri striding towards him. She was smiling, but Sam saw her eyes were still sad.

“I brought someone to see you,” she said.

“Really, Missouri, I’m not in the mood for company,” Sam said.

“I know. And I understand that, but I have my instructions, and I am going to carry them out.”

Sam frowned. “Instructions?”

She nodded. “He left me a letter, too, Sam, and he asked me to do this. Now, get dressed, your company awaits.” When she saw his hesitation, she looked pleading. “Don’t make me let him down.”

“I’ll be right out,” Sam said, ducking back into the bedroom.

He took time choosing a shirt and buttoning it slowly. He didn’t want to deal with people. He assumed it was James and Tess, as Missouri surely wouldn’t have brought Patience to see him while he was in such a mess. She must be with the sitter that had cared for her the day before.

He was shocked, therefore, to see the little girl in the living room. She was sitting on George’s chair, playing with the button that raised the leg rest up and down. The sight of her sitting in George’s place was almost as great as the shock of her presence there at all. George was the only person that had ever sat there.

“Uncle Sam!” she said gleefully, scrambling off the chair and running at him.

Sam caught her as she bowled into him, her arms flying around to hold him, and took in how much she had grown in only the four months since he had last seen her when he’d diverted to California after taking a hunt in Oregon. Her hair in braided bunches was longer and she came up taller against him.

Sam hadn’t wanted company, least of all Patience’s, as he didn’t want to upset others, but he felt a surge of love for her rise up in him. If he understood what Missouri meant properly, George had arranged this; he’d wanted Sam to see Patience. How had he known that her presence was exactly what Sam needed? She was so young and alive, and Sam couldn’t not smile with her as she beamed up at her.

He bent down and picked her up, “How’s my favorite girl?” he asked.
“I’m learning piano now,” she informed him.

“You are?” Sam asked.

“Young. I have lessons with Miss Claire, but I’m missing one as we got to come and see you instead. I thought we were coming to see George, too, but Momma said he had to go away.”

“He did,” Sam said, sitting down and adjusting her on his lap.

“Momma says he’s gone away to Heaven, and when you go there, you don’t come back. It’s not like when we come to see you because we always go home after. That’s right isn’t it, Sam? George won’t come back.

“No, Patience,” he said, his voice constricted as her words reached into him in their innocence, making him face the truth. “George can’t come back.”

She touched his cheek. “Why are you crying?”

Sam sniffed and wiped at his face. He hadn’t even been aware that he was. He hadn’t cried at all yet, shock seemed to have dried his tears before they fell, but now he couldn’t see to stop.

“Uncle Sam?” Patience prompted.

“I’m crying because I miss George,” Sam said.

She ran her small hands over his face, smearing his tears. “Don’t cry. It’ll be okay. I’ll look after you.”

Sam smiled at her and she grinned back at him.

“Better?” she asked.

Sam nodded and kissed her cheek. “All better. Thank you, Patience.”

It wasn’t all better, but it was a little. When you held someone as young and alive as Patience in your arms, it was easier to remember that George’s life had been a long and great one, and he had died an old man. That was a feat in itself for a hunter. Sam had been lucky to have known him, and he never would have had Michael not trapped him here. As sad as he was that George was gone, he was grateful that he’d had a chance to know him.

And one day, perhaps, Sam would see him again.

Chapter End Notes

So… This chapter was one of the very hardest of this story. The others are still to come. I loved George. I’ve never connected with a character I’d created myself the way I did him. He was actually supposed to die earlier, in 2001 when Sam got back from New York, but I couldn’t bear to do it. I knew it was time soon though, so I bit the bullet and said goodbye here. I cried outlining, I cried writing, I cried even more editing. I’m hoping that you have an emotional reaction, too, as that means I did my job right and he was alive to you. If not, I’m sorry for not making him live for you, too.
Until next time…
Clowns or Midgets xxx
When Missouri asked Sam to come to her house for dinner on a Friday evening in April, Sam was confused. It wasn’t the invitation, as she offered a lot of them now that Sam was living alone again, but it was the fact she had insisted he be there, even though she knew he was just back from three back-to-back hunts and had been traveling most of the night.

She wouldn’t explain why it was so important either, so Sam cleaned up and made his way to her house for six. He parked outside and walked up the path and steps to the doors and knocked. He heard Missouri calling something that he couldn’t hear and then the door opened. It wasn’t Missouri that stood on the threshold though. It was James.

“Hey, Sam,” he said happily.

“James! What are you doing here?”

“Wow, that’s some welcome,” James said.

Sam shook his head, “Sorry. I just wasn’t expecting you. Come here.” He pulled James into a hug and slapped his back. “Is everyone here?”

“Just me,” James said. “Tess has taken Patience to visit her parents for the weekend and, as I just tied up a big case, I have taken a few days off. I thought I’d made the trip east to see you and Mom.”

“He knows how to make his mother happy,” Missouri said, appearing at in the kitchen door. “And you,” she added knowingly, seeing Sam’s wide smile.

“It’s good to see you,” Sam said honestly. He’d not seen James since Christmas in California, and that had been a short visit as Sam had heard about a hunt on the other side of Kansas that he’d had to fly home early for.

“You, too,” James said. “You want a beer?”

“That would be great.”

He followed James into the kitchen and sat down at the table while James fetched his drink from the fridge. When they were sitting together, Sam asked, “So, how is everything?”

“It’s good,” James said. “Patience is loving kindergarten, and her piano lessons are starting to sound more like actual music now instead of her just beating her fists on the keys.”

Sam laughed. “I’m sure that’s a big improvement.”

“It really is,” James said. “We would have stopped them sooner, as she really didn’t seem to be getting it, but she loved them. Tess can play, too, and it’s something they can practice together.”

“You’re not tempted to learn?” Sam asked.

“No, I’m in charge of helping with swimming lessons. I want to get her out on the waves, but Tess
“I should think so,” Missouri said, her expression disapproving. “She’s far too young to surf.”

“Yes, Mom,” James said piously, but when Missouri looked away, he winked at Sam. “She’s a proper mermaid in the water though. She’s got medals and certificates up the wazoo from her swim school.”

“That’s good,” Sam said. “She’s doing well.”

“She is,” James said proudly. “She doesn’t know I’m here. We didn’t want her announcing at dinner with her grandparents that she’d rather be here, and you know how direct she can be.”

Sam chuckled. As she grew, Patience became more and more open. She said what she thought when she thought it. Sometimes it was refreshing, to have someone so honest, but when she would talk about George, it hurt Sam. Those wounds hadn’t really healed for him.

He missed George for who he was, but it was also the loss of everything that came with his life. George’s death had come to signify all death and loss. He had lost Dean already, as he would never seen him again, and John would soon be gone, so Sam didn’t even have the occasional calls for lore to look forward to for much longer. Jessica would soon be gone, too, and Sam’s thoughts dwelled on her more than ever lately. She was out there with Sam’s past self right now. They were living their lives and making plans together. Sometimes, when Sam was in the west for a hunt, he thought of making a pass by Stanford to see her. He thought he would like to just catch a glimpse of her. Perhaps it would even help.

“How are you doing?” James asked, breaking into his thoughts.

“I’m okay,” Sam said quickly.

“Keeping busy? Mom says you’re away a lot these days.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Sam said, not elucidating further.

He was hunting a lot. He’d always planned to dial back the hunting for these years, when John, Dean and Bobby were out there working, but he was using the fact of his existence as an excuse to keep going. They hadn’t seen him—he thought—they wouldn’t see him. He could do what he wanted, and whatever happened would happen.

“What are you doing?” James asked.

Before Sam could form a lie to answer, Missouri turned away from the stove and said, “Show Sam what you brought, James.”

Giving his mother a quizzical look that made Sam think James was aware the interruption had come for a reason, James said, “Maybe after dinner.”

“It’s not going to go any better just because he’s has a full stomach,” Missouri said. “Show him.”

“What’s going on?” Sam asked.

James went into the hall and came back a moment later with his wallet. He opened in and took out a piece of folded paper. “I found this,” he said, handing it to Sam.

Sam took the paper and opened it. It was a print out of a grainy picture Sam knew had been taken
It was him.

In his arms was the woman he’d brought out of the South Tower. She was clinging to him as he carried her bridal style away from the tower, Sam’s shirt still tied around her face. In the background were firefighters, some directing people away and others looking up at the burning tower. There were other people in the shot and debris and bodies on the ground, but the picture had been framed around Sam and the woman.

Sam licked his dry lips. “Why do you have this?”

“I found it when I was researching a character reference for a case. She’s looking for you,” James said. “She’s posted in message boards and survivor support sites with the story of what happened. Her name’s Susannah.”

Sam opened the paper and laid it flat on the table. Beneath the picture was the heading: Do you know this man? Under that was a short introduction. On September 11th 2001, I was working in the South Tower of the World Trade Center as a PA at Morgan Stanley when the second plane hit. My life was saved by a man called Sam Winchester. He carried me from the building only minutes before it collapsed, and I never had a chance to thank him…

Below that was an account of what had happened in the café, the people they’d helped there. Sam learned it had been called Marco’s Coffee and Pastries, something he’d never known before. She spoke of how they’d parted when Sam left and she’d never seen him again. She pleaded for anyone with information to contact her on a listed email address and thanked them for their help.

Sam ran his hands over his face and sighed. He had spoken to George about what happened that day, but he’d never spoken to Missouri or James. They knew now from reading this account, though the account was heavily skewed to show Sam in a falsely heroic light.

“Oh god,” Sam groaned.

“What are you going to do?” Missouri asked.

“I don’t know,” Sam said without looking up. “I guess it couldn’t hurt to write her a letter at least. That might give her some closure. Right?”

“I think you should see her,” Missouri said.

Sam’s head snapped up and he stared at her, “I can’t do that!”

“Why not?” she asked. “You saved her life, Sam. She deserves the chance to thank you face-to-face. Imagine if the situation was reversed. Would you ever be able to let it go if you couldn’t thank the person that saved you? She needs closure. You know how deep the trauma is for what happened for the whole country. It will be a million times worse for her, having been there, just like it is for you.”

“It was different,” Sam said. “I knew what I was getting into. I knew what was coming.”

James shifted uncomfortably. They never referenced Sam’s presence in this time as a time traveler. Sam had told him the story and that had been it. He’d only known Sam was in New York that day when Missouri had told him after the planes had hit.

“Sorry,” Sam said quietly, then addressed Missouri again. “I don’t think seeing me is going to
“You are,” Missouri said. “It’s only you that feel like that’s been lost. Do this for her, Sam. Let her thank you.”

“I think Mom’s right,” James said. “It would have messed me up if I couldn’t see you again after the riots. You saved me and so many others then. They all had a chance to thank you before they left. This woman didn’t have that.”

Sam closed his eyes and thought for a moment. He didn’t want to do this for himself, he didn’t feel he needed it, but if she needed it, shouldn’t he go to her?

“Oh, he said. “I’ll meet her if that’s what she wants.”

Missouri beamed at him. “James, can you arrange it?”

“Of course,” James said. “I’ll email her now.”

“Good,” Missouri said. “That’s decided. I’ll serve dinner.”

“I’ll set the table,” Sam said as James pulled out his Blackberry and started to compose an email.

He still doubted his decision, but he took comfort in the fact that he knew that, if he could have been there, George would have given him the same advice. He would want Sam to face her and hear her thanks for both of their sakes.

xXx

James had arranged for him to meet Susannah in Central Park, so Sam booked into the Hilton at the airport and took a cab straight there. He didn’t want to hang around in the city longer than he needed.

The location of their meeting, Bow Bridge, had amused Sam because of its romantic connotations, but he supposed it made sense as they would be able to spot each other there. Sam was there early and there was no one around that he recognized, so he stood on the middle of the bridge and waited, staring down at the lake. There was a family of white swans swimming out from under Sam, two cygnets following their parents as they glided towards the shore where a woman and child were throwing bread into the water. Sam thought of how much Patience liked to feed the ducks in Golden Gate park with him when he visited.

“Sam?”

He heard the voice calling behind him and he turned slowly.

Susannah had stopped dead a dozen feet from him, her hands raised as if to touch him, despite the distance between them still. Her mouth was open, and Sam saw that she was pale. He thought he must be pale, too. Seeing her and hearing her voice had brought memories rushing to the surface.

She took a step forward, her arms reaching for him, and Sam opened his own to her. She ran at him and embraced him tightly. Sam held her in return, feeling the awe of the moment,

The image they presented to the world, a lover’s reunion, didn’t occur to Sam, He was just feeling the comfort of this woman with whom he had spent one of the worst days of his life. She wasn’t a stranger. Though Sam hadn’t realized it sooner, they were bonded by what they had shared, and now, as he held her, Sam realized he had needed this meeting, too.
She pulled back and Sam saw the tears streaking down her face. “You’re taller than I remember,” she said with a laugh.

“And you’re smaller.”

“I don’t think so.” She patted her stomach that Sam now noticed was curved with a small bump. “I feel big.” She took his hand a squeezed it. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

Sam smiled. “Me either.”

“Thank you for coming,” she said. “I spent all that time wishing I could find out who you really were, maybe write you a letter, but when your friend said you were willing to meet, it was like Christmas came early.” She reached up to touch his face and then pulled her hand back. “I’m sorry. I’m not usually so grabby. It’s just I feel like I know you already, like you’re a part of my family.”

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “I understand.”

She held his cheeks in her hands and stared into his eyes. “Thank you, Sam. Thank you so much.”

“I’m glad I could help,” Sam said.

“You saved my life. You truly did.”

Sam patted her hand and she released him to wipe at her wet eyes instead. “I’m sorry about this. I’d blame the hormones, but it’s not that. It’s you and me and everything.”

“It makes you remember?”

“You too?” she asked.

Sam nodded.

He saw her face and he remembered smoke around his face and water dripping down walls. He heard her voice and he remembered the sounds of the stairwell as people filed to safety. He felt her hand and he remembered her grip on his shoulders, holding him so tightly, as if he was the only thing that held her to the earth.

“Shall we sit down?” Sam asked.

She nodded and they walked across the bridge to the benches beneath the blossom laden trees on Cherry Hill. Some of the blossoms had already fallen, and Sam swept them away so she had a clear space to sit. She thanked him with a smile and then brushed away the petals for him.

As Sam sat down, she moved a little closer and then turned so they were facing each other across the short distance, their knees touching.

“Do you remember it all?” she asked.

“Yes. Do you?”

She shook her head. “Not all of it. I remember being at work that day clearest. I was getting a file for my boss when there was a sound like an explosion from the North Tower. After that, only flashes of what happened. I don’t remember either tower being hit. My therapist says it’s my mind’s defense from the shock and trauma. The first thing I remember is your face as you told me your name.”
“You were praying,” Sam said. “You didn’t seem to hear me, so I took your hand and led you to the stairs.”

“I was praying? I didn’t know that. Wow. I guess it makes sense. I was a good Christian back then.”

“Not anymore?” Sam asked.

“No god that I want to believe it would have let that happen,” she said harshly.

Sam understood how she felt. He knew there was a god, but it wasn’t one he wanted to praise given what he did.

“I remember you tying your shirt around my face now,” she said. “Seeing you makes me remember more.”

“There was a lot of smoke,” Sam said.

“And people.”

“Yes,” Sam said. “A lot of people.”

“There were things on the stairs, weren’t there,” she said. “Shoes and purses and laptop bags.”

“People dropped what was slowing them down,” Sam said.

She pushed her long hair back from her face. “I forgot that. I remember clearly after we were out of the building, but the stairs were a blur before I heard your voice. People were talking on cell phones, weren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“Calling the people they loved,” she said wonderingly. “I remember…” Her eyes teared again. “I remember them coming in the other direction.”

Sam understood what she meant at once. “Yeah, the fire crews were trying to get to the impact zone.”

She blinked and a tear slipped down her cheek. “They didn’t come out.”

“I don’t think so. There were some that were rescued from the rubble, but it was so confusing; I don’t know which tower they came out of.”

“You went back to the rubble, didn’t you? I saw a picture.”

Sam’s eyebrows rose. “Of me?”

“It was a man with the Red Cross. I wasn’t sure, so I didn’t put it on the boards when I was searching, but I thought it was you.”

“It probably was,” Sam said. “I helped at the med station for a while. Then I joined the bucket brigade.”

“I went home,” she said quietly, an admission of guilt. “There were a group of us in Marco’s when a cop came, and he told us to get out of there. We all left together. We were scared. The streets were grey and we kept thinking the buildings were going to come down on us.”
“You were right to go home,” Sam said. “You did what you needed to do for yourself. I stayed because I needed to for me.”

She squeezed his hand again. “You’re a hero.”

“No. I’m lucky,” Sam said. “The heroes are the people that went up those stairs, not down.”

“You saved me,” she said, “and Gracie.” She took a wallet out of her purse and opened it to show a photograph of herself with a man holding a little girl. “She just had her second birthday. I was pregnant that day. You saved two lives.”

Sam smiled. “She’s beautiful.”

“She’s a hellion, but I love her. That’s Lucas, my husband. He wanted to come today, too. He wanted to thank you himself, but I wanted it to just be us. Does that make sense?”

“It does,” Sam said. “Can you talk to him about it?”

“Sometimes. I try not to though. It was a big trauma for him, too. He worked all the way over in Staten Island—he’s a teacher—and he knew I was in the tower. He doesn’t really understand it though. He didn’t breathe in the dust.”

“I didn’t speak about it at first either,” Sam said. “I went home after a week at The Pile, and I tried to slip back into my life. I didn’t do a very good job. It wasn’t until we bombed Afghanistan that I had the words at last. My friend listened to me. He’d been through a lot in his life, so he understood it, too.”

“It does help. I used the groups and chat rooms online. There were a lot of us feeling the same things, and we all understood. It helps that you can’t see their faces when you’re talking. You don’t see the shadows in their eyes. I stayed in contact with Marco, the guy whose café we took over, and a few of others that were there have connected with us since. They’d like to meet you.”

“I can’t do that,” Sam said quickly. “I’m sorry, but I can’t. I wasn’t even sure I could handle meeting you.”

“But you came anyway. Thank you.” She laughed. “I can’t stop saying that to you. It doesn’t seem big enough. You thank your waiter for bringing you a coffee. There should be a different word for when you’re thanking someone for saving your life.”

“You saved me, too,” Sam said. “I was so lost that day. I wanted to help people desperately, but everything was so confused. So many people that needed me, that I would have dashed around trying to help them all and I would never have come out. The building would have fallen with me in it. You gave me a job, someone to save, and got me out in the process. So, thank you.”

She smiled at him. “You’re welcome.”

“And so are you.”

“Did it change you, too?” she asked. “I don’t feel like I’m the same woman I was September 10th that year.”

“I suppose so,” Sam said. He had changed since he left 2010, but that was because of many events, 9/11 just being one of them.

“I do things now,” she said.
Sam frowned. “You do things?”

“Yeah, I don’t put stuff off. I want to eat the cake, I eat the cake. I want to book a Disney holiday for me, Lucas and Gracie, I do it—we’re going in three weeks. I do the things that are important.”

“That all sounds like good stuff,” Sam said.

“It’s not all good. Sometimes I do stuff that scares me. My grandmother died from breast cancer and my mom had a lump removed ten years ago. She wanted me to have the test done to see if I had the gene, but I didn’t want to. I had it done a year ago. I don’t have the gene, thankfully, but I was terrified for the time it took to get the result.” She tilted her head and surveyed him. “Do you do things you’re scared of?”

Sam laughed. “All the time.”

“Really?”

Sam considered and realized he didn’t. He hunted, but that wasn’t facing a fear, it was facing danger, and even that was mostly negated by Michael. He hadn’t spoken at George’s funeral because he’d thought he couldn’t, but was that being unable to or being scared to?

“No, maybe not,” he said.

“Then start. What are you scared of?”

That was a long list, Sam thought. He was scared of his father’s death, Dean’s death, Jessica’s. He would not be physically present for them, but he would be in the world with the knowledge of what was coming and no way to stop it. He was scared of Ruby coming into his life. For months he would be under her spell, drinking her blood and training his powers. He couldn’t stop that either. He was scared of Lucifer. He was going to face him, but there was more he was going to hide from.

He was hiding from Jess.

“What are you thinking?” Susannah asked.

“There’s something I want to do, someone I want to see,” Sam said thoughtfully. “Seeing her will hurt me. I only have a limited time to do it though.”

“Is she sick?”

“Something like that.”

“Then do it. If you want to see her, the battle’s already half won. You just have to make yourself do it. It’ll probably be good for both of you. If she’s sick, she’s probably even more aware that you’re not there than you are.”

That wasn’t technically true. Jessica had her Sam. She was happy. But she was living with a clock ticking over her head. If Sam wanted to see her, he had to do it sooner rather than later. It wasn’t going to hurt her, him going. She wouldn’t see him even. Sam was the one that might suffer. It could be harder to lose her again if he had a new memory of her.

Would he ever forgive himself if he didn’t?

“I’ll think about it,” Sam said.
“Good. And while you’re thinking about that…”

She rooted in her purse and pulled out a white envelope. She handed it to Sam and he opened it and took out a piece of paper. It was a sonogram. The shape of a head was visible, and the blade of a nose.

“It’s a boy,” she said. “He’s due in July. I want to call him Sam.”

Sam’s mouth dropped open and she laughed. Of all the things she was going to say, this was the last thing Sam expected.

“Lucas agrees it’s right, but we’ll only do that if it’s okay with you. What do you think?”

Sam was never going to have a child. He had James, and that had always been enough, but the idea of a child out there with his name was incredible. The child would know he was named for the man that had helped his mother. There would be a connection to Sam Winchester in the world after he was gone. Could he let them do that? Could he not?

“I would love it,” Sam said.

She beamed and rubbed her stomach, looking down at her bump with love shining in her eyes. “Perfect. You hear that, Sam, you have a name now.” She winched and touched a spot. “Ouch. I guess that’s you telling me you like it.”

“He kicked?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. You want to feel?”

“I… Uh…”

She took his hand and pressed it to her stomach. Sam froze and then he smiled as he felt a soft nudge against his hand.

“There,” Susannah said happily, releasing his hand. “Now you’ve been introduced.”

Sam laughed. “Thank you.”

“Do you think you’ll meet for real one day?” she asked. “I’d love to see you hold him, and you should meet Gracie.”

“I don’t think so,” Sam said. “But I’d love to see a picture.”

She smiled. “And you’ll keep in touch. Tell me when you do the things that scare you?”

“I will,” Sam promised.

She patted his hand where it lay on his knee and smiled. “Thank you, Sam.”

“No, thank you, Susannah. You’ve given me something I didn’t realize I needed until today.”

“I’m glad,” she said. “And if I ever can help you, anything at all, you’ll let me know?”

“Yes,” Sam said, and he thought he was telling the truth. He could not tell her it all without changing her world, but there were human things still coming for him, and he could share them.

As much as she thought she owed him, Sam owed her more.
There was a spot in a park in Palo Alto where Sam and Jessica had liked to go to study in the warmer months. They would sit under the trees and quiz each other on facts and details of what they were studying. Sam thought that was the perfect place to find them.

He didn’t know if they would come the day he arrived, but he was prepared to wait. He would return each day until they came if he needed to.

The cherry blossom that had fallen when he’d met Susannah in Central Park was in evidence in California, too, and Sam hoped that would draw Jessica and his past self out. Jessica had always loved the blossom.

He took out a book from his duffel and settled to read, or to look like he was reading at least. His eyes scanned the park for a sign of them. There were many people, some of them Sam recognized from his days at Stanford, but he was anonymous with his book and beard, and no one seemed to notice him.

He had been there almost an hour, and he was thinking of going to get himself a coffee, when they arrived. As they walked towards their spot, Sam drunk in the sight of the woman he loved and breathed her name.

Over one shoulder his younger self held a backpack that Sam knew held their books and folders, and his free hand was linked with Jessica’s. She was wearing a denim skirt and blue t-shirt, and the other Sam wore jeans and a Stanford t-shirt. They looked so young to him, innocent and untroubled. Completely unaware of what was coming.

Jessica sat down on the grass and took the bag from Sam, tipping it out and piling the books for each of them. Sam took a ball that had fallen out of the bag and began to toss him from hand to hand. Jessica said something, and Sam laughed and sat down. Jessica scowled at him and poked his stomach with a pen. Sam curled in on himself and she jabbed him again, her face alight with a smile.

She picked up her textbook and began to read aloud, and Sam uncurled himself and picked up the ball again. With a glance at Jessica, he threw it up into the tree above them, sending a shower of blossoms onto their heads when it hit a branch. Jessica looked up and laughed as Sam caught the ball on the fall and threw it up again, making more blossoms fall. Jessica lifted her face to it and it settled on her cheeks and eyelids.

He remembered this day now, remembered how it felt to be the one to make Jessica smile like that, to know she was happy because of him. He had felt like he could move mountains. Jessica had always had that effect on him, making him feel like he was more than just a man.

Jessica would soon give up on trying to make Sam study, and she would just lay on the grass and let Sam bring the blossoms down for her. Later, they would join their friends at Scotty’s bar, and there would be karaoke. Sam would refuse to sing, but Brady and Zach would belt out a number by The Clash.

Sam took a long look at his younger self with the woman he loved, and then he got to his feet. He had looked his fill and should now leave them together. They had their life together, one filled with love, friends, and joy. It would not last forever, but it was there now, and Sam knew that was the best they could have.

Susannah had her husband and Grace, and a baby on the way, Jessica had the man she loved, and
Sam had his family. He had lost George, but he wasn’t alone, and there were things to face. He had to be strong for them.

As he walked out of the park and hailed a cab, he thought perhaps it would be a little easier now he had seen Jessica one more time. It was something he could treasure, and maybe, he thought, if George was waiting for him at the end of what was coming, Jessica might be too.
“We’re almost there,” Sam said, leaning over and shaking Missouri’s shoulder gently.

She stirred and murmured, “What time is it?”

“Past ten. You’ve been out a few hours.”

Missouri sat up and sighed. “You should have woken me. I would have taken over the wheel so you could sleep, too.”

“I think we’re going to be on short sleep rations for a while, Missouri,” Sam said. “You needed to rest while you could.”

“And what about you?”

“I’ll be fine.”

It was September 3rd, 2005, and Sam and Missouri were on their way to Reliant Park, Houston, Texas, to deliver supplies and to offer help to the refugees from the path of Hurricane Katrina.

The people in Reliant Park had been bussed in from the Louisiana Superdome, escaping the terrible conditions they’d endured there, after being evacuated from their homes. Sam knew there were going to be in excess of 25,000 people there, and he and Missouri had brought with them as many supplies as they could fit in the 26-foot U-Haul they had rented.

When they reached Reliant Park, Sam drove them to the Astrodome and joined the other trucks and trailers parked there. A group of soldiers were directing people, and Sam pulled up and rolled down his window to wait for directions. A man came over and Sam leaned out.

“We’ve got supplies,” he said. “Where do we take them?”

“See the Red Cross trucks?” the soldier said, and Sam nodded. “Park up beside them and I’ll tell someone you’re here.”

Sam thanked him and maneuvered the truck into place beside the lines of red and white trucks. They climbed out and Sam went around to the back to unlock the doors. A man in a Red Cross t-shirt approached them and said, “Who are you with?”

“We’re just volunteers,” Missouri said.

“Then you’re very welcome,” he said. “What do you have?”

“Hygiene supplies and basic painkillers,” Sam said. “We figured you’d have food and water taken care of.”

“Tell me you’ve got toothbrushes and you’ll be my new best friends,” he said.

“Hello, best friend,” Missouri said with a small smile. “We’ve got toothbrushes, Crest and all the Listerine you could possibly need.”
“I don’t know about that,” he said. “We’ve got 25,000 people here.”

Sam swung open the doors to reveal the boxes stacked from floor to ceiling, and the man laughed shortly. “I take that back. You’ve come through for us. I’ll get some of those soldiers to come help unload.”

“What can I do?” Missouri asked.

“If you’re serious about staying to help, you can grab a vest from the box inside and find someone with a supervisor vest on and ask them where they need you. I warn you though, it’s not easy work.”

“I can do it,” Missouri said, bustling away through the door.

The man walked away toward the soldiers and Sam climbed into the truck. When the soldiers came, he took the first box from the stack and handed it down to them. Another soldier climbed in beside him and they worked together, taking the boxes and passing them down to the others.

“You came through here,” one of them said, seeing the Crest logo on the side of the box. “Something like brushing your teeth makes you feel human. Most of these people came here with nothing at all. We used all our personal gear to help them already, and the stores round here are practically cleared out. There’s just too many of them needing too much for us to keep up.”

“We figured the big charities would have the survival basics taken care of,” Sam said.

“You’re right. The folks from the Salvation Army have set up food vans around the other side of the arena, and we’re got a few churches in the area bringing what they can in. We’ve got all the water we need.”

They gradually unloaded the truck, reaching the boxes of soap and wash cloths that Missouri had brought. They’d been preparing for this for months, bulk buying supplies and keeping them in a storage unit. Now the time had come, and Sam was nervous.

When the truck was eventually empty, Sam climbed out and went through the door Missouri had entered and took a vest from the box. He unwrapped it from its plastic and pulled it on. He couldn’t help but be reminded of the last time he’d worn one of these, when he was working with the injured after the towers fell. He knew this wasn’t going to be the same, he was not going to be providing emergency medicine for them, but it was going to be just as tough, though in a different way. At least he wasn’t alone this time. Missouri was with him.

He passed through a long corridor that he thought would have been maintenance access when the arena was used for its proper purpose and entered the cavernous stadium.

The sight momentarily took his breath away—there were so many people. Though he had seen pictures in the media the first time, it hadn’t prepared him to see it in person. There were rows upon rows of green cots with people sitting and lying on them. The stands were filled with people that hadn’t been lucky enough to get a makeshift bed. They were trying to sleep in the padded red chairs.

Though it was late, most people were still awake. Children wandered the edge of the covered pitch, some with parents and some alone. On the electric score board, pleas were flashing up, one after the other. Corinna looking for Mike Wheeler. Kyle looking for Lacey. They were brief, but the need behind them made Sam’s heart ache. He couldn’t imagine what these people were going through.

A man clapped him on the shoulder. It was the Red Cross worker that Sam had spoken to before.
“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, fine,” Sam lied. “What can I do?”

“You want to hand out some of your goodies?” He pointed to a stack of the boxes Sam and Missouri had brought. “You’ll be pretty popular. Your friend is around here somewhere doing it already.”

Sam looked for a sign of Missouri, but she was lost among the thousands of people.

He took a box and tore it open, seeing the tubes of Crest. Without a word, he walked forward and began to walk toward the first row of cots.

There was a woman in one that was curled on her side and seemed to be sleeping, but when he walked past, he saw her eyes were open.

“Hey,” Sam said. “I’ve got some stuff for you.” He took out a tube of toothpaste and held it out to here. “There’s toothbrushes, too. I’ll bring them next.”

She sat up slowly and took the tube from him. “Thank you,” she said dully.

Sam smiled at her walked on to the next cot. Some of the people were sleeping, and Sam set his gifts on their red blankets, ready for when they woke. Others were awake. He reached an elderly man sitting on the edge of his cot and held out a tube. “Here,” he said.

The man opened his mouth and smiled toothlessly. “That’s no good for me, Son,” he said. “But if you’ve got my glasses in that there box, I’d be extremely grateful.”

Sam forced a smile for him. “Sorry. No glasses.”

“I lost them in the damn boat,” he said. “They’re probably busted by now. Guess I never could have found them again anyway. It’s a damn shame though. I can barely see a thing without them.”

Sam couldn’t imagine how this man felt. He’d apparently been rescued by boat, probably losing everything he owned, and he had lost his glasses. It would seem a strange thing to mourn when he had been hit by so much more tragedy, but Sam thought he understood. Even something so simple but vital as sight had been lost.

He moved on, laying down tubes of toothpaste for the sleeping to be found when they woke, and giving them to others. Some people reacted as if he had given them the greatest gift they could imagine while others were too traumatized to even take it from him. He set their tubes down beside them.

He saw a woman who was reading from a bible, and when Sam reached her, she looked up at him, staring him right in the eye and said, “O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chastise me in Your hot displeasure. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am weak. O Lord, heal me for my bones are troubled.”

“Enough with the damn bible thumping,” a woman beside her said. She was sitting on the edge of a cot where a small child slept and in her arms was a baby swaddled in a blue blanket. “I lost everything: my babies’ clothes and toys, their birth certificates, every photo I have of them. My bones are not troubled. My damn heart is broken! God has no answers to that.”

The woman that had been reading looked up and Sam saw such sorrow in her eyes that he almost stepped back to distance himself from it. “My husband fell trying to get into the boat. He was
swept away from us, and I am never going to see him again. I lost everything but my faith. Please
don’t try to take that away from me.”

The woman with the baby scowled at her. “Keep your damn faith but keep it to yourself. I don’t
need to hear it.”

Sam smiled at the woman with the bible as she took the toothpaste from him.

“I’ll come back with a toothbrush soon,” Sam said.

She stared him in the eye again, and Sam was unnerved. “Bless you,” she said.

The woman with the baby scoffed, but Sam said, “Thank you,” quietly before moving on.

He came to the end of a row where there was a group of children playing a game of tag. He
stopped and watched them for a moment.

“They don’t understand,” someone said behind him.

Sam turned and saw a young man in a stained Saints shirt. “That’s my little girl there in the red.
Her mother worked in a nursing home, and I haven’t seen her since the flood hit. She wanted to
help with the evacuation. I don’t know if she’s here somewhere. I don’t even know if she’s alive.
My daughter asks where mommy is and I have no answer for her. She has no idea what’s
happened, and I can’t be the one to tell her. She thinks this is an adventure, and I love her so I’m
going to let her believe that a bit longer.” He sighed. “What have you got in the box?”

Sam reached in and took out the last two tubes of Crest then held them out.

The man took them and said, “Thank you, buddy.”

“I wish I could do more,” Sam said.

“So do we all,” he said tiredly. “But we can’t. We’re all just here waiting.”

He walked away and Sam watched him go until he felt a hand tugging on his vest. He looked down
and saw a little boy with a gap-toothed smile grinning up at him.

“You got candy?” the boy asked.

“No, sorry,” Sam said. “I’ve just got an empty box.”

“Can I have it?”

Sam frowned. “There’s nothing in it. It’s just a box.”

“No, it’s not,” the kid said.

Sam handed it to him and watched as the kid carried it away, struggling a little with its size, and
said to the other children, “Look what I got!” They swarmed around him and began to chatter.

It was just a box, Sam thought. Trash. But these children were going to make a toy out of it.

In some ways it was harder to be here than at The Pile in the days after the towers fell. The people
they were trying to recover there were dead; their suffering was over. For these people, it was just
beginning.
After two weeks in Houston, Missouri and Sam went back to Kansas to retrieve more supplies. The Astrodome had been emptied in preparation for Hurricane Rita and the people moved to Arkansas. They loaded the truck with tarpaulins and water, and the gear they would need for themselves to make an extended stay in the disaster zone. They went to Arkansas and worked at the shelters there until it was safe to return to Louisiana weeks later.

They parked the truck in the French Quarter, which had been spared the worst of the damage and was bouncing back fast, and settled there. Sam made the trip into the surrounding neighborhoods each day with his supplies while Missouri stayed to help the people that remained.

The worst affected neighborhoods were the hardest places to be. The bodies had mostly been removed from the streets, but there was still evidence of devastation all around. The houses that remained were marked with crosses used by the national guard to cover where they’d been and what they had found. Beneath the crosses was the date they’d entered and when they’d exited with numbers of dead they’d found inside and any additional risks found such as gas leaks. The numbers of dead seemed never ending. Sam wondered about the lives of those that had been lost. Had they chosen not to evacuate or had they been unable to?

Each day he nailed tarpaulin over the roofs of houses they thought could be saved and cleared debris from the roads. Missouri counseled people that had remained, listening to their stories and offering comfort. There was no formal training available for her or the people like her, but Sam found that most of them that chose that method of assisting had chosen it for simple a reason: they were good at it. Sam knew how good Missouri was already, as she had helped him through some of the worst moments of his life. Now she was sharing her skills with others that desperately needed it.

The atmosphere in the French Quarter was different to that in the outlying neighborhood. When the power came back on and supplies trickled in, restaurateurs opened their doors to the official workers and volunteers alike, providing hot meals. Jazz was played in the streets by defiant people that would not let their city be a tomb. Hotels that had been spared the waters filled their rooms with volunteers and allowed others to use their toilets and showers. Sam and Missouri slept in their truck, but they made use of the facilities with much gratitude.

Sam tried to lose himself in what he was doing most days, but when November 2nd approached, he felt a weight much more debilitating that anything he had felt so far when working in the disaster area descend over him.

When the day itself dawned, he arranged to leave Louisiana for a couple days to retrieve more supplies from a depot in Arkansas. He planned to leave alone, but Missouri had said there were things she needed to buy herself and said she’d come along.

They filled the truck in the late afternoon and then Sam excused himself to collect something from town. He passed the stores without entering and walked into the first bar he found. It was a dive, with a sticky floor and low lighting from busted lightbulbs rather than choice. A jukebox played Dolly Parton’s greatest hits and an old man leaned against it, swaying to the tune of I Will Always Love You.

Sam took a seat at the bar and ordered himself a beer and shot of tequila which he downed and followed with a swig with beer. He had come out with one clear mission, to get so drunk that he couldn’t think or feel.

His mission was going well, and he’d exchanged the shots of tequila for a bottle of whiskey and a
table in the corner, when Missouri arrived. She stood in the doorway, her eyes scanning the room. She looked decidedly out of place, even dressed in the jeans and loose blouse that had become her informal uniform in Louisiana. It was the fact that she was obviously too good for a place like this that made her stand out. She didn’t belong. Sam did. On this day, he was made for the place of drinking and regret. Missouri was made for life and love.

She spotted him and came over to his table, sliding into the booth beside him. “I was looking for you,” she said.

“You found me.”

“What’s wrong?” She bit her lip. “Is it too much for you, what we’re doing? We can go home whenever you like. You’ve done so much. There’s no shame in needing to stop.”

“It’s not that,” Sam said. “It’s today.”

“What happens today?”

Sam took a swig of whiskey and winced. “Jessica.”

Missouri frowned. “Your girlfriend?”

Sam nodded. “A couple days ago, Dean came to Stanford and told me my dad had gone missing. I went with him to look in the last place we knew he’d been, and we found he’d gone already. We stuck around, though, and worked the case he’d abandoned.”

Missouri gasped, and reached out to touch his arm. He thought she’d remembered the rest of the story he had told her a lifetime ago. She knew what happened next.

“Heard the shower and think Jess is in there, so I’ll just flop down on the bed to wait for her.” He closed his eyes and saw the scenes he was describing in vivid detail. “Something will drip on my face. It’s blood. I’ll look up and see Jessica on the ceiling. Her stomach will be all bloody. She’ll stare down at me, and I’ll be able to tell how scared she is. I’ll be scared, too, and I’ll barely have time to think before the fire comes. She’ll burst into flame and it will cover the whole ceiling. I’ll be pinned there, shouting her name as if that can help, and the apartment will catch fire around me.”

He glanced at his watch. “That’s happening right now. As I sit here, right this minute, two-thousand miles away, the woman I love is dying. I know every single detail of what’s happening, and I can’t do a thing about it.”

“I am so sorry, Sam,” Missouri said, taking his hand and squeezing it.

Sam bowed his head. “And now she’s gone. I love her so much, and she just died in front of my eyes. And it’s started now. What just happened means I’m going to be hunting again, hunting the thing that killed her. We’re on a path now that going to cost my father’s life, and Dean’s; he’ll be gone for months until the angels bring him back. It’s going to cost my friends’ lives. This path is going to cost so much and hurt so many, and it leads to Lucifer. He will be freed in four years because I am going to hunt again.”

“It’s not your fault,” Missouri said.
“Isn’t it?” Sam asked. “I am the one that will free him. I’m the one that will trust a demon, betray my brother and drink the demon blood that will turn me into a junkie that kills a woman so I can kill a demon. People will try to stop me, people I love, but I will do it anyway.”

“You didn’t know.”

“That excuse doesn’t hold weight with something as bad as this,” Sam said, looking down at his watch again. “The fire crews are probably there now. Dean is with me, doing his best, but I am broken. I know, even through that devastation, what I have to do, and it’s started.”

“Exactly,” Missouri said. “It’s started. You have spent all these years waiting, and now it’s coming for real. And you know what to do. You can stop it. You have just got to wait a little longer, just a handful of years, and then you can kill him.” She took the whiskey from him and poured herself a shot then knocked it back. “The good thing about things like this starting is that, with each day, you’re closer to the end. It’s almost time, Sam. You just have to be ready.”

Sam looked blearily at her and saw the fire in her eyes. “You really think I can do it?”

“Yes,” she said emphatically. “I know it. George knew before and Anna knows it now. When you see Dean again, he will know, too. What happened today is awful; I remember how it felt for me when I lost the person I loved. But I had James to keep me strong. You have the world to do that for you. It’s more than anyone should have to bear, but you can do it. You just have to believe in yourself like I believe in you.”

Sam stared at her, looking for doubt but seeing only certainty.

“It’s going to get bad,” he warned her.

“Then it’s a good thing you’ve got me, isn’t it? You and I can handle bad.” She kissed his cheek. “I’m here, Sam, and I am going to be here until it’s time. You’re not alone.”

Sam smiled at her. On the other side of the country right now, Sam had just lost the love of his life and he was feeling alone in the world with only his brother to help him. Here, now, Sam was feeling scared, but he had Missouri’s support, Anna’s strength and George’s faith to help him.

He had to wait, and this was going to be the hardest part of the journey back to 2010, but he would not be alone for it.
Sam and Missouri were sitting across from each other at the table in her kitchen, untouched coffees in front of them and expressions solemn.

“How long do we have?” Missouri asked.

Sam checked the clock on the wall. “Not long. Maybe thirty minutes. I can’t be sure. I know they’ll come when Rick Sanderson is here for his reading.”

“His wife playing around again?”

“Yeah.”

Missouri nodded thoughtfully. “Do you think I should tell him the truth this time?”

“Maybe, but you’re not going to.”

“Okay,” Missouri said, accepting his words without question. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.”

The day had finally come for Sam to meet Missouri for the first time. Soon he and Dean would arrive, chasing down Sam’s vision of their old house, and Sam needed to decide whether or not he would see them. They couldn’t see him, he knew, and he didn’t want to risk Anna needing to wipe Dean’s memory again, or his own, but he did want to see them—to see Dean.

“You could hide upstairs,” Missouri said. “Watch through the window.”

“I think that would be too difficult,” Sam said. “Hearing Dean like that… it would be hard not to come to him.”

“Then watch from the street. They’re obviously not going to recognize your car. You can just drive past when they get here. Then you see them but there’s less pressure on you.”

Sam nodded. He could handle that. Just to see Dean from a distance would be a gift.

“Incidentally, why are they here?”

“I had a vision of someone in trouble in our old house,” Sam said. “It’s a—” He tried to tell her it was a poltergeist, but the word stopped in his throat. He frowned. “It’s a—”

Missouri smiled. “I don’t think I’m supposed to know yet.”

“Guess not,” Sam said.

“Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out. I am psychic.”

“Me too. At least I am right now.”
“Do you miss it?” she asked. “The visions stopped when the demon was killed, didn’t they?”

“The visions stopped, but the powers didn’t. I still used them.”

She nodded. “But did you miss them?”

“No. It wasn’t the same for me as it was for you. I didn’t see report cards or phone calls. I saw people dying. Remember how you felt to see Dean strung up by that demon? Imagine every vision being like that. I’ve only had two so far, but there will be more, and I’m going to struggle with it.”

“I’m sorry, Sam,” she said.

“Yeah, me too.” He sighed. “I should go. They’ll be here soon.”

“And you are going to watch?”

“It doesn’t feel like I have a choice,” he said. “He’s here, I can see him, so I have to. I need to.”

“I understand.”

He carried his coffee to the sink and tossed it away then went out into the hall. Missouri followed him to the door and touched his arm as he reached for the handle. “Come see me later?” she asked.

“I will,” Sam said. “I’ll be here when you get back this evening.”

He hugged her briefly and then walked out of the door and out to his car. He climbed in and quickly pulled away from the house. He drove around the block and pulled over at the other end of Missouri’s street.

Rick Sanderson arrived for his appointment, and a five minutes later Sam heard the rumble of an engine that made his heart skip. They were here.

The sleek black car drove past him and stopped outside Missouri’s house. He held his breath as the doors opened. Sam got out first, eager to get to Missouri and help. Dean was a little slower, still uncomfortable being back in Lawrence.

Sam barely gave the younger version of himself a moment’s attention. He drank in the sight of his brother. He was closer to the Dean Sam had left behind now, older and more settled. He didn’t have the same raw excitement of a solo hunt that Sam had heard on the phone. He was—they both were—stressed to breaking point by what had happened and the continued absence of their father. Dean needed him especially.

Sam wanted to speak to Dean desperately, but at the same time he was frozen, knowing he couldn’t.

Dean said something to Sam’s younger self and they walked up the steps to the door. Dean knocked then shoved his hands in his pocket, the picture of nonchalance, though Sam knew he wasn’t feeling it. The door opened and Sam saw Missouri gesture them in. He knew she would set them in the parlor to wait while she dealt with her client. The door closed behind them and Sam raked a hand over his face, exultant to have seen Dean but also miserable that he was gone so soon.

He started the engine and drove away, passing the Impala and smiling at her, the rolling home it had been, and then went on, heading to his new home, never more aware of the differences in his life now to how it was then than he was in that moment.
Sam got to Missouri’s house before she was back that evening, and he let himself in. Knowing what Missouri was coming back from, he went to the fridge and took out a bottle of wine and a beer. He uncorked the wine and poured her a glass then carried both their drinks into the living room.

He flipped on the TV and flopped down onto the couch. The channel was showing the evening news, and Sam watched the story develop of an Egyptian passenger ferry that had sunk in the Red Sea. They had no numbers of dead, but they were estimating it to be in the region of a thousand people.

Sam didn’t remember this happening the first time. He’d been lost in what had happened at the time and hadn’t followed current events. As he watched the video of survivors, wrapped in blankets and shivering on the shore, he thought of how their lives had just changed as completely as his had the night Jessica died. Like him, they would never be the same.

He took a draw on his beer and leaned back with eyes closed. A few streets away, he had just been choked by a lamp cord that was going to make it difficult to swallow for days. Dean had saved him—as he always did—but Sam thought perhaps it would have been better if he hadn’t. So much would have been avoided if Sam had died today.

He shook away the morbid thoughts as they were not helpful and checked the time. He didn’t know how much longer Missouri would be, as he couldn’t remember when Jenny had gotten back with the children. Missouri would offer them to clean it up, and Sam would insist that she went home.

He heard the key in the lock and then the front door opened. “Sam?” Missouri called.

“I’m here.” Sam got up and picked up her glass, meeting her in the doorway, holding out her drink. “You need this?”

“I do,” she said tiredly, taking it from him and sipping it. “I guess you couldn’t warn me that I was going to be attacked by a table.”

“I…”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I couldn’t have done anything about it anyway. Would probably have been worse to know it was coming. It hurt though.”

“Do you want to get checked out at the hospital?” Sam asked.

“There’s no need for that. I’ll be bruised but fine.”

She walked stiffly into the living room and sank down carefully on the couch. “That’s better.”

“How was it?” Sam asked.

Missouri smiled. “It was strange. Seeing you like that, not knowing me, was hard. And you’re so young, just a boy. I didn’t realize how different you would be. You’re suffering so much.”

Sam grimaced. “I remember.”

“I just wanted to hug you, but I was a stranger. There was nothing I could do for you.”

“You did enough,” Sam said. “You helped.”
Missouri sipped her wine and then smiled. “Dean is wonderful.”

Sam nodded. “He’s special. I didn’t think you spoke to him that much though.”

“Oh, I didn’t, but that boy’s mind is an open book. I saw it all there. He *hates* being back in Lawrence, and he misses your father so much that it’s like a cloak over him. He’s doing his best to stay light for you, but he feels completely out of his depth. He sees you’re hurting, and he can’t do anything to help. He thinks your dad would be able to do more; he’d understand how you feel.”

Sam shook his head. “Dean did plenty to help. He kept me sane that first year.”

“You love him,” Missouri stated.

“I do,” Sam agreed.

“He loves you, too. Neither of you hid that from me. You’re both so connected. Even though you feel like you’re just finding your feet again, finding your place with each other after being apart, you balance perfectly. You’re two halves of the same whole. You need each other.”

“Yeah,” Sam said sadly. “We do, I do. Can you imagine how it felt to be in 1978 and to be told I’m not going to see him again for thirty-two years?”

“No,” she said quietly. “I really can’t. But you just have to wait a little longer now.”

Sam nodded and forced a smile, but his heart ached. He didn’t have four years to wait for Dean; he had four years left to live.

There was a knock on the door, and Missouri looked up, “Is that you?” she asked.

“No. We won’t see you again until tomorrow.”

“I better see who it is,” she said, getting to her feet and making slow progress to the door.

Sam took a swig of his beer and leaned back only to jerk upright when he heard Missouri speak weakly in the hall. “Oh.”

Sam knew it couldn’t be them, so he wondered who would make Missouri react like that.

When the answer came in a gruff voice, he felt his heart stutter and stop before racing on. It was John Winchester.

“Missouri, I need help.”

“You can’t…” Missouri started, but John cut her off.

“I’m sorry but I have to come in. They can’t see me, and they’re still here.”

His heavy footsteps plodded down the hall. Sam lurched to his feet, the beer bottle clutched in his hand and his mind empty. He knew he should hide, but there was nowhere to go. The only door was the one John was about to come through.

“John, stop!” Missouri said, but it was too late. The door was pushed fully open and John was walking into the room.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, holding up a hand to Sam. “I didn’t realize you had…” He cut off as his eyes widened and his mouth dropped open.
Sam wondered what he was seeing. It made sense to Sam that Dean, comparing a child of sixteen to a fully-grown man had recognized him immediately; Dean had always seen him much more clearly. It had apparently taken John a moment.

Sam just stared at him, at a loss. He had spoken to his father many times over the years, and those conversations, brief and businesslike as they were, had been his valued connection to his remaining parent. He never thought he would see him again, and if he had imagined it, he would have been overwhelmed with happiness. But he was there now, and Sam was angry.

“They can’t see me.” That was what he had said. Sam and Dean were so close to him now, needing him so much, and he wasn’t going to them. He felt his face flush, and he wished he had a weapon with him to aim at his father, to see fear in his eyes, the same fear Sam’s younger self and Dean felt for him now, needing him but not being able to find him.

He didn’t have a weapon, but John did. He reached into the back of his pants and pulled out his gun, bringing it up to aim at Sam in one liquid movement.

“What are you?” he growled.

Sam narrowed his eyes. “What do you think I am?”

“I don’t know,” John said. “That’s why I’m asking.”

Missouri brushed past him and stepped between them with her hands raised and voice firm. “Put that gun down, John Winchester.”

“What is he?” John asked.

“He’s your son,” Missouri said. “And you’re going to kill someone waving that around.”

“He’s not my son. I just saw Sam and he sure as hell didn’t look like that.”

“You saw me!” Sam snarled. “Sneaking around and following us, but you won’t even answer your phone when we call? We’re going out of our minds worrying about you, and you’re hiding out here instead of coming to us! Do you have any idea what Dean’s going through?”

“T’m not following them,” John said. “Dean called me. He needed me so I came.”

“And you’re a real help here,” Sam snapped. “I’m sure Dean really appreciates the support.”

“What are you?” John asked again.

“A man,” Sam said. “What I am to you, I don’t know. I thought you were my dad, but the father I knew, as screwed up as he was, wouldn’t do this to us.”

“It’s Sam,” Missouri said tensely. “He’s just not from this time; that’s why he looks different.”

“He doesn’t deserve an explanation, Missouri,” Sam sneered. “He deserves nothing, just like he gives us.”

“Calm down, Sam,” she said firmly. “John, put that gun away.”

John lowered his gun slightly and Missouri sighed. “Away! Put it away and we can talk about this like adults. You don’t need it. Sam is not a danger to you or me.”

“Screw that,” Sam said, brushing past Missouri and his father, making for the door. John seemed
so shocked that his gun lowered to his side.

“Come back in here, Sam,” Missouri ordered. “You need to talk to him.”

“No,” Sam said. “I needed to talk to him then. Now I need to get away from him.”

“Think about what you’re saying,” she said.

Sam knew what she was referring to. This could be the last time he would have a chance to talk to him. John only had months left to live. Sam couldn’t talk to him though. All he could think of was how it had felt to be searching for him, how much he and Dean had needed him, and how he had been here but hidden from him.

He yanked open the door and marched out to his car. He threw himself in and slammed a fist against the steering wheel. He had become a master at controlling his temper since his anger-fueled days of the apocalypse, but now he was filled with it. He felt betrayed, lost.

He needed to get away.

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Sam spent the night tossing and turning. He didn’t calm until the early hours of the morning, and even then, he couldn’t sleep as his mind was so busy.

He hadn’t forgiven John for hiding from them, but he accepted now that there must a reason known only to John that made hiding seem a better alternative to going to them. He had made enough mistakes in his life to be able to relate to that. He just wished he’d made a different choice, though he knew nothing he could say would change anything. They wouldn’t see their father again until he came to them in Chicago, though he would call soon. Was that phone call a result of what Sam had said to him the night before, or was it just because of the hunt he wanted them to take?

He got out of bed around dawn and ate a breakfast that he couldn’t taste. He wanted to go to Missouri’s, to see if John was still there, but he had to wait until the right time. He and Dean would soon come and ask her to check the house for a lingering spirit, and Sam would go then. He would talk to his father alone if he could and get some answers.

Just after nine, when he knew Missouri would be gone, he drove over to her house. There was no sign of John’s truck, but there hadn’t been any the day before either. He was smart enough to not leave it somewhere Sam and Dean might see.

He let himself in with his key and waited before announcing himself to see if John was still there. “Missouri?” John called from the living room.

“No,” Sam said. “It’s me.”

He strode into the living room and faced his father who was sitting on the couch with his hands hanging between his knees. He looked defeated. Sam was sure it wasn’t the events of the previous evening between them that had affected him like this this, so he wondered what had happened.

“Have you come to shout at me some more?” John asked.

“That depends. Are you going to pull a gun on me again?”

“No, I know I don’t need to now.” He sighed. “Missouri has gone back to the house. Sam, I mean
you, and Dean came this morning and told her what happened last night.”

“I remember,” Sam said.

John looked up at him and Sam saw desperation in his eyes that he didn’t understand.

“What?”

“Dean said your mother was there,” he said.

“She was,” Sam said,

John sucked in a shaky breath. “Oh.”

“She stayed,” Sam said. “After she died, she was tethered to the house. There was a poltergeist there, too, and Missouri said she destroyed it to save us. She spent all her energy doing it. She’s gone now.”

“Gone where?” John asked mournfully.

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted. “Heaven, I hope. We never knew for sure.”

John wiped a hand over his face. “I’m glad she saved you, Sam.”

“Are you?”

John scowled. “What kind of question is that? Of course I am. You are my son, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Sam said. “What did Missouri say to convince you?”

“She told me you’re from the future, 2010, and you came back to save people.”

“I did,” Sam said, knowing he couldn’t tell him that it was Mary and his younger self that he and Dean had come to save.

“She showed me a scrapbook,” he went on.

Sam frowned. “What?”

“It was full of you. Photographs and stories from newspapers she’d clipped. It was like a journal, too, all the things you’d done and hunted. She said she wanted there to be a record of the things you’d done in case you needed it one day.”

Sam had never known Missouri kept scrapbook. He had his journal, too, but he’d catalogued hunts and people he’d met in that, written letters to Dean. He hadn’t kept the clippings from LA or New York. He wondered what else she’d found to keep. He wondered why she had thought he would need it. He remembered everything he had done.

Then it occurred to him that it wasn’t really for him. She had made it for him to show Dean.

Sam would not be able to explain how he had spent his years without Dean, as he would be dead, but perhaps Missouri could show it to him and make him see that Sam hadn’t wasted that time. Maybe he would see that Sam had done what he could to atone for his great crimes.

“You’ve done some incredible things,” John said. “She says you’re amazing.”
“She’s biased,” Sam said. “She loves me. I’m a screw-up really. I let people down, especially the ones I love.”

John’s expression became sad again. “I’m sorry about Jessica.”

Sam bowed his head. The wound of losing Jessica again was still raw. “Thanks.”

“How long has it been for you?”

“Three months. Thirty-three years. Both at the same time.”

“Does it get any easier?”

Sam looked at him incredulously. “Has it ever gotten easier for you to lose Mom?”

“No.”

“Then what makes you think it would be different for me?”

“I’m sorry,” John said.

Sam was saved from answering, accepting the apology or denying it, by the sound of Missouri coming through the front door. She came into the living room and set her purse down on the table.

“That boy…” she said. “He has such powerful abilities. But why he couldn’t sense his own father, I have no idea.”

John looked up her, his eyes wet. “Mary’s spirit… Do you really think she saved the boys?”

“I do.”

John turned the wedding ring on his finger, and Sam saw the misery in his face.

“John Winchester, I could just slap you,” Missouri said. “Why won’t you go talk to your children?”

Sam was shocked to see a tear slip down John’s cheek as he said, “I want to. You have no idea how much I want to see them. But I can’t. Not yet. Not until I know the truth.”

Missouri sighed as she perched on the side of Sam’s chair. “Well since neither of you are aiming a gun at the other, I’d say it’s a good time to find it. Your boys, the ones that belong here, just left town, but you have this version of your son here. Why not ask him for the truth?”

Sam sat back in his seat as John fixed his eyes on him and asked, “Can you tell me?”

“I’ll do my best.”

He could only tell him as much as he’d known the first time Sam lived through this time. If his knowledge had come from Sam, he would be able to tell him now, but if not, he wouldn’t be able to say the words. He figured he would start talking and keep going until he was forced to stop.

“Do you know what killed Mom yet?” Sam asked.

“I think it’s a demon.”

Sam nodded. “It is.”

John blew out a breath and Sam gave him a moment before going on.
“His name is Azazel and you’ll know him because he has yellow eyes. He’s a serious player in Hell and on earth: very powerful and very dangerous. He’s working on a master plan that will wreck lives.”

Sam’s and Dean’s among them, as well as those of the other special children and their families.

“How do I kill him?” John asked.

“Have you heard of the Colt?”

John’s eyes widened. “It’s real? I heard rumors, and I’ve been looking, but most people think it’s just a legend.”

“It’s real,” Sam said.

“Where is it?”

John hadn’t known that in Sam’s time, but he tried to tell him anyway. The worlds caught in his throat and he choked.

“He can’t tell you,” Missouri said, rubbing Sam’s back as he coughed his way to easy breaths again.

“You will find it one day though,” Sam said when he had his breath. “You’ll find it and it will work.”

“I’ll kill it?” John asked in a weak voice.

“It will die,” Sam said, knowing he couldn’t tell him he would already be dead by the time the killing shot would be fired. John was going to have to live with enough without knowing what was coming for him after the deal.

“We’re going to win,” John said, a look of ecstasy on his face. “We’re going to avenge her.”

“You are,” Sam said.

“What else can you tell me?” John asked.

“Nothing about your life,” Sam said. “You already know enough. Knowing more is hard to live with. Believe me, I know.”

John looked disappointed but he didn’t argue. “What about your life? What are you doing here? Why were you trapped you at all? What was the point?”

Sam glanced at Missouri and she shook her head, which Sam took to mean she hadn’t told him about Michael.

“The demon dies, but the war isn’t over,” Sam said. “People we loved were in danger, so Dean and I came back to ’78. Dean was taken back when it was over, but I was left behind because someone else had a plan. Their plan is going to fail, but I have to live through to 2010 to change anything.”

“What about these visions? Missouri said that’s why you and Dean came here.”

“It started about three months ago,” Sam said. “I’ve had two so far, but I will have more. It’s a part of Yellow-Eyes’ plan. I’m one of what he called the ‘special children’.”
John nodded but he didn’t look surprised. Suspicion curled in Sam’s gut. “You already know that part though, don’t you?”

John fixed his eyes on the dark screen of the TV. “I knew there was something. Ever since you were a child, you were different. I’ve spent all these years trying to find out what that was, too.”

Sam thought that he should have felt betrayed, but he just felt disappointed. So much made sense now, the way his father had been on his ass all the time. It wasn’t just because they were different, because Sam wanted a different life, it was because John knew he was wrong. Perhaps that was why he hadn’t wanted Sam to go to college, he had wanted Sam close where he could watch him.

“I am a part of the demon’s plan,” he stated boldly, thinking if John was already thinking of him as a threat he might as well know it all. “There are more of us. We were all visited when we were six months old by the demon, and he did something to us that gave us powers.”

John look horrified and Sam laughed harshly.

“Are you thinking of shooting me again?”

“No!” John said. “I am thinking of how hard it must have been for you to live knowing that. I’m thinking of what you must have gone through. You’re my son and I love you. I want you to have a good life, not to be dragged into a demon’s plans.”

He sounded sincere, and Sam believed him in part—he did love him—but he also knew what he had said to him today meant that one day John would tell Dean to save him, and if he couldn’t do that, to kill him.

“You’re a more hostile version of the son I knew, which would have seemed impossible before, but you are my son,” John said when the silence stretched too long.

“I have a reason to be hostile,” Sam said. “You are putting me and Dean through hell right now.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, and Sam believed he meant it. “But if I go to you, you won’t let me go. Dean maybe, but not you.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Because Dean’s the good soldier?”

“No, because Dean understands there are some things in life that are more important than getting what you think you need.”

Sam shook his head. Dean would do what John wanted now because he trusted that he knew what he was doing, that he was so wise. It would take a year, but Dean would refuse an important order when he failed to kill Sam, and he would be better for it. It would open him to seeing his father’s faults for the first time. John wouldn’t understand that though, and Sam couldn’t tell him without revealing that he wouldn’t be alive for that revelation.

“I understand that you think that,” Sam said. “Because I once made a choice like that. I thought was right, betraying Dean, thinking it was the only way. I was wrong though. I did a lot of damage,”

“Sam…” Missouri said, placing a hand on his arm in warning.

Sam cleared his throat and redirected. “I can’t tell you more. You’ll have to live it.”

“Can you give me any advice?” John asked.
Sam didn’t see the point, as it would make no difference, but he said, “Don’t push me and Dean away. We’re capable and we don’t need protecting. We can stand with you for this.”

“What about the fight? Killing the demon.”

“Nothing I can say will change that,” Sam said. “It will happen how it happened no matter what I do or say. You just have to trust it will work out.” He hesitated and then said, “Give Dean more. He would die for you in a heartbeat, but you hold him at arm’s length. Let him know how you feel one day. He needs you. We both do.”

He remembered how it felt to see his father dead on the hospital room floor, how he had watched in horror as the doctors tried and failed to resuscitate him. He remembered the pain of that grief and how it had come close to destroying Dean.

“I need you, too,” John said. “I might not always know how to show it, but you and Dean are my world.”

Sam smiled, knowing it was at least partially true. John had given his life and gone to hell for Dean. “I know.”

John brushed his hands down his legs and stood. “I should go. I need to get to work with what I know now.”

Sam stood, too, and held out a hand. John glanced at it and then pushed it aside and pulled him into a hug. Sam leaned into the contact, taking the offered comfort, and when they pulled back, he said, “I’m going to say stuff soon that’s going to piss you off, Dad. You’ll think something I’ll refuse do soon is a betrayal, a choice I’ll make, but it’s because I love you that I can’t do it, not because I don’t understand.”

John frowned. “You can’t give me more on that?”

“Afraid not,” Sam said. “You have to live it like I did.”

John sighed and walked to the door. He turned back on threshold and said, “I’ll see you, Sam.”

“I know,” Sam said with a sad smile. “Goodbye, Dad.”

“Goodbye, Son.”

He walked out of the door and it swung softly closed behind him.

Missouri put her arm around Sam and leaned against him. “Are you going to send Anna after him?” she asked.

“No. I think this is one of the things that always happened; he always knew what I told him and what would happen to me. If I’m wrong, something will happen to change it and he will forget.”

Missouri sighed and straightened up. “Do you want a coffee?”

“I think I need to be alone for a while,” Sam said. “I’m going to head home if that’s okay.”

“Of course.”

Sam kissed her cheek and then walked out of the door. It had been hard to see John, and he’d felt emotions he never would have expected when faced with a second chance to speak to the father he loved again, but he thought it had been good nonetheless. He’d had a chance to arm him with some
information and he’d had a chance to say goodbye. The last words he’d spoken to his father were no longer the angry outburst in the hospital. John knew Sam loved him now, and that was more than Sam had thought he would ever have.

In a matter of months, John would be gone, and Sam and Dean would be one step closer to the apocalypse, but for that day, in that moment, Sam was just grateful.
Chapter Sixty-One

Sam was just clearing up after breakfast when the phone rang. He wiped his hands on a cloth and went into the living room to answer. He checked the caller ID and saw it was an international number he recognized. Dieter was the only one that ever called from out of the country, and he rarely called anymore. Since the advent of reliable email, they had connected that way. He answered the call and went to sit in his chair. “Dieter?”

“Guten Morgen, Mein freund .“

“Hey,” Sam said, smiling widely at the sound of his friend’s voice. “How are you?”

“I am so good,” he said ebulliently. “Lena is getting married!”

“Wow,” Sam said. “Is she even old enough to get married already?” It seemed only a few years ago that Dieter had told him his wife was pregnant.

“She has grown, Sam. She is young, yes, but they are very in love and they feel ready. Stefan is a good man.”

“Then that’s great. I’m really happy for her, and you.”

“I hoped you would say that. I want you to come to the wedding. You have not met her or Petra and Lukas yet. Come back to Berlin and I will show you my family and how great our city has become since you were here. You will come?”

“I would,” Sam said. “Really. But there is a lot happening here at the moment. I can’t leave others to deal with it.”

“What is happening?”

“There’s some family stuff,” Sam said. “And complications with the business.”

That wasn’t true. Brooks Home was flourishing, and Sam had little to do anymore, but he didn’t feel he could go to Berlin while there were other things happening in the world, though they were things he could do nothing about. Sam had been killed by Jake a only a month ago, and Dean’s path to Hell had started. Useless as he was, Sam felt he needed to be close to them for it.

Dieter sighed. “You must come one day, my friend. There is so much I want to show you. You will not recognize the east of the city.”

“There’s a lot I want to see, too,” Sam said. “I will come one day.”

“Do you promise me?”

“I will try to come,” Sam said. “And if I don’t make it, you and Petra must come here. There is so much I want to show you in America, too.”

“Ah, how I wish I could come now,” Dieter said. “Lukas is still in school though, and we cannot leave him.”
“Bring him,” Sam suggested. “Bring them all.”

“I will,” Dieter said decisively. “When Lucas has finished with school, just a few more years, we will come to you and you can show me your great country.”

“That’s a deal then,” Sam said.

“Yes it is. I am looking forward to it, and I know the family will be when I tell them.”

“Great,” Sam said.

“I should go,” Dieter said regretfully. “We are celebrating. I snuck away so I could share the news with you.”

“Thanks, Dieter. I appreciate it.”

“Goodbye, my friend.”

“Bye.”

There was the click of a disconnected call and Sam set the phone back on the cradle, smiling to himself. It had been a good morning for friends. He’d had an email from Nancy, too. She had sent pictures of herself and her girlfriend, Alice, from their vacation at a Napa vineyard. Alice seemed nice, though Sam hadn’t had a chance to meet her yet. Though she lived in Sacramento, only a ninety-minute drive from James in San Francisco, their schedules had never matched up. Nancy was very busy with the jewelry making business she’d set up with her Vegas winnings. They stayed connected through phone calls and email, but Sam planned to see her and meet Alice that year. It had been too long since Vegas.

He went back into the kitchen to finished clearing up, but his phone rang again before he could start. He picked it up, seeing James’ number displayed, and he smiled. It was a very good morning.

“Hey, James,” he said happily.

“Hey, Sam.” There was something wrong with James’ tone. He sounded tired and almost sad.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

James sighed. “Can you come to see me?”

“Of course. What’s happened though?”

“It’ll be easier if I tell you in person. I don’t want you to worry unless you need to. When can you come?”

Sam was already worried, but he thought James already knew that. He obviously needed to tell them in his own time though. “I’ll get the first flight I can,” he said. “Do you want me to call your mom to come, too?”

There was a long silence as James considered. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. Thanks, Sam. I appreciate it.”

He founded formal, and that made Sam worry even more. What could have happened to make him sound like this? What was Sam going to find when he arrived in San Francisco?

“I’ll call your mom and we’ll be there as soon as we can,” Sam said.
James answered only with the sound of a disconnected call. Sam hung up and dialed Missouri’s number. He would tell her what they need to do and then grab the duffel of clothes he always took hunting. They could be at the airport in an hour.

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Sam rented them a car at the airport rather than asking James to come collect them and they made the short drive to the house mostly in silence. On the flight they had endlessly discussed what could be wrong that James would want them to come, but they had no answers and were both exhausted and stressed by the topic now.

When Sam pulled up outside the house, he climbed out and started toward the house, only realizing Missouri wasn’t with him when he was at the door. He walked back to the car and opened her door. “Come on,” he said. “They need us.”

With a look of sadness, Missouri climbed out and took Sam’s hand. They walked together to the door and Sam knocked. He heard someone fumbling with the latch and then it opened slowly, revealing Patience.

“Grams!” she said, her smile taking over her face. “Uncle Sam!”

“Hello, sweet girl,” Missouri said, bending and hugging her granddaughter.

Patience hugged her back and then hugged her arms around Sam’s waist. He noticed that she seemed to have grown a couple of inches since he’d last seen her.

“How’s my favorite girl?” Sam asked, gently tugging her braid. “Been behaving?”

“I’ve been good,” Patience said proudly. “Can we go to the park?”

“Maybe later,” Sam said. “Shouldn’t we say hello to mommy and daddy first?”

She giggled. “Yeah. Okay.” She stepped back and they entered the long hall.

Patience danced into the living room and Sam set down his duffel under the coat rack and hung up his jacket just as James came out to the foyer. Sam was expecting the man he’d heard on the phone to greet him, but James looked happy as he smiled widely at them and embraced his mother.

He shook Sam’s hand and said, “What a nice surprise! What are you two doing here?” Sam frowned but before he or Missouri could speak, James dropped his voice and said, “I didn’t tell Tess I called you. I don’t want her worried.” He raised his voice again and said, “Come on in.”

Exchanging a worried glance, Sam and Missouri followed him into the living room. Sam saw what had happened to make James sound as he had on the phone at once. Tess looked terrible. She was sitting on the couch with her legs curled up under her, and her eyes were dark with bruise-like shadows. Sam thought she’d lost weight, too. Her skin seemed loose on her face. She beamed at them though and said, “Mom! Sam! We weren’t expecting you.”

“We thought we’d surprise you,” Missouri lied smoothly.

“You succeeded,” Tess said, uncurling her legs and standing to greet them. As she kissed Sam’s cheek, he noticed her skin felt too cool. She was obviously ill.

“How are you?” Missouri asked her.
“I’m fine,” she said. “Just on the tail end of a migraine.”

“Momma has a headache,” Patience informed them.

“Momma had a headache,” Tess corrected her.

Patience brightened. “Then can I practice?”

“Maybe later,” James said. “We’re going to visit with Grams and Sam now.”

Patience pouted, and Sam said, “Maybe Patience and I can go for a walk to the park. We could take Riley.”

“Yes!” Patience said excitedly. “I can take my scooter.”

James looked at Sam. “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” Sam said.

He wanted to spend some time with Patience, but more than that, he wanted to give James and Tess a chance to have some time with Missouri without being overheard. Perhaps they would tell her what was really happening when Patience was out of earshot. Sam was sure there was more to what had happened to Tess since he’d last seen her than a migraine. It had to be something big if James had called them and not told her. Sam was very worried about her.

“Where’s Riley?” he asked Patience.

“In the yard,” Patience said. “He’s digging.”

Tess sighed. “There go my petunias again. He’s a perfect dog in all other respects, but you leave him unattended and he’ll destroy a flowerbed.”

“I’ll go corral him,” Sam said.

He went into the hall and took Riley’s leash from where it hung and pocketed a tennis ball then went out of the back door to the yard where he whistled for the dog. Riley pulled his head out of an impressive hole he’d been digging in a bed of bright flowers and came bounding at Sam. Sam bent and stopped him, stroking him and rubbing his ears, before Riley could spread the dirt from his paws to his pants.

“Hey, boy,” he said. “You want to come to the park?”

Riley’s tongue lolled out and his tail wagged which Sam took to mean yes. He attached his leash to his collar and then grabbed Patience’s scooter from the shed. He carried it to the door and called, “You coming, Patience?”

“Yes!” she called back from the living room. A moment later she dashed into the kitchen wearing a pair of sparkly shoes with small heels that clicked on the tiled floor.

“Nice shoes,” Sam said.

“I got them for my birthday,” she said.

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Are you supposed to be wearing them to go to the park?”

“Yeah. I do it all the time.”
Sam wasn’t sure he believed her, but he didn’t have the heart to make her change. If trouble came of it, he’d take the blame.

“Come on then.”

Patience pushed her scooter through the gate and onto the sidewalk and then mounted it and glided along with her shoe clicking the pavement with every push.

“Don’t get to far ahead,” Sam said, following her with Riley trotting at his side. “I’m an old man. I can’t keep up.”

She stopped and waited for him, and when he reached her, she pushed off again at a more sedate pace.

“Are you very old, Uncle Sam?”

“So old,” Sam said.

“Older than Daddy?”

“Much older.”

“Older than Grams?”

“Not quite, but she looks so young it’s impossible to know how old she really is,” Sam said.

She laughed and scooted away again. Sam sped his pace to keep up with her, meeting her at the road where she waited for him.

“Look both ways,” Sam reminded her.

She obeyed and then pushed off of the sidewalk and across the road.

It was only a few minutes to the park, and soon they were passing the large boulders that flanked the entrance. Riley seemed eager to get ahead when they were inside, but Sam kept him leashed until they reached the off-leash area. There he called Patience to a stop and unhooked Riley. Sam took out the ball and said to Patience, “Want to play?”

“Yeah!”

She took the ball and called to the dog. He bounded back to them and wagged his tail and fidgeted as he waited for the game to start. She threw it as hard as she could, and Riley raced after it, coming back a moment later and dropping the ball at her feet. She threw it again and Riley bounded away.

“That was a big throw,” Sam said. “You’re getting stronger each time I see you.”

“Miss Kathy says playing piano builds muscle,” she said.

Sam was pretty sure it was muscles in the hands that her teacher was referring to, but he didn’t destroy the illusion for Patience. When Riley came back the next time, Sam picked up the ball and threw it as hard as he could. It flew across the field and Patience laughed. “That was really far.”

“I must have muscles, too.” While they waited for Riley to return, he asked, “How’s school?”

“It’s okay,” she said. “Ebony is my best friend now.”
“What happened to Sophie?” She had been the one Patience had spoken endlessly about last time they were together.

“She’s got a boyfriend now and she wants to play with him more.”

Sam choked. “She has a boyfriend! How old is she?”

“Eight, like me.”

Sam didn’t remember girls being on his radar at eight, but he supposed his childhood hadn’t actually been a normal one. Perhaps relationships usually started that young. The idea of Patience having a boyfriend made him feel very old.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” he asked.

She scrunched up her nose. “No. Billy Barton asked to share my table at lunch, which is how you become boyfriend and girlfriend, but I said no because he picks his nose when he thinks no one’s looking, and now he pulls my braids when I walk past.”

“Billy Barton sounds like a jerk,” Sam said. “You should tell on him.”

“I don’t want to be a snitch. Dad says all boys are jerks and that I shouldn’t have a boyfriend until I go to college anyway.”

Sam laughed. “I like that idea, too.”

“And he says I shouldn’t tell him about them. He says his heart can’t take it.”

“He’s got a point,” Sam said. “Boyfriends are scary for daddies. And uncles,” he added. “You can wait until you’re ready to get married before telling me about them, okay?”

“Okay,” she said solemnly.

Riley pounded back to them and dropped the ball. Sam threw it again and said, “Apart from school how is everything going? How are Mommy and Daddy?”

Patience shrugged. “They’re okay, I guess. But Mommy is tired a lot and that upsets Dad. They keep having talks so I have to go play in my room or the yard.”

Sam nodded, cataloguing the information. Tess would be tired if she was ill, and if they were talking about it without Patience, it had to be serious. Sam wondered what was going on. James had apparently called them to California to talk about it, but did that mean they knew what was happening already? Was this trip designed for them to hear the bad news in person?

“What’s wrong?” Patience asked, tugging on Sam’s hand.

“Nothing,” Sam said quickly. “Just thinking old man thoughts.”

“Shall we feed the ducks?” she asked. “They sell food in the café for them.”

“Sure,” Sam said, hooking the leash back on Riley’s leash and picking up the now damp ball. They walked deeper into the park, toward the middle, and Sam thought of Tess. If he was right, if she really was ill, what was he going to do?

xXx
When Sam and Patience got back to the house, James, Missouri and Tess had moved to sit outside. With the early evening light painting her face, Tess looked worse than before. Missouri looked different, too. Sam wasn’t sure if they’d explained what was happening to Tess while Sam and Patience were gone or if it was just because she saw the same thing and shared the same worries as Sam, but she seemed sad and drawn.

Before Sam could sit down, James told Sam that he was going to get Mexican take-out for dinner and asked if he wanted to come collect it with him. Sam thought there was more than a simple request for company at the heart of it, so he readily agreed.

“I don’t like Mexican,” Patience complained.

“Then it’s a good job I’ve got fish sticks in the oven for you, isn’t it?” Missouri said.

“With fries?” Patience asked.

“With fries,” Missouri agreed.

“Don’t get used to it though,” Tess said. “It’s only because Grams is cooking that you get a treat like that on a weekday.”

“Count yourself lucky, kiddo,” James said. “Grams never let me eat fries unless it was a special occasion. I had to eat gross vegetables!”

“Eww,” Patience said. “Gross vegetables.”

“Don’t encourage her, James,” Tess said tiredly. “I have a hard-enough time getting her to eat them as it is.”

James apologized and Missouri said, “Vegetables are good for you, Patience. Look how big and strong your daddy grew up to be because your grams made sure he ate properly.”

Patience eyed her father and nodded. “Yeah. Okay.”

James got to his feet and kissed his daughter’s head before walking into the house. Sam followed him into the hall where James stopped and bowed his head. He suddenly looked like an old man, a man who had lived far beyond the thirty-seven years he had.

Sam laid a hand on his shoulder and said, “Are you okay?”

The restaurant was only a short walk away, and Sam and James set out on foot. Sam waited for James to break the silence, to tell him what was happening, but they reached the restaurant without a word spoken. James placed their orders and they sat down to wait. A man in a uniform the colors of the Mexican flag brought them glasses of water, and James sipped his. As he set it down, Sam was shocked to see he was shaking.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked worriedly.

“It’s Tess,” James said.

Sam had surmised that much already, so he merely nodded and waited for James to have the strength to go on.

“I think she’s really sick,” he said quietly. “She’s been having these headaches for a while now,
and they keep getting worse. It’s more than that, though. She’s different. She gets confused about simple things and she’s more emotional than before. She cries when she thinks we can’t see. She’s fallen over a couple times, and she can’t always see what she’s trying to read. She says she just needs glasses, but I think it’s more.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “I’m not stupid, Sam, I know it’s a bad idea, but I went on the internet and checked her symptoms. I think she had a brain tumor.”

Sam sucked in a breath and reached out an unsteady hand to grip James’ arm.

“I have to know,” James said. “I know we don’t talk about you and how you’re here, your presence in the wrong time, and I prefer it that way, but I have to ask now. Is she going to be okay? Is she okay in your time?”

Sam bit his lip, wishing he could reassure the man he loved like a son. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I only met your mom once, really only spent a few hours with her, before I came to 1978. She helped me out with something, but we didn’t stay in touch. I didn’t even know she had a son until I met her when I came back.”

James looked up at him and there was such misery in his eyes that Sam had to swallow down a lump in his throat.

“Can you help me?” James asked. “The person that brought you back, the… angel… You said they can heal people. Is there one that can help Tess?”

Sam hesitated before answering, and he wasn’t sure he could without breaking James’ heart. James took his answer from Sam’s silence though. He gripped Sam’s hand where it lay on his arm and squeezed it tightly enough to hurt.

“Please, Sam,” he said desperately. “You have to be able to do something.”

Sam could do something, or Anna could, but it would come at a risk. Anna told him she would be detected if she healed George, and that would put her in danger. But this was Tess’ life. She called Sam on her lunchbreaks when she had a funny story about something that happened at work involving one of the fat cats her firm represented. She sent him emails of memes that she thought he would like. She welcomed him into her home every time he came. She was family. Sam loved her. He couldn’t let her die.

“I’ll try,” he said. “There is someone I can try. She may take some persuading, but I’ll talk to her.” He nodded and then added with a surge of confidence. “I will find a way.” He would find a way to make Anna do it if he needed to.

James’ face slackened and he pressed his lips into a thin line. He withheld the sob Sam could see wanted to escape him, but he couldn’t stop the tears that formed in his eyes. Sam took a napkin from the dispenser and handed it to him. He wiped at his eyes and then said, “Thank you, Sam. I’ll never be able to repay you for this. I can’t lose her. She and Patience are my world.”

“I know,” Sam said gently. “It will be okay. I will go now. Tell the others that I’m not hungry and have gone for a walk. I’ll find the person I need and will bring her to you as soon as I can.”

James nodded eagerly. “Okay. I will. Thank you.”

Sam got out of his seat and patted James’ shoulder. “I’ll see you soon.”

James gripped his hand and looked at him with unrestrained gratitude. Sam smiled and left the restaurant, going in search of an angel.
Sam stood on the height of the bridge in the park and said, “Anna. It’s me. I need you. I’m in Golden Gate Park, at the Roman Bridge, and I need to talk to you.”

He looked around and saw no sign of her. He had never needed her more, and that made his voice harsh as he said, “Now, Anna!”

“I’m here,” she said softly behind him.

“What took so long?” Sam snapped.

She frowned. “I was following Crowley. What’s wrong?”

“I need your help,” Sam said.

“What’s happened?”

“Tess, Missouri’s daughter-in-law, is sick, and I need you to help her.”

Anna sighed. “You know I can’t do that. I told you when you wanted me to heal your friend, George—”

“This is different! It’s not the end of a life of hunting. It’s the end of a whole life!”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Brain tumor. We think.”

“You don’t know?”

Sam shook his head. “Not for sure. She’s sick though, you just have to see her to know that. She has a husband and a little girl. She’s a good person. Please.”

“You don’t need to try to convince me like that, Sam,” she said. “I know you wouldn’t ask unless it was important. I’m sorry for what’s happening. But you can’t ask me to do this.”

Sam wasn’t sure whether she meant he couldn’t ask because she wouldn’t do it, or if she meant she would because he asked.

“Come and see her,” Sam said. “If you can just tell us what’s wrong… We need to know.”

Anna looked out over the lake, her timeless eyes unreadable, and then she nodded. “I will come and see what I can tell you.”

“Thank you,” Sam said gratefully.

He thought if he could just get her there. If she could see Tess and the life she had, to look into the eyes of her husband and daughter, he would be able to change her mind. He was going to find a way to change her mind one way or another. Every time he thought of James’ face as he told him what was happening, his determination grew. He had promised James he would fix it, and he would.

“We’ll walk back,” Sam said. “You appearing in their backyard would blow my cover pretty well. Only James and Missouri know the truth.”
“Who do we say I am?” she asked,

“You’re a friend from the college,” Sam invented wildly. “We met in a forum and became friends.”

Anna nodded. “Okay. I’ll lie.”

Sam wasn’t sure whether she meant she would lie about how they met or the fact that they were friends, but he didn’t much care. If Anna saved Tess, he would finally forgive her part in trapping him in 1978 and for targeting his parents.

They walked out of the park and along the streets together. Anna looked around at the buildings they passed, taking it all in. When they reached the house, Sam led them through the back gate and into the yard, calling, “I’m back, and I brought someone to meet you.”

They walked around the house to where they were all seated at the table, the debris of dinner in front of them. Patience was sitting on Missouri’s lap, and her eyes followed Anna as she followed Sam towards them. Tess looked a little upset. Sam guessed that the last thing she wanted when she wasn’t feeling well was a stranger arriving.

“Anna!” Missouri said. “What…? It’s good to see you.”

Glad of her quick recovery, Sam said, “Anna, this is Tess and James, and their daughter Patience. Anna is a friend of mine from the college in town.”

James smiled widely and pulled out a chair for her, “Come sit down, Anna.”

Anna sat and folded her hands in her lap.

“How did you meet Sam?” Tess asked.

Anna fixed her eyes on Tess and Sam saw the tightness in her eyes that lasted a moment before she recovered herself. Sam knew she had seen what was wrong with Tess, and her reaction made him hope she might be more persuadable. She seemed to care.

“We met in a web forum on myths and legends,” Anna said. “When I heard he was in town, I had to see him. I hope you don’t mind me just showing up like this.”

“Of course not,” James said enthusiastically. Having guessed who Anna was, he didn’t seem able to hide his happiness. It was making Tess suspicious though. She was frowning, though Sam guessed that might be pain, too.

“I didn’t know you were into myths and legends, Sam,” Tess said.

“You’ve never been in his study,” James said with a laugh. “He’s hooked on it.”

“It’s a hobby,” Sam lied easily.

Tess got to her feet. “Well it’s nice to meet you, Anna, but I should get this little one ready for bed. Make yourself at home though. Any friend of Sam’s is a friend of ours. Come on, Patience, time to say goodnight.”

“It’s early,” Patience whined.

“Listen to your mother,” James said.

Patience hugged Missouri and then slid off her lap and came to kiss her father. Sam bent and
hugged her, saying, “Sleep well.”

When Tess and Patience disappeared inside and the door clicked closed behind them, Sam said, “James, this is Anna. She’s an angel.”

“It’s good to meet you,” James said. “So good. Thank you so much for coming. We’ll never be able to repay you for this.”

Anna looked at Sam. “What have you told him?”

Sam ignored her question and asked one of his own. “Can you see what it is?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “It’s cancer. A tumor, deep in the brainstem.”

Missouri gasped and James rubbed a hand over his face, his eyes wet. He had already suspected, but to hear it confirmed was so much worse, Sam knew. He felt the same. Missouri stood and moved to James’ side; she pulled him against her and stroked his back. When he had control of himself again, he smiled at her sadly and Missouri sat down beside him, holding his hand.

“Can you help us?” he asked Anna.

“Yes,” Sam said. “She can.”

“You know it’s not that simple, Sam,” Anna said with a frown. “There are other things at stake.”

“What things?” James asked. “More important than my wife’s life?”

“No,” Sam said before Anna could speak. “Nothing is as important as Tess.”

Anna stiffened and glared at Sam. “This is about everyone, Sam. If they find me…”

Sam held up a hand to stop her. “You’ll just have to hide.”

“And if they catch me? If I can’t help when its time? What will you do then?”

“I’ll do it alone,” Sam said. “I’ll find what we need, and I will do what has to be done.”

“And if you can’t?”

“I will,” Sam said defiantly. “You can hide for the next couple years. After that they will be distracted and won’t search.”

“You hope.”

“I hope,” Sam agreed. “But even if they are still searching, I can do it alone. I’m not risking the plan for this, Anna. I’m just risking your freedom. And for the sake of Tess’ life, I’ll do that.”

“You really believe you can do it alone?” Anna asked.

“I know I can,” Sam said firmly. “It’s why I am here.”

James had followed their conversation like a riveting tennis match, but now he was watching Sam, his brow furrowed. “Why are you here, Sam?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Missouri said. “This does. Anna, are you going to do it?”

Anna hesitated a long time and Sam waited for her to answer, wanting to know whether he would
need to force her to help with a threat. He knew she was worried about hiding from Heaven if she healed, but he thought she would be far more scared if she was hiding from Michael himself. If she refused to help, Sam would threaten her with him. He thought Michael would be a lot more motivated to find her if he knew she had betrayed him and had been working to help Sam find a way to defeat Lucifer himself. He didn't want to threaten. Despite the fact she had killed him and helped Michael to trap him, it was because of her that there was a plan in place for Lucifer now. She had paid her dues.

“I’ll do it,” Anna said.

James choked a sob and Missouri squeezed his hand.

“How does this work?” he asked. “Is it like a spell or something?”

“I just have to touch her,” Anna said. “What are we going to tell her though? Do you want her to know about my true existence?”

“Not unless she has to,” James said. “It’s hard to know even the little I know. I don’t want her to feel the same way.”

Sam considered and then an idea occurred. “Anna, you just became a faith healer.”

Missouri nodded. “That’ll work.”

“It might not,” James said. “Tess doesn’t believe in stuff like that.”

“She’s about to start,” Sam said.

“I’ll go get her,” James said.

“I’ll go,” Missouri said. “I can take over bedtime duty. You should be here for this, James. She’s your wife.”

She disappeared into the house, and after a few minutes, Tess came out. Sam noticed that she looked really pained now, though she smiled and said, “Mom is reading Tess her bedtime story. Does anyone want a drink?”

“Come sit for a moment,” James said.

Frowning at the serious look on her husband’s face, Tess sat down beside him and asked, “What’s wrong?”

James drew a breath. “I know you don’t believe in this stuff, but I want you to try something.”

“Try what?”

“Anna is a faith healer. She wants to see if she can help you.”

Tess raised an eyebrow. “I don’t believe in it? Since when do you?”

“Just try,” James said.

Tess smiled at Anna. “I’m not being rude, but I think for what you to do work, you have to believe in it, and I don’t. I appreciate the offer though.”

“There’s no harm in trying,” Sam pointed out.
“Please,” James said.

“I’m tired, James, I have a headache,” Tess said impatiently. “Can we save the sideshow for another day?”

James looked desperate. “Do it for me, for Patience. Sam’s right. What can it hurt to try?”

Tess looked confused by James’ reaction and a little annoyed, but she said, “Okay, fine. What do I have to do for this to work?”

It was clear that she was just humoring them, but that didn’t matter to Sam. That she let Anna perform this miracle was all that mattered.

“Just close your eyes,” Anna said, getting to her feet.

Tess relaxed in her seat and tilted her head back, closing her eyes.

“That’s it,” Anna said. “I am just going to touch your forehead. It will feel strange for a moment, and then it will be over.”

Tess sighed and Anna stepped up behind her. She looked at Sam and he felt her anger at him, but he didn’t let himself react. He didn’t want her to think he was doubting what he was asking her to do. He wasn’t.

Anna pressed her fingertips to Tess’ temples and a rush of blue-white light rushed from her hand. Tess stiffened and James grabbed her hand. “It’s okay,” he said.

It was over in a minute. The light disappeared and Anna stepped back muttering, “I have to go.”

She ran around the side of the house and Sam heard the flutter as she disappeared. He fixed his attention on Tess who was sitting upright in her chair and her eyes were darting around. “What was that?” she asked.

“How do you feel?” Sam asked.


She looked better too. Her eyes were bright again and unshadowed, and the pained lines on her forehead were gone.

“It worked,” James breathed.

“I guess it did,” Tess said wonderingly. “She took away my headache at least.”

James glanced at Sam and he nodded. It was done. She was healed.

“Champagne!” James said.

“It’s a Wednesday evening, James,” Tess said.

“And you’re feeling better,” James said. “We’re going to celebrate it.”

Tess smiled indulgently and said, “Okay. You win.”

James kissed her on the mouth, his hands coming to cradle her cheeks. Sam smiled. He understood how James felt as it was the same way he’d felt when Dean had arrived at his motel room after
Castiel rescued him from Hell. It was the raw relief and overwhelming happiness of the miracle, and the fact you didn’t ever want to let them go again.

As James released her reluctantly and rushed into the house, Tess ran a hand over her face and looked around. “Where did Anna go?” she asked.

“She had to leave,” Sam said.

“Is she okay?”

“Yeah, she just had something she had to do.”

Or at least Sam hoped she was. He didn’t have a single regret for Tess’ healing, but he hoped Anna would be okay. She didn’t deserve Heaven’s jail or, worse, to die. He had to hope she would be able to hide well enough to escape the angels that might even now be searching for her.

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Sam and Tess were sitting in the backyard, watching Missouri push Patience on the swing set. James was inside making dinner for them. Even though Tess was completely healed, he’d insisted on her staying with them and enjoying the last evening of Sam and Missouri’s stay.

Patience was crying, “Higher, Grams! Higher!” and Missouri was obliging by pushing her harder.

Tess smiled and then cleared her throat and looked at Sam. Sensing a serious discussion was coming, Sam tensed.

“Who was Anna?” she asked.

Sam formed his expression in a calm mask and said, “I told you, a friend.”

Tess sighed and dropped her voice so she wouldn’t be overheard by Patience or Missouri. “I didn’t tell anyone else, but I already knew what was wrong with me, Sam, at least I had a good idea. I saw my doctor a few weeks ago, and he sent me for a CT scan. There was a tumor on my brain stem.”

Sam shifted uncomfortably. “And you didn’t tell James?”

“No. They were going to do an MRI next to get a clearer image of it. I was putting off the scan because I was scared of what they’d find.” She sighed. “I know that was stupid, but I didn’t want to have to tell James what was happening. If you knew something like that was happening, if you knew you were going to die, wouldn’t you want to shield the people you love from it?”

“Yes,” Sam said seriously. “I would.” He felt the exact same way about Dean. He wanted to protect him from what was coming with Lucifer, even though it meant Sam could never see him or Bobby and Castiel again.

“So I kept cancelling my appointments, rescheduling them for a later date,” Tess said. “But I knew what was happening to me. When there is something in your body that doesn’t belong, you can feel it. I knew there was this thing growing in my brain and it was going to kill me.” She stared at Sam until he met her gaze. “I don’t feel it there anymore.”

“That’s great,” Sam said, smiling widely.

“It is,” she agreed. “But is that because I don’t want to feel it, or is it really gone?”

“Have the scan and see,” Sam said.
“But you already know, don’t you?” She sighed. “You’re different, Sam. I don’t want to see it because I don’t want to believe, but you are. You don’t look any older than thirty, but James tells me you’re in your fifties. You look exactly like the man I met all those years ago, and that’s not normal. It didn’t matter before, because no matter what else you were, you were still Sam, but now I need to know. Am I still sick?”

Sam frowned. He hadn’t known Tess was aware of his differences. He’d hoped she’d explained it away as good genetics or faulty memories the way people in Lawrence seemed to. She’d known all along though, and he owed her the truth now, or at least a portion of it.

“You’re not sick anymore, Tess.”

She drew a shaky breath. “And Anna? Who is she?”

“She is a friend, but she’s also different. I can’t explain more without changing things for you. Trust me when I say she wouldn’t hurt you or anyone else though. She saved you. Have the scan anyway, just to be sure for yourself, but you’re going to be fine.”

“How?” Tess asked,

“Anna is special,” Sam said. “I really can’t tell you more than that. You don’t want me to.”

“I didn’t get a chance to thank her,” Tess said.

“I’ll tell her for you when I see her.” Sam reached out and took her hand. “Don’t let the fact you don’t understand it change what happened. You’re fine now and you get to see your little girl grow up.”

Tess squeezed his hand and looked across the yard at her daughter who had her eyes closed as she reached the dizzying heights of the swing. “Thank you, Sam.”

Sam smiled. “You are very welcome.”

He looked at her and then turned his eyes to Patience, too. That little girl could never know how close she had come to losing her mother. James had almost lost his wife, and Sam his friend. Thanks to Anna, Tess was safe.

Sam had finally forgiven her for what she’d done to him, too. He had been harboring the anger for so long that it was only now that it was gone that he noticed it. Anna had betrayed him and helped Michael trap him, but she had also found a weapon to defeat Lucifer and had saved Tess.

The balance between them was equal again. One day, Sam hoped, he would be able to tell her that.
Chapter Sixty-Two

Sam was sorting through his mail when he spotted a thick envelope with a lilac wax seal. It was addressed to him, so it wasn’t a mistake, but he hadn’t received a letter so fancy since James and Tess sent out wedding invitations.

He tore open the seal and took out the letter on cream high quality paper that felt thick in his hand. He read the copperplate writing and his mouth stretched into a wide smile. He set down the letter and pulled out his cell phone. He dialed and waited as it rang through on the other end.

“Did you get it?” Nancy asked excitedly.

“I did!” Sam said. “You’re getting married?”

“I am!” she squealed. “Alice asked me as soon as they started issuing marriage certificates!”

“I’m so happy for you,” Sam said.

And he meant it. Nancy obviously adored Alice, and he knew they’d been campaigning for equal rights to marriage for years. Sam had wanted this for her, and though he’d known it was coming for California, albeit for a truncated time, he hadn’t known exactly when and he’d missed the news as he’d been hunting a lot lately. The fact it was happening now made him feel freer than he’d felt for weeks with the weight of everything else that was happening in his personal world at the time.

“Thanks, Sam,” she said. “Are you coming? You have to come. It wouldn’t be right without you.”

In Nancy’s view, it was in part because of Sam that she and Alice had met. Her jewelry business had been just building a client base five years ago when Alice had asked her to make a custom necklace for her mother’s birthday. They’d had a meeting to discuss the piece and, according to her, Nancy had fallen hard. They’d become friends while Nancy nursed her attraction, and one night they’d been caught in a rainstorm on the way home from a concert together. They’d run to Nancy’s apartment and the rest was history. Nancy believed that, as Sam was partially responsible for her business starting in the first place, he was responsible for them being a couple now.

“I’ll come,” Sam said. “When is it?”

“Didn’t you even read your invitation?” she asked, and Sam could imagine her look of impatience with him perfectly. “It’s July twelfth in San Francisco. The city led the way for us to get married, so we thought it would be right for us to tie the knot there. We don’t know how long we have until those Prop 8 bastards shut it down.”

“I think you’ll be okay for July,” Sam said.

She laughed. “I sure hope so. Alice’s parents are going all out organizing this for us.”

“And your parents?” Sam asked tentatively, knowing they weren’t as supporting of Nancy’s lifestyle as Alice’s family.

“They’re coming! Mom seems excited even. It might just be because she wants me to remember
them when I’m rich.”

“Are you going back to Vegas?” Sam teased.

“Actually, we are. We’re going for the honeymoon. But that’s not what I meant. I don’t suppose you saw page nineteen of May’s Vogue.”


“No, but my business might have. Cameron Diaz was spotted wearing one of my pieces. She must have been an online customer as there’s no way I would have missed her buying from me in person, but the article set things off. She gave them the store Nancy’s Creations as the source, and things have been crazy ever since. My name was one of the top googled words of May in the US rankings. If it carries on like this, I’m going to get proper premises and a better workshop.”

“That’s amazing!” Sam said.

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool, but I think getting married to my soul mate tops it.”

Sam chuckled. “Definitely.”

“So, you’re coming?”

“Nothing could stop me,” Sam said.

“Bring a date. Bring Missouri! I’d love to meet her since you tell me so much about her.”

“I’l ask, but I’m sure she’ll say yes,” Sam said, thinking they could tie the trip in with a visit to James, Tess and Patience.

“Great,” Nancy said. “I should go. I’ve got a wedding to plan and a wait list for work that’s insane.”

“You should bump your prices up,” Sam suggested.

She laughed. “That’s a proper businessman talking. But I’m one step ahead of you, rich boy. I’ve already hiked the custom pieces up. I’m going to be able to book my own suite at the Bellagio soon.”

“You are,” Sam agreed. “I’ll see you soon, Nancy.”

“See you, Sam.”

Sam ended the call and lowered the phone and picked up the invitation again. He was happy for Nancy, and excited to see her again and share her day, but he couldn’t help but feel a pang of guilt, too. Six weeks ago, Dean had died. He was in Hell right now, suffering under Alastair’s knife, and Sam was here talking weddings with a friend. It wasn’t that he didn’t care. He cared too much. He’d faltered the first two weeks after Dean died, and he’d drunk himself to sleep every night, but Missouri had made him see he was being selfish. One version of himself was out there now, making bad choices and on a path to ruin; he had to do better on the rerun. He had the ways and means to save other lives, even if he couldn’t save Dean’s, so he’d packed up his bag and headed onto the road to hunt. Though they would have been his preferred targets, he had to steer clear of demons. He had no way to kill them, and he couldn’t let them go back to Hell and say how they’d met Sam Winchester, not when he looked different to the one that was already hunting them. He had to concentrate on monsters he could kill without being revealed.
He had only come back to gather clean clothes and to spend a night in his own bed while he’d been in the area. He would head out again tomorrow, and he would hunt until it was time to go to California for the wedding.

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The hall was bedecked in lilac gauzy curtains and fairy lights. The band was playing on a raised stage, and people were slowly moving to the dance floor after the toasts. Sam and Missouri were dancing together, moving to the gentle music.

“This is nice,” Missouri said. “We haven’t danced together since…”

“The Jazzhaus,” Sam said. “Yeah.”

He felt a wave of sadness for their absent friend. The last time they’d danced, George had watched, listening to the music that had brought him fond memories of his past.

“I miss him, too,” Missouri said gently.

They didn’t often speak about how it felt to be without George. They only shared memories of him and the things he’d done, and even then, only rarely. It was hard for Sam, and he imagined it was hard for Missouri, too. George had left a hole in their lives; the third part of their trio was gone.

Days like this, when things happened that Sam wanted to share with him, were bittersweet.

“I wish he could see how well you’re doing,” Missouri said.

“Missouri, I spent two weeks drunk,” Sam pointed out.

“Yes, only two weeks. I can’t imagine what you’re going through with Dean where he is, with what you’re doing out there, but I am proud of how you’re handling it. You’re not letting it take you over anymore. You’re out there hunting. You’re here, celebrating your friend’s day. You’re living.”

Sam smiled sadly. “I keep thinking of things I want to tell George. I want to tell him about today. He’d have gotten a kick out of it. He thought it was hilarious that my wild weekend in Vegas was so platonic.

“It was the kind of thing that could only happen to you, Sam. I’m glad it did though. Romance was not what you needed at the time, it was just comfort and fun.”

Sam nodded. “I wonder what he’d make of what’s happened since. What I’ve done.”

“He’d be proud,” Missouri said. “We spoke about his death a few times before it happened, as he knew he wouldn’t be here for when you needed him most, and he knew you wouldn’t accept that if he told you, so he told me instead. He believed in you. He knew you were going to win this war for the world.”

“I haven’t done it yet,” Sam said.

“Because it’s not time yet. You will.”

Sam smiled genuinely now. He loved her faith in him. He had more confidence now. He would defeat Lucifer because he had to. There was no other option for him. Someone had to do it, and it was right that it was him. He’d made the mess. It was down to him to clear it up. It would come at
a cost, but that felt right, too. His only real regret was Dean. He was leaving him a mess to clear up in the form of a dead brother. He was so damaged before they came to 1978; how would he be when Sam was dead?

“Stop it,” Missouri said firmly.

Sam frowned. “Stop what?”

“Whatever you’re thinking. If it’s not about the here and now, let it go for today. There is time to think of other things later. This, today, is about your friend.”

“Okay,” Sam agreed easily. “You’re right.”

Missouri beamed at him. “Good. Speaking of…” The song came to a close and Missouri stepped back from him. “Go find Nancy and ask her for a dance.”

Sam looked around and saw Nancy kissing an elderly man on the cheek. The man smiled at her and walked away, leaving Nancy to look around the room. She spotted Sam and held out a hand to him. Sam kissed Missouri and then made his way over to her. “Care for a dance?” he asked.

“Since you asked so nicely…” she said with a grin.

She fitted herself in Sam’s arms and they began to dance to the new number. For a while, they just moved across the floor, not talking, and then Nancy said. “Okay, I gave you your chance, now I’m fishing for a compliment. What do you think of my dress?”

Sam held her away from him for a moment and examined the ivory ballgown she was wearing. The bodice glittered with jewels and the skirt billowed out from the waist. “Speaking as an expert, I think it’s beautiful,” Sam said.

“You’re an expert on wedding dresses?” she asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m an expert on beautiful women in beautiful dresses,” Sam said.

She laughed. “Something else we have in common.”

“I have to wonder if you have a certain pair of black Louboutin’s under all that material though,”

She grinned. “Would you believe me if I said I tried? Alice’s mother wouldn’t let me. I have these sensible height ivory silk heels instead.”

“You should have gotten a new pair now you’re Vogue famous.”

“I would, but every penny I make is being poured back into the business. I want to get real premises and a workshop that isn’t the spare room.”

“You’ll get there,” Sam said. “I have faith.”

“Thanks, Sam.”

Sam pulled her closer and they began to circle again. “You and Alice both look perfect.”

“She’s perfect,” Nancy said in a dreamy voice. “I can’t believe I got so lucky.”

“Me either,” Sam teased.
She pinched his hand hard and Sam made a show of wincing.

“You know what I mean, though?” she asked. “It was enough for me to meet her, to be her friend, and when I fell in love, I never thought she could ever feel the same, but she does. What are the odds of finding your actual soulmate and having her feel the same way?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said. “But I think it’s a miracle when it happens.” It had happened to him once, too.

“Are you thinking of Jess?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “She would have loved this. She loved weddings, even sham ones on daytime TV. She was a romantic.”

“I can’t imagine how it feels to be without her,” Nancy said.

“You shouldn’t,” Sam said. “Not today. It’s the first day of the rest of your life, a life with Alice, and that’s all you should be thinking about. It’s a time to be happy.”

“Are you happy?”

Sam considered. “Right now, I am.”

He was. Dean was dead, and that was a weight on his heart every day, but right now, in this moment of dancing with his friend at her wedding, he was happy. He thought Dean wouldn’t begrudge him that it he knew the full story. He would definitely prefer it to what Sam’s other self was doing out there right now.

Alice appeared then at his elbow, and Nancy’s whole demeanor changed. It was as if she came alive after a long sleep. Her smile was wide and her eyes soft.

They stopped dancing and Nancy said, “Alice, this is my friend Sam.”

“Sam,” Alice said with dawning realization. “It’s good to meet you at last. Nancy’s told me a lot about you.”

“And you to me,” Sam said. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks.” She grinned at him and Sam noticed even her deep blue eyes seemed to shine with happiness. “We’re going to Vegas for the honeymoon. Do you think my girl’s going to be lucky again?”

“I think she already got very lucky in her wife,” He held Nancy’s hand out to Alice. “But I wish you a lifetime of more luck.”

Nancy kissed his cheek. “Thanks, Sam.”

Sam stepped back and said. “You two enjoy your day. I’m going to get a drink.”

Alice and Nancy spun away, and Sam went to the bar to order a beer. He looked around the dancers and spotted Missouri being spun around the floor by someone that he thought was a relative of Alice, an uncle maybe. Missouri seemed happy enough, so Sam left her to enjoy herself and took his beer to an empty table.

As he sipped his drink, he marveled at his life. In the world right now he was making the biggest mistake of his life, but here was, enjoying a friend’s wedding. He didn’t have many normal days
like this left. Only a little more life at all. In less than two years he was going to be facing Lucifer. It would end there, but for today, he was as happy as he had been lately. He had lived a long life and met and loved many amazing people and done incredible things. It was coming to an end, but that was true for everyone. The only difference was that he knew how and when.

Until then, he was going to keep living his life and finding happiness where he could.

xXx

Though Missouri had asked, Sam had refused to tell her the results of the 2008 election. He wanted her to experience the moment with the rest of the country. He wanted the experience, too. He wanted to see that moment dawn for her.

They were in his house, watching the results come in, and drinking beer. Sam had a bottle of champagne hidden in the back of the fridge for the right moment.

The results flooded in at first as the eastern states declared, then they slowed as it grew later, making the tension even greater. The first time this happened for Sam, he and Dean had been at Bobby’s, just having finished up the ghost sickness hunt. They’d all been distracted and hadn’t followed the news as it happened, but just after 11pm, when Obama was declared the winner, Bobby had handed them each a beer and they’d toasted the win before carrying on with what they were doing. This time Sam was really living it. He was the only person in the world that knew the result for certain, and he felt privileged instead of lonely in time for once.

The view on the TV changed from a map of the country with flashing states to the anchorwoman who said, “The results are in from Idaho. With 61.2% of the votes, the state has been declared for Republican, John McCain.”

“No surprise there,” Missouri said.

“Wait,” Sam said, as the anchorwoman pressed her finger to her ear and said. “And with the highest margin we have seen so far, Democrat, Barack Obama has won Hawaii with 71.8% of the vote.”

Missouri whooped. Though the result was no surprise, she had celebrated every win Obama had gotten so far.

“We have more…” the anchorman said. “We have breaking news. Momentous news really. Because of victories in California, Washington, Oregon and Hawaii, we project that Senator Barack Obama of Illinois will be the next president of the United States.”

Missouri leaped to her feet and ran towards the TV, arms outstretched as if she could reach right through it and embrace the picture of Obama on the screen. She turned to Sam, and he saw her eyes were wet. He got up and walked towards her, his own arms outstretched to her. She threw herself into them and clung to him. “He did it,” she said weakly, and then her voice rose to a jubilant shout. “He did it!”

Sam lifted her and spun her around. She laughed gleefully and when he set her down she held his cheeks and pulled him down to her, planting a kiss right on his lips.

Sam laughed. “Happy?”

“So happy. I can’t believe it.” She nodded. “I’m so glad you didn’t tell me. I am experiencing it properly.”
“You are,” Sam said.

Missouri clapped her hands. “I need to call James.”

“What about Patience?” Sam asked. “She might be sleeping.”

“If James doesn’t have that little girl awake and watching this, I will want to know why.” She picked up Sam’s phone and dialed quickly. She patted her leg as she waited for it to be connected, and then said, “James! Did you see!” There was a moment in which Sam heard James’ indecipherable tinny shout come through the phone and then she shouted back, “I know!”

Sam sat down and smiled, so happy with her reaction. This was what he’d imagined many times over the years. When the news came of another racial downfall for the country, an unarmed black child killed by cops, when Missouri felt eyes following her in a store, he thought of the day that would come in which she could be proud of her country, when she could have a government she could trust. He thought of the LA riots and how angry James had been. He thought that this would finally give him some form of closure on that experience.

“Yes, hang on,” Missouri said, then held out the phone to Sam. “He wants to speak to you.”

Sam took the phone, “Hey, James. How are you doing?”

“I am good,” James said enthusiastically. “So good. This is amazing, Sam.”

“It’s history,” Sam said.

“Yeah.” His tone changed and became serious. “Are you thinking of LA, too?”

“I am,” Sam said.

“This is the opposite,” James said. “This is what I was thinking of the day I stood at the courthouse. It’s taken sixteen years, but the country changed after all.”

It wasn’t perfect, and it wouldn’t be in two years, Sam knew, but America had just taken a big step forward.

“It did,” he said. “About time, too.”

“I need to go,” James said. “We have friends here and they’re trying to persuade Tess to let Patience try champagne. I think she needs some backup.”

“I’ll call tomorrow,” Sam said.

“Okay. Bye, Sam.”

“Goodbye, James.”

He ended the call and went into the kitchen. He took the champagne from the fridge and two glasses and carried them back to the living room where Missouri was watching the TV with her hands over her face. For a moment, he just watched her, reacting to this historical moment, and he felt more connected to this time than ever. Something great had just happened, and he had a friend to witness it that this meant so much, too.

It was life.
Sam kicked open the door and rushed into the dingy room, his machete raised. His eyes scanned the room, and he felt a chill of trepidation as he counted the vampires inside. There were four, and they were all feeding from the middle-aged man whose disappearance was the latest of those he had been tracking.

One of the vampires, the one feeding from the man’s jugular, lifted his head, lips bloodstained, and growled, “Hunter!”

Sam had no fear for himself, but the victim was as pale as chalk and didn't move as the vampires dropped him and stalked toward Sam. He had a sick feeling in his gut that he was too late to save him. He was still breathing, but Sam wasn’t sure for how long. He needed to deal with the vampires quickly and get him to a hospital.

He raised his machete and nodded to the vampires as if calling them on, urging them towards the blade that would end them.

Unfortunately, these vampires didn’t seem as stupid as some he’d met. They rushed forward as one, and Sam had to swing wildly at them rather than taking careful aim. The blade sliced through one’s neck, leaving him in pieces on the floor, giving Sam three more to face. He swung out again, but the biggest of the vampires, one that looked like he’d been a linebacker in a previous life, charged Sam and collided with him.

Sam fell back onto the floor and his head hit hard. He gripped the blade still and tried to bring it up as one of the vampires sank its teeth into Sam’s neck. He felt the burn of pain and a sick drawing on the wound before it healed.

The vampire that had been feeding from him sat up and frowned at him. “What are you?”

“You really think I’m going to answer that?” Sam sneered.

The vampire bowed over him again, and Sam snapped his head up, butting him in the mouth and breaking teeth.

The vampire howled and fell back. Sam jumped to his feet and swung the blade to drive back the other two vampires.

“What did you do?” the fallen vampire asked, his mouth full of blood and his words mushy.


His words were sarcastic and light with the relief the hunt was giving him. He needed something to kill today to offset the knowledge of what was happening elsewhere in the country.

The smallest vampire, a female, came at him, and he swung with his blade again. His aim was off, he was distracted, and it sank into her shoulder. She screamed with pain as Sam pulled the blade out and corrected his aim for her neck. He swung and forced the blade through her against the
resistance of flesh and bone. She dropped, her head rolling away, and Sam turned his attention to the remaining two. The one with the broken teeth was on his feet now, and he was crouched as if about to spring. Sam pressed his hand to his healed but still bloody neck and held it out. “Come and get it.”

The vampire sprung at him, and Sam met it with a kick to the gut and swing of his blade. The head fell but the body remained standing for a moment, the muscles locked into the position of death. Sam pushed it over and it fell with a thump.

He spun on his heel to face the final vampire, another woman, and winced as he saw her tearing a piece of pipe from the wall. The smell of gas permeated the air as she tossed the pipe from hand to hand.

“Here we go again,” he said.

The vampire howled with rage as she came at him, and Sam swung the machete. He missed as she dodged, but she hit her mark. The jagged edge of the metal slid through his gut, going deep enough that he felt it break through the skin of his back.

She stepped back, triumphant for the moment before Sam struck. The machete cut cleanly through her neck and she dropped.

Sam rushed toward the man on the ground and pressed his fingers to his neck. He knew instantly he had been too slow. His chest was unmoving, and though he searched, he couldn’t find a pulse.

Though there had been much loss in the past month, many nameless people that had he mourned as they had died because of him, he felt the loss of this life deeply still. Perhaps because there were other losses today of people Sam loved that also died because of him.

Sam smelled the gas, and while he knew that it would not kill him, it did make him feel sick and he decided to go outside to the fresh air before he unimpaled himself. He stepped out into the open air and breathed deeply, then pulled a book of matches out of his pocket. He needed to take care of the house and bodies before too much gas escaped and made the fire an inferno that would reach him too. He didn’t want to experience third degree burns.

He lit the matchbook and threw it back into the house. He heard the whump of the fire catching and then he set off running, the metal in his gut pulling painfully, just before the fire caught the pipes and the house blew up.

He came to a stop and took a breath. It was going to hurt, he knew, but he couldn’t leave the pipe in there. He gripped it tightly and pulled on it, dragging it out of his flesh. He groaned with pain and horror at what he was doing. No matter how many times it happened, the many ways he was injured, there were some things he never wanted to experience for himself and dragging two feet of pipe out of his own gut was one of them.

The pipe came free and he tossed it away before turning and walking back toward his car, stopping dead when he saw a man standing beside it. He had no idea who the person was, but the fact he had just seen him set a house on fire and unimpale himself was going to create some questions Sam couldn’t answer. He decided to skip the ‘how did you do that?’ conversation and just leave. He walked closer to the car, but the man stepped in front of him and grabbed his shoulder.

“I would like to speak to you.”

Sam knew from the strength with which the man held him that he wasn’t human. That simplified
things in one way but complicated them in another. Sam wasn’t going to be able to walk away from this conversation.

“I don’t want to speak to you,” Sam said.

“Hard luck.”

Sam sighed. “What are you? Angel or demon?”

“Neither. I am divine though. My name is Adrian.”

He released Sam’s shoulder, and Sam stepped back from him. “Never heard of you.”

“That is not a shock. Not many humans are acquainted with reapers before their time has come.”

“You’re a reaper?” Sam asked. “Shouldn’t you be elsewhere right now? Don’t you have a job to do?”

“My job is here. I came to help a soul to move on. He went without trouble. I think he was too traumatized to argue.”

“Good to hear,” Sam said.

“I stayed for the sideshow. How are you alive?”

“Shouldn’t you know? You’re divine after all. Can’t you see it?”

He wondered why the reaper wasn’t able to sense the grace that ran through his veins. Elias had, and he was no longer an angel. Sam thought angels and reapers were the same in their extra senses.

“If knew, I wouldn’t be asking you, would it? Who are you?”

“Sam Taylor. Hunter. And I need to leave now.”

“That name is a lie,” he said.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Sam said. “I am who I am, and I’m done with this conversation. I suggest you get to Carthage with your other buddies. It’s a big day, after all. Isn’t the boss being raised today?”

“How do you know about that?”

“Long story,” Sam said, walking around him and reached for the car door handle.

Adrian grabbed him and shoved him back. Sam fell down, skidding on the dirt.

“You’re not natural,” Adrian said in a low voice. “I should kill you.”

“You can try.”

Adrian stepped forward and stared down at him. “I could touch your chest and stop your heart.”

“Like I said, you can try.” Sam got to his feet so he wasn’t looking up at the reaper like a child.

“How do you know so much? Who are you really? What are you?”

“Shouldn’t you know that, too? Don’t you have a rolodex of all souls ready for collection? I’ve
bequired before.”

“No,” Adrian said. “I have not reaped you, and I have not met you. I am not omniscient. How have you been collected?”

“Which time? There was the knife in the back, quite literally, and the lightning strike. I’m not sure if losing my lungs counted. I certainly wasn’t breathing.”

Adrian’s eyes widened and he stepped back. “You’re the vessel?”

Sam sighed as he realized he’d said too much. If his mind hadn’t been on other things, he would have known not to reveal that much about himself. He was distracted by what was happening in his other life though.

“Lucifer’s vessel,” Adrian went on. “Did Lucifer do this to you? Is that why you cannot be killed?”

“No,” Sam said. “This particular gift came from someone else.”

“I should take you to Michael.”

Sam felt nervous for the first time. Michael would not know what he had done to Sam as it hadn’t happened yet, but he would probably sense Sam wasn’t of this time, and it wouldn’t take him long to work it out. He would trap Sam and do what he could to break him, ready for Lucifer. Sam knew he wouldn’t break, but he didn’t want to spend the next eight months being tortured until Michael met him again. He had a feeling Zachariah himself would be eager to see Sam suffer, and Anna had mentioned someone called Thaddeus that had scared her.

“You can’t,” Sam said.

“Why not?”

Sam grappled for an answer, but he couldn’t find one. It didn’t matter as at that moment there was a flutter on the air and Anna appeared.

She looked from Sam to Adrian, her eyes wide, and asked, “What’s happening?”

“Anna,” Sam said with a sigh of relief. “This is Adrian. He’s a reaper, and he wants to take me to Michael. Adrian, this is my friend Anna. She’s an angel. You two probably know each other already. You’re both divine.”

“Anna,” Adrian said in an awed voice. “I thought you were jailed.”

“I was released,” Anna said. “It’s good to see you again. It’s been a while.”

Sam looked from her to Adrian and he rolled his eyes. She was talking like this was a reunion she’d been hoping for. She didn’t seem to care that the reaper was threatening Sam with Michael.

“It has,” Adrian said. “I missed you when you Fell.”

Sam cleared his throat. “Sorry to ruin the moment, but we’ve got things to do. Adrian, if you’d just take off and forget you saw me, that would be great.”

Adrian shook his head as if coming out of a daze. “I have a duty to Michael.”

“So does she,” Sam said, thumbing towards Anna. “She’s here on his orders.”
“I don’t believe you,” he said.

“And I don’t care,” Sam said. “I’m leaving.”

Adrian gripped Sam’s shoulder again and held him.

“Kill him, Anna,” Sam snapped.

“What? I…”

Sam saw her look of horror and he cursed. Adrian was putting their entire plan in jeopardy, and she was hesitating because they apparently used to be buddies. He was going to have to take care of it himself. He made himself boneless, leaning his weight against Adrian as if he had fainted. The reaper did exactly what he’d hoped for; he pushed Sam away, perhaps not wanting close contact with the abomination, and Sam fell forward onto Anna. He snatched her blade out of her hand and spun to face Adrian.

The reaper had time to do no more than say, “Anna, stop…” before Sam sank the blade into his chest, right over his heart.

His eyes and mouth blazed with light and his arms flew out at his sides, as if a powerful force was moving through him.

Sam dragged back the blade and slapped it into Anna’s hand. Her fingers curled around it automatically, even though her mouth was slack and her eyes wide as she watched her friend’s death.

When he fell to the floor, she looked at Sam, her expression shocked and betrayed. “You killed him.”

Sam nodded. “It didn’t look like you were going to.”

“He was my friend.”

“He was going to take me to Michael. The whole plan would have been screwed. You don’t get to have friends anymore. Neither of us do. They die.”

“Sam…” she said consolingly, and Sam knew she knew what was happening this day to his other self.

“I lost friends today,” he said. “Ellen and Jo blew themselves up so me and Dean could get away and kill Lucifer. We fail, we’re probably failing right now, and they will have died for nothing. And that’s down to me. I as good as pressed the trigger myself.”

Anna didn’t argue, and Sam appreciated that. He didn’t need her to lie to him, to try to make it better. He knew the truth of what he had done. He knew what he had cost his friends and family.

“It’s almost time, Anna. We’re down to only months before Dean and I will go to ’78, and then we can get to work. We have come this far, I have waited this long, and I refuse to fail now.”

“I know,” she said. “I’m sorry. I should have been the one to do it. It was on me and I failed.”

Sam shrugged. “It’s done now. And the rest will be done, too. We just have to wait a little longer. You have to stay safe.” He frowned. “What are you even doing here? How did you find me?”

“I knew what day it was,” she said. “Missouri told me where you were. I wanted to make sure you
were okay.”

Anna never usually bothered with Sam’s emotional health, and he was touched that she had cared enough to check in on him today. He didn’t need her to care though. He needed her to work.

“Is it safe for you to be here?” he asked. “Aren’t they still looking?”

“Not today,” she said. “Death’s raising has them all distracted. I am monitoring Angel Radio, but I am safe for now.”

“Good,” Sam said. “You’ve got to take care of yourself.”

Anna’s lips curved into a wry smile. “Because you need me? I thought you were going to be able to find the lance yourself. That’s what you told me when you asked me to heal Tess.”

“I will if I have to,” Sam said. “But I don’t see the point in writing off an ally unless I have to.”

It was more than that. He did care. Anna had done her best by him since 1983 when she’d abandoned her mission for Michael to help him. Together, they were going to save the world.

With a matter of months left to live, Sam had rethought his relationships. Anna and Missouri were really the only two that knew the real him anymore, and he thought he should use their help when it was offered. It was coming down to time for the fight, and as determined as he was, he would be a liar if he said he wasn’t struggling. Missouri took care of his heart, helping him to hold onto his certainty that seeing Dean again was the wrong thing to do—though she had no idea she was doing that—and Anna took care of the mission.

Between them, they gave Sam the strength to live with what was happening to the world and what was to come.
Chapter Sixty-Four

It was past midnight, but Sam wasn’t even a little tired. He was sitting in his living room, the only light the glow of the TV playing an old movie he wasn’t watching. He was waiting. It was February 1st, and soon, if not already, Dean would be brought back from 1978. He would realize quickly Sam wasn’t there, and then… Sam didn’t know what he would think then. He would search, surely, but what conclusion would he draw? Would he think Sam had abandoned him as he was a coward that couldn’t face what he’d done, or would he think Lucifer had him?

Neither option was one Sam wanted to put Dean through, but it was what he had to do.

He had waited for this day for so long. As first he anticipated it with excitement, finally seeing Dean again, but later it had been with trepidation. When Dean was back, it would be time for Sam and Anna to put their plan in motion. But in that moment, Sam wasn’t thinking of Lucifer or how it would feel to face him or even how limited the days left of his life were. He was thinking of how much he wanted to see his brother. It had been four years since he’d seen him, eleven since he had spoken to him, and it wasn’t enough. Sam thought getting through the next days, weeks, however long it took to find the Lance, were going to be even harder than the last thirty-two years put together.

There was a soft noise on the air and Sam looked up to see Anna standing in front of him.

“Hey,” Sam said in a dull voice.

Anna didn’t waste time with greetings, she merely flipped off the TV and said, “I have news.”

“Dean?” Sam asked.

“Yes. He’s back. I saw him.”

“Did he see you?” Sam asked worriedly.

“No. I concealed myself well.”

“Good.”

If Dean knew Anna was alive, he would know something had gone wrong. He and Castiel might search for her, and after what Anna had done, they would want revenge.

Sam drew a deep breath, not sure if he wanted an answer to his question. “How is he?”


“Where is he?” Sam asked. “Where did Michael spit him out?”

“A hotel in Colorado.”

“Where we left from,” Sam said. “That’s good. It will take him time to get back to Bobby’s.”

“Why does that matter?”
“Because it take a little longer before he realizes I’m not there either.”

“That only gives you until morning before he’s searching for you,” Anna said.

Sam bowed his head. “I know.”

He wished there was something he could do for Dean to make him stop searching for him. Sam knew he wouldn’t find him, but he didn’t want him to torture himself trying. The only way was to speak to him somehow, but Sam couldn’t bear a phone call. Dean might notice something was wrong. His voice was exactly the same as it had been thirty-two years ago, but Dean knew him better than anyone. He might somehow know Sam wasn’t the same man he’d last seen.

An idea occurred to Sam, such a simple one he couldn’t understand why he’d not thought of it before. Dean had to believe Sam had gone of his own accord, so he had to leave him a message.

“Can you take me to Bobby’s?” he asked.

Anna looked confused. “Are you going to reveal yourself to him? You know he’ll tell Dean.”

“No, but I need to leave them a message so they know I am doing this on my own, not trapped or being forced.”

“I’ll take you there,” Anna said.

“Give me a minute,” Sam said, getting to his feet.

He walked into the study and sat down at his desk. He took a moment to gather his thoughts and then picked up a piece of paper and a pen and began to write. He took time to try to find the right words to use, to make it clear that this was what he wanted and that he was okay. He didn’t want to leave Dean in any doubt that he was acting of his own accord. When it was done, he signed it and folded it into fourths.

“Anna,” he called.

She came to the door and asked, “Are you ready?”

Sam got to his feet and tucked the letter into his shirt pocket. “Yes.”

Anna nodded once and then Sam felt the swoop in his stomach that always accompanied traveling with an angel.

They came to a stop outside a familiar farmhouse surrounded by junked cars. Sam’s breath came shakily as he looked around, seeing the place he had played as a child and visited as an adult, the place that, outside of the Impala, had been the only place close to a home that he knew. He hadn’t been here in thirty-two years.

He walked forward on leaden feet and approached the window. A light was burning inside, and as Sam moved closer, he saw Bobby sitting at his desk, a book open in front of him.

His breath caught and his hand reached forward automatically, as if he could push through the glass and space that separated them and touch his friend. He hadn’t seen him in a lifetime and being this close was equal parts joy and torture. He missed him so much more now that he was close to him that it was a physically painful.

“Sam,” Anna said quietly. “Are you sure?”
“Yes,” Sam said, knowing what she was asking. “He can’t see me. Can you put him to sleep?”

In answer she disappeared and reappeared behind Bobby. Before he could do more than look up, she had her hand on his forehead and his eyes fell closed. Anna cradled his head gently and eased it down to rest on the open book he had been reading. She pressed her fingers to his head again then gestured for Sam to come in.

He walked up the steps to the porch and waited as Anna disengaged the locks and bolts that the ever security-conscious Bobby kept in place after dark. She opened the door for him, and Sam stepped inside. The memories flooded over him at once: days spent with Dean and Bobby, Castiel, too, later; conversations and arguments; moments of simple family time and moments of anger.

It was exactly as he’d remembered it. The books were stacked on every surface and the air smelled of Old Spice and whiskey. It had been over three decades. It had been a matter of days. It was too much and not enough.

Sam walked toward the desk and took a moment to look down at his sleeping friend, seeing the lines of the apocalypse on his face that he’d forgotten. For so long, Sam had been consumed with how much he missed Dean, how it was going to hurt him to stay away, that he’d forgotten that it wasn’t just his brother he would be leaving behind. It was Bobby and Castiel, too. The small group that had been Sam’s only family before 1978. The number of people he called family had grown now, he had Missouri and James, Tess and Patience. He loved them, but that didn’t diminish the love he felt for the man in front of him.

“Sam…” Anna said quietly.

“I know.” He picked up the bottle of whiskey from the desk and slipped his note beneath and then took a long look at Bobby, marking his face in his mind, knowing he would never see it again, then said, “I’m ready. Take me home.”

Anna nodded and Sam felt them move again. He came to rest in his living room and he sighed out a shaky breath.

“Can I help?” Anna asked gently.

“I just need to be alone,” Sam said. “And you have somewhere to be?”

“I do?”

Sam looked at her, seeing her confusion and wondering at it. Sam knew what had to happen next, so how could she not?

“You need to go to Michael,” he said.

Anna took a step back, and her expression became tight with fear.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said. “But he needs to see you. He’ll be expecting you to report to him now that time has aligned again. If you don’t, he’ll come looking for us.”

“What do I tell him?”

“Tell him it’s working,” Sam said. “That I am breaking but I need just a little more time.”

“It’s been thirty-two years, Sam. How could you need more time?”
“Because I am not going to find Dean again. You think just a little longer without him will break me completely. Say I will be ready for Lucifer soon.”

“What about me? If he asks, what do I tell him I’ve done?”

“You watched me as he told you to, made me think you’re on my side.”

Anna still looked scared, and Sam softened his voice.

“The time for hiding is over, Anna. Michael can’t take me yet. I need to be free,”

She drew a deep breath and her features smoothed. “Okay. I’ll go now.”

“Thank you,” Sam said. He knew what he was asking of her, but it was the only way. They needed a little more time to find the Lance.

Anna nodded once and disappeared. Sam stood for another moment and then went into his study. He sat down at the desk and took his journal from the drawer. He turned to a fresh page, after an entry about the last rugaru hunt he’d taken, and wrote two words.

It’s time…

xXx

Sam didn’t sleep that night. He wondered how Anna was getting on with Michael. He was sure she could sell the story if she stayed calm, but he wasn’t sure if she’d be able to do that. She was as scared of Michael as he was, perhaps more, as she had been punished by him before. Michael scared Sam, but only because he could complicate their plans. He was more scared of Lucifer and what he would do to the world if he wasn’t stopped.

He pushed the thoughts from his mind though and concentrated on what he could control: his environment. He couldn’t do anything for the plan until Anna was back, so he decided to do some long overdue housework. He swept through the kitchen, living room and hall, and then filled a bucket with hot water and soap and got down on his knees to scrub the floor. It had been a while since he’d done it properly, as he’d been hunting a lot, and it was needed.

The repetition of the scrubbing brush bristles scraping the floor, the heat of the water on his hands, hot enough to hurt, kept him focused on his task rather than his situation. He had reached the hall when he heard the key in the lock. He sat back on his haunches and looked up as Missouri came in. She looked confused when she saw Sam kneeling at her feet, and even more so when Sam’s greeting was, “Be careful. The floor’s wet.”

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Cleaning. You?”

“I came to clean, too,” she said. “I thought you’d want it nice if you brought Dean here. I didn’t think you’d be home.”

“I had things to do.”

Missouri frowned down at him, and Sam went back to work on a stubborn spot on the floor. He felt the unspoken words in the air, hovering on Missouri’s lips, but she merely said, “I’ll make some coffee,” before stepping tentatively around him and going into the living room. A moment later Sam heard the sound of her filling the tea kettle and setting it on the stove.
Sam had known this moment was coming, but he’d hoped he would have a little longer before he’d have to admit what he’d been hiding from her all this time: the fact he wasn’t going back to Dean. She had waited for this day with anticipation, thinking Sam would be happier when he was with his brother again. She had no idea Sam had decided a long time ago that the reunion would never happen. He hadn’t told her as he thought she’d argue with him, not understanding why he wouldn’t go to Dean. Sam vowed the moment he realized what had to happen that Missouri couldn’t know he was going to his death when he faced Lucifer.

He carried on scrubbing until the floor was clean and then he carried the bucket of water outside to empty among the trees. He left the bucket and scrubbing brush outside the door then went back inside, stepping carefully on the wet floor.

Missouri was bustling about in the kitchen, and as Sam came in, she said, “It’s almost ready. Sit down.”

Sam obeyed, taking his usual seat across from what had been George’s place, and he closed his eyes a moment. He wanted to see his friend more than anything in that moment. George had accepted his choice to stay away from Dean, even though he hadn’t liked it. He’d understood why Sam needed to do it. It would be harder to make Missouri understand. She had seen Sam missing his brother for all these years, and she’d comforted him through the hardest days.

Missouri came in with two cups of coffee and a plate of cookies on a tray. She set the tray down and handed Sam a cup. “Have you eaten yet?” she asked.

Sam shook his head. “I will.”

“I know,” she said simply, holding out the plate of cookies. “Now.”

Sam took one and bit into it. He had been so distracted with everything else that was happening and how he was feeling that he hadn’t noticed how hungry he was. He ate the cookie quickly and took another.

Missouri settled herself on the couch and said, “I thought it was time. Isn’t Dean back yet?”

Sam took a sip of his coffee to give himself a little more time to answer. “He got back yesterday,” he said.

“Then why aren’t you there?”

Sam sighed, facing the moment at last. “I’m not going to him, Missouri.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Why not?”

“I can’t,” Sam said, fixing his attention on his coffee mug. “It’s not the right time.”

“Sam, it’s been thirty-two years,” she said, unknowingly quoting Anna. “How could it not be the right time?”

“It’s time to face Lucifer, or almost time. Anna and I will be able to search for the weapon now. When we have it, we will go against him, and that will be dangerous. We’re up against the Devil, and I don’t want Dean to be a part of that. I have to keep him away from this fight. I owe him that. I have betrayed him in the worst way before. This time, I am going to protect him.”

Missouri drew a shaky breath, and Sam looked up. “What’s wrong?” he asked.
“Lucifer,” she said. “I don’t know why I’ve never considered it before. I mean, I knew he was free and you were going to face him, but I have been so confident that you were protected that I never thought of how much danger you were going to be in.”

“He can’t kill me,” Sam lied. “Michael’s grace will protect me.”

“But there are other ways for you to be hurt. Elias proved that. What if Lucifer…” She couldn’t complete the sentence.

“He won’t. Anna and I are prepared. With this weapon, it will be easy. We have a plan. We’ll be in no danger. Lucifer is the one that’s going to suffer this time.”

“What is this weapon?” she asked.

“It’s the Lance Michael used when he faced Lucifer and banished him to the Cage. It can kill an archangel.”

“Do you have it?”

“No, a demon named Crowley does, but we’re getting it from him. We had to wait until it was the right time, and it is now. Anna is with Michael now, feeding him lies about me needing a little longer to break, and when she’s back, we’ll start our search.”

Missouri nodded. “But Dean…”

“He doesn’t have Michael’s protection. He’ll be in danger from Lucifer. Anna and I have to do it alone.”

“How can you stand it?” Missouri asked. “You’ve waited so long.”

“Exactly. I’ve waited all this time. A few more days, weeks tops, will be easy after that. I’ll see him again soon.” He didn’t feel guilty for the lie. He was protecting her.

“How long have you known you’re not going to him?” she asked.

“Years,” Sam said quietly, hating the way she would feel when she knew he’d hidden it from her all this time. “Ever since Anna found out there was a weapon, I’ve known Dean didn’t need to be a part of it for us to win. I decided then that I would keep him out of it.”

“You never told me. I have been carrying on about you seeing him again all this time and you never said anything. I thought I was helping you, reminding you he was coming. It must have been torture.”

“It wasn’t,” Sam said, forcing a smile for her. “It helped. Just being able to talk to someone about him was enough. And I will see him again. I’ll be able to tell him it’s over when I do. Maybe that will make up for some of what I did.”

Missouri frowned and seemed to consider her words carefully. “Are you sure you can do it without him? Dean was there for everything you went through before. You were a team.”

“He was, and we were, but that was before I was trapped and had to face things without him. I can do this now because it’s the right thing for him.”

“Is that all?” she asked quietly.

“What do you mean?”
“Like you said, you were trapped. You have been without him so long, and you have done and faced so much. Are you sure you’re not protecting yourself? You’re not the man you were when you arrived in 1978, the man Dean knew. Do you think it won’t be the same?”

“Of course it won’t be the same. It can never be the same for either of us after everything that’s happened. But he’s still my brother, the man I trust the most in all the world. It will be different, but we’ll make it work.”

At least they would have if Sam was going to see him. It would have been an adjustment for them both. Dean might not know him at first, not in the same way he had before, but that would have been fixed with time. They would have found their balance again because they were brothers. Of all the things that worried Sam, that was the least of them. He was keeping Dean away to save his life, not for some selfish reason like fear.

“e’ll look for you,” Missouri said.

“Anna took me to Bobby’s last night, and I left them a note. I said I am working on something and will come back when I can.”

“He’ll be worried.”

“He’ll be pissed,” Sam corrected. “That’s nothing new. He’ll think I’m being reckless and probably betraying him all over again, but I can handle that. I’ll make things okay when I see him again.”

Missouri sighed. “I know I can’t change your mind, and you know I’ll support your choice, but I think you’re making a mistake, Sam. You need him.”

“I do,” Sam said. “And one day I will have him, but not before it’s time.”

Missouri set down her coffee and stood up. Sam frowned as she came towards him and plucked the cup out of his hand and put it on the table. She tugged his hands and Sam stood up. She put her arms around him and Sam relaxed into her hold. She held him for a long time and then pulled back and looked up at him.

“Are you scared?” she asked.

Sam wasn’t sure if she meant of Dean or Lucifer, but he answered honestly for them both. “Yes. But I know everything will be okay after.”

He wasn’t lying. It would be okay for the world and, eventually, for Dean, too. He would understand what Sam did and why, and he would move on. It would take time, but if Sam succeeded, Dean would have plenty of that. Sam would be gone, but in going, he would have saved the world.

Dean would understand that one day.
Dean woke on the floor with his right arm pinned under him. He groaned and tried to roll over, but
it was hard as that arm was numb. Didn’t Michael know humans had something called circulation?
Would it have killed him to leave Dean on his back if he was going to dump him on the floor?
Though in hindsight he didn’t like the idea of Michael touching him at all, let alone making him
comfortable.

“Dick move, dick,” Dean grumbled.

He rolled over and used the bed to push himself to his feet, then rubbed his arm that was starting to
prickle as blood flow returned. He looked around and frowned. He was alone.

“Sammy?”

There was no answer, no sign of his brother at all.

He banged on the closed bathroom door and shouted, “You in there, man?”

When he heard nothing, not even a creak of the floor or running water inside, he turned the handle
and closed his eyes before pushing it open. He didn’t want to see Sam doing his business, but he
did want to make sure he was okay. The last time he’d seen his brother, he’d been dead on the floor
of that decrepit house after being stabbed by that bitch Anna.

“Sam? I’m opening my eyes in five so you better get up and zip up. Five… four… Three… Two…
One…” He opened his eyes and saw the empty room. “What the hell?”

Michael had said he’d sent Sam back, ‘safe and sound’, and Dean had seen him do something, so
where was he? Dean had been spat back in the hotel they’d left out of. Why wouldn’t he leave Sam
there, too? Unless this was his idea of a joke.

Maybe, Dean thought, he hadn’t come back to the exact same time as Sam. He could be out there
somewhere, looking for Dean, too. He zipped Sam’s duffel closed and picked it up along with his
own and looked around the room for anything he’d missed then left the room and walked along the
hall with its garish red wallpaper and brown carpet. He summoned an elevator car and went inside,
double hitting the first-floor button. The car began to move, and Dean tapped his foot impatiently
as he waited for the doors to open. When they did, he walked through the small lobby to the
counter where a greasy-haired man in his twenties was reading a comic.

“Hey,” Dean said. “Have you seen the man I arrived with? Has he been through here?”

The man raised his eyes and frowned at Dean. “Which one? The pervert or the giant?”

“The giant,” Dean said. “Though if you’ve seen the other one, that would be good to know, too.”

Castiel might have gotten back on his own and hooked up with Sam already. They could be
looking for Dean together.

“I ain’t seen either of them,” he said.
“Then why did you…?” Dean sighed. “You think maybe they slipped past while you were staring at Wonder Woman’s breasts?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know. I took a leak, too.”

“Thanks for that,” Dean said.

He went outside and scanned the area for a sign of Sam or Castiel. Neither of them was there, though he wasn’t that surprised about Castiel. He’d been in a bad way when Dean last saw him. He didn’t think the angel would be up to making the return trip anytime soon.

The Impala was still there, which was a relief, as Dean would have been pissed if Sam had taken her to get himself to Bobby’s. He had a spare key for emergency purposes only. This didn’t count as a big enough emergency for grand theft auto from his own brother.

He unlocked the trunk and stowed their duffels, then stopped, leaning against the smooth metal and tried to clear his thoughts.

Sam apparently wasn’t there, which meant Dean needed to track him down. He closed his eyes and said, “Castiel, are you back? If you’re around, come on down. I’m outside the hotel. We need to talk.”

There was no flutter of arrival, and when Dean looked around, there was no sign of anyone there but a woman walking down the sidewalk, casting him a curious look. Dean figured she’d heard him talking to himself.

He got in behind the steering wheel and pulled out his phone. He checked it over, making sure its trip to 1978 hadn’t damaged it, and then speed-dialed Sam’s number. It went straight through to voicemail which was weird as Sam was always on Dean’s ass about keeping their phones charged and turned on all the time. He waited for Sam’s sensible pre-recorded message to finish before saying, “Where are you? I just got back. Give me a call when you get this.”

He ended the call and then dialed Bobby’s number. It was answered quickly with a gruff, “Yes?”

“It’s me. Is Sam there?”

“No. I thought the two of you were planning on doing the time warp with Castiel.”

“We were. We did,” Dean said. “I just got back, but I can’t find Sam.”

“He’s probably not gone far.”

“The fact he’s gone anywhere at all is what’s bothering me,” Dean said. “And the fact the last time I saw him he was dead on the floor.”

There was a sound of sputtering and gasping that made Dean think Bobby had been mid-drink before his announcement. He waited for Bobby to clear his airway and say, “What the hell! He was dead?” before explaining.

“It was Anna. She stabbed him in the gut. Michael said he’d fixed him though. He was supposed to be back already.”

“Michael! What was he doing there? And how are you still yourself? Why aren’t you suited and booted as a vessel already?”
“Have a little faith, Bobby,” Dean said bitterly. “I’m not rolling over for those dick bags and saying yes.”

“Okay!” he said defensively, and Dean could clearly imagine his raised hands and look of annoyance. “I just thought…. .”

“You thought I would have given it up already?”

“I figured if Michael brought Sam back it was in payment for something else.”

“It wasn’t,” Dean said shortly. “He did it off his own back. Keeping him warm for Lucifer, I guess. That’s not the problem though. The fact that I can’t find Sam is.”

“You’re right. I haven’t seen him though. I’m guessing you tried calling him.”

“Yeah. It went through to voicemail.”

“Then you better come here,” Bobby said. “If he’s looking for you, too, this is the first place he’ll look. How far out are you?”

“I’ll be there by morning,” Dean said.

“Okay. I’ll have him call you if he shows up here.”

“Thanks,” Dean said.

He ended the call and took one last look around the parking lot, almost expecting to see Sam loping towards him, the repentant look that seemed to be his only expression now in place. He wasn’t there through, so Dean started the engine and backed out of his spot.

If Sam wasn’t there, he was probably already on his way to Bobby’s. At least that was what Dean hoped.

xXx

Dean strode through Bobby’s door and into the kitchen, calling. “It’s me.”

“I know,” Bobby said from his spot at the desk. “I heard your engine half an hour before you got here.”

Dean raised an eyebrow but Bobby didn’t correct his exaggeration.

“No sign of Sam?” Dean asked.

“Yeah, he’s in the bathroom. I didn’t tell you because I thought it would be a nice surprise. Idjit.”

“A simple no would have been fine,” Dean said.

“And thinking before you asked would have meant you knew the answer already. If he was here, I would have said. I’ve called him and left messages, but I’ve heard nothing back. Now, are you going to tell me what happened?”

“I already told you,” Dean said. “Anna killed Sam. Michael gave me some bullshit about God’s plan and how I was going to say yes, then he sent us back. He did Sam first, but when I woke up—on the floor of our hotel room—he wasn’t there.”
“Have you tried Cas?”

I tried from the hotel, but there was no sign. He was in a bad way when we left him in ’78. Zapping us back really took it out of him. I’d be surprised if he made it here himself already.”

“Worth a try though,” Bobby said.

Dean nodded and said, “Cas, I’m at Bobby’s. We could really do with some help, so if you’ve made it…”

“I’m here, Dean.”

Dean spun on his heel and saw Castiel standing by the stove. He was as pale and wrecked looking as he had been when Dean last saw him. He began to list to the side, and Dean rushed to get under him before he could drop. He pushed a chair behind him, and Castiel collapsed into it.

“You look like hell,” Bobby said.

Castiel nodded. “Yes. I would have been here sooner, but I was indisposed.”

Bobby huffed a laugh. “I’ll say.”

“I didn’t even regain consciousness until I heard your prayer, Dean.” He looked around. “Where is Sam?”

“We were hoping you’d have some insight into that,” Bobby said. “He’s missing.”

“I haven’t seen him,” Castiel said. “I woke up in that… interesting… hotel room, and went looking for you both straight away. I didn’t get further than the lobby before Michael arrived though. He sent me back, and I just woke up on the floor of that hotel room in Colorado.”

“Yeah, Michael’s not much for comfort,” Dean said. “Dammit. I figured Sam had to be with you or on his way here. He had a head-start on me, so he should have been here already.”

“Do you think Michael lied?” Bobby asked in a tense voice.

“You mean he’s still dead?” Dean didn’t want to think it, but it was an option he had to consider.

Bobby nodded.

“Sam is dead?” Castiel asked.

Dean explained what had happened to them in 1978, from finding their parents to Anna’s attack and Michael’s arrival. “But he said he’d fixed Sam and sent him home,” he finished.

“Yeah, but he’s an angel,” Bobby said. “They’ve not exactly proven themselves to be stand-up guys for you, have they? No offence, Cas.”

It looked as though Castiel had taken plenty of offence, but he didn’t refute Bobby’s words. He said, “If Michael said he healed Sam, he did.”

“How do you know?” Dean asked.

“Because he is an honorable angel,” Castiel said.

Dean scoffed. “Yeah, he’s going to destroy the world real honorably when he and Lucifer fight.”
“He believes that is God’s will,” Castiel said. “He is being a good son. Like you were.”

Dean scowled at him. “I was a good son, but I still knew the difference between right and wrong. When my father asked me to kill my brother, I made the right choice.”

“Michael does not have your strength of character,” Castiel said. “But the fact remains, he is honorable. If he said Sam was healed, he was. If he said he sent him back, he did.”

Bobby cleared his throat. “How much wriggle room would honor give him though?”

Castiel frowned. “He would be honest.”

“Yeah, but could he frame the truth to hide something.”

“What do you mean?” Dean asked.

“Well, Sam’s not here, and he’s not gotten in touch with any of us. Even if his cell was dead, he’d be able to use a payphone, he could call Cas. Since he hasn’t, maybe he can’t.”

“He was healed!” Castiel snapped in frustration. “Michael would not lie.”

“Calm down,” Bobby growled. “I’m not saying he did lie. I’m saying he used the truth to deceive Dean. There’s a difference. What if he healed him and sent him back, but not to Dean. What if he stuck him somewhere else?”

“He said home,” Dean said.

“His idea of home or ours?” Bobby said.

“Where else would be home?” Castiel asked.

Bobby looked apologetic. “Well… the other angels think Sam and Dean belong to Lucifer and Michael They’re the chosen vessels. What if Michael meant he sent Sam home to Lucifer.”

Dean pulled out a chair and sat down beside Castiel, his legs weak. Could Sam be with Lucifer even now? Was he saying yes already or was Lucifer trying to elicit consent from him some other way? Was he hurting him?

“No,” he said quietly in answer to his thoughts. “He can’t be.”

“I don’t like the idea any more than you do,” Bobby said seriously. “But I’m saying it’s an option. Michael wants you and Sam to be the vessels so he can have the fight. Maybe he thinks that’s how to get the yes vote out of you. If Lucifer has his chosen vessel, it can’t be much longer before he has the world.”

“What do you think, Cas?” Dean asked.

“I don’t want to think of it at all,” Castiel said.

“None of us do,” Bobby said irritably. “But knowing if we’ve got to launch a rescue mission from Satan would be a good start for us.”

But they couldn’t do that, Dean thought, bowing his head to hide his face. If Lucifer had Sam, they had no chance of getting him back. They’d shot him with the Colt and it had done no more than give him a headache. How would they be able to get Sam, the person Lucifer needed above all else, away from him?
He felt sick. Sam could be hurting even now and Dean wouldn’t be able to save him.

“I don’t think so,” Castiel said.

Dean’s head snapped up and he clung to Castiel’s words like a life raft.

“I just don’t believe he would do that,” Castiel went on. “Michael wants the battle done properly, with Sam and Dean as the vessels, not the stopgap Lucifer has now, but he wouldn’t hand Sam to Lucifer. He wouldn’t think of it as honorable. He, like Lucifer, believes that it will happen in time anyway.”

“You’re banking this on Michael being halfway decent,” Bobby said. “Isn’t that a bit shortsighted?”

“I don’t think so. I know Michael. He was my leader for millennia. Wherever Sam is, I don’t believe it is with him or Lucifer. He’s somewhere else. Though I don’t know why.”

Dean felt the weight pressing on his chest ease at the thought of Sam being out there but not with the devil, but he was still worried that he wasn’t with them.

“Who else needs a drink?” Bobby asked. “The hell with it being early. This is the apocalypse and Sam is missing. Dean, get yourself a glass.”

Dean stood, relieved to find that his legs wanted to support him now, and took a glass from the cabinet. He turned back to Bobby and saw that he was frowning at a piece of paper.

“What?” he asked. “What’s going on?”

Bobby held out the piece of paper and said, “He left this under the bottle.”

Dean crossed the room in long strides and snatched the paper out of Bobby’s hand and read it.

Dean,

I’m okay. I can’t be with you right now though. I’m sorry. There is something I’m working on that I have to do alone. It’s going to help. You can’t be a part of this, but I will be in touch when I can. Don’t worry.

Take care of yourself,

Sam.

Dean dropped the paper onto the desk and cursed. Castiel walked over, a little unsteady still, and picked it up. He read it, his frown growing with each line, and then said, “Where is he?”

“Exactly,” Dean said bitterly. “Where the hell is he and what the hell is he doing?”

“He has a plan,” Bobby said.

“You think?” Dean laughed harshly. “Sam’s plans don’t always work out though, do they? The last time his plan was to kill Lilith, and that freed Lucifer! The last time he was alone was when he was running around with Ruby, and she got him hooked on demon blood! What the hell is he going to
do to the world this time?"

Bobby stared at him until Dean averted his eyes. “Feel better for that, do you?” Bobby asked. “Does listing his mistakes, as if either of us could have ever forgotten them, help?”

“No,” Dean said bitterly.

“Good,” Bobby said. “Sam is working on something. I want to know where he is, too, but I trust he’s doing what’s right. He’s not going to make the same mistakes again.”

“No, then why is he doing it alone?” Dean asked. “If it’s going to help, it’s got to be about Lucifer and Michael. Why would he go off without us to do that? He knows we’re stronger together.”

“You’ve not been in the best place lately, Dean,” Bobby said.

Dean glared at him. “You think I’m too weak to handle whatever Sam’s doing?”

“No, I think you’re dealing with stuff no one should have to deal with. Sam betrayed you before— I’m not denying that—and there were awful consequences. You have suffered more than any of us with what happened to you after your deal. You wouldn’t be human if you weren’t struggling. Sam seems to agree. I think he’s keeping you out of it for a reason, and that’s to protect you.”

“I don’t need to be protected,” Dean growled. “I need my damn brother here with me. I need us to fight this war together.”

“Sam disagrees,” Castiel said.

“Just because he thinks that, it doesn’t make it right,” Dean said. “He needs to get his ass back here.”

Bobby shrugged. “Maybe he does, but how are we going to find him?”

“I’ve found him before,” Dean said.

“Then try again. I’ll help you even. But I think you’re making a mistake. I think letting Sam do whatever he’s doing might just be the best thing.”

Dean shook his head. Bobby didn’t understand. Sam needed Dean as much as Dean needed him. They worked best together. It was great that Sam wanted to protect him, Dean understood that and a part of him even appreciated it. But he wasn’t going to let Sam run around alone, getting into trouble without Dean there to help him. Anything could happen.

“Where do we start looking?” Castiel asked. “I can’t sense him anymore.”

“Stolen cars,” Dean said. “He got back here somehow to leave that note, so I’m going to find how he did it. I’ll find him.”

“I’ll set up the laptop,” Bobby said, wheeling himself around the desk to the cabinet and picking up the laptop from where it sat beside the fresh whiskey bottle.

Dean poured himself a drink in Bobby’s glass and slugged it back. He was going to find Sam and give him the biggest ass-reaming of his life. Sam needed Dean as much as Dean needed him. They worked best together. It was great that Sam wanted to protect him, Dean understood that and a part of him even appreciated it. But he wasn’t going to let Sam run around alone, getting into trouble without Dean there to help him. Anything could happen.

“Where do we start looking?” Castiel asked. “I can’t sense him anymore.”

“Stolen cars,” Dean said. “He got back here somehow to leave that note, so I’m going to find how he did it. I’ll find him.”

“I’ll set up the laptop,” Bobby said, wheeling himself around the desk to the cabinet and picking up the laptop from where it sat beside the fresh whiskey bottle.

Dean poured himself a drink in Bobby’s glass and slugged it back. He was going to find Sam and give him the biggest ass-reaming of his life. Sam needed Dean to know he couldn’t do this. Dean needed him, and not just to work with and to protect. His conversation with Michael had affected him. The archangel was so sure he was going to give consent, just as Lucifer was about Sam.

Dean needed his brother with him so they could prove them wrong together.
Sam was eating the breakfast Missouri had made for him, and she was sitting at the table with, sipping her coffee. They weren’t talking about Dean anymore, in fact their conversation was about what else Sam needed to do to clean the house, but Sam felt the topic in the air still. Missouri wasn’t happy with his choice, and though she would support it, Sam knew she had a backlog of arguments she wished she could employ.

He was glad they weren’t talking about it. It was harder than he’d thought to stay away. Dean was out there now, the Dean that belonged to his time, and he wished he could see him. He wanted to explain what had happened and to tell the story of Sam’s second life. He wanted Dean to know so many things, to tell him about George, explain how special he had been. He wished Dean could know how much Missouri had done for him. How she had saved him in ’78 and then had done it again over the years when Mary died, when Dean and John went to hell and when he found George dead. There was so much he should know. Sam hoped that, when it was over, Missouri would give Dean his journal so he could see for himself what had happened and why Sam had done the things he had, what he had died for and why he had left Dean behind to do it.

He tried not to think of what was happening in Sioux Falls at that moment. Dean would surely be there by now, and probably Castiel, too. Had they found the note? How angry was Dean? Which side would Bobby come down on? Would he understand what Sam was doing, going off alone, or would he think Sam was set to fail again as he had last time? They might not even trust him, Sam knew. The last time he’d worked without them, he’d freed Lucifer. In their minds, Sam was the angry man he’d been thirty-two years ago, fueled by rage and probably making bad choices. Sam hoped it would be over before they had a chance to worry too much, that he would be gone without fuss before they could suffer.

“What are you thinking?” Missouri asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between them.

Sam pushed away his mostly empty plate and wiped his mouth. “I’m thinking about windows.”

She looked doubtful. “Windows?”

Sam nodded. “Yes. I was wondering if I have time to clean them all before Anna gets here. She left in the hours ago, but I have no idea how long Michael will want to question her. He has a lot of years to catch up on, and she has a lot of lies to come up with.”

“What do you think she’ll tell him?”

If she’s smart, she’ll keep it close to the truth. I’ve worked and hunted, traveled and met people. The lies will be about my state of mind. He has to think I am close to breaking. She’s going to tell him I need just a little while without Dean to finish me off.”

“What if he doesn’t believe her?” Missouri asked.

“Then we have to run.”

“How do you run from an archangel?”
“You start by banishing him,” Sam said.

He got to his feet and took an X-Acto knife from the drawer where he kept a few tools. He cut across his palm and fisted his hand to draw the blood before daubing the first lines of the symbol on the wall. He had to stop and keep cutting himself as his hand healed so fast, but soon he had a perfect banishing sigil painted there. “Slap that with a bloody hand and any angels in the vicinity will be blasted away. They’ll only be gone a few hours, but it’ll give me enough time to escape.”

“And then you’ll run?” Missouri asked.

“If we can, Anna and I will run together,” Sam said. “I have got the sigils on my ribs that hide me from Anna. They’ll stop any angel sensing me. It will be tough, but I can hide. He doesn’t know me well enough to find me if I’m trying not to be found.”

Not like Dean, he thought. When he had been hiding with Ruby, after he’d broken out of the panic room, Dean had tracked him down and tried to stop him. He wished Dean had succeeded. So much would have been avoided. He would never have been brought back to 1978. Of course then he would never have met James, Tess or Patience; he would never have known George or met any of the other people he knew now; he never would have experienced the things he had. That would be a bitter loss, but he never would have known what he’d missed out on and the world would have been safer. People would have lived. Ellen and Jo, the many other nameless and faceless people Lucifer had killed, wouldn’t have died. The loss of Sam’s new life wasn’t so bad when compared to what he would gain.

It was pointless to dwell on it though. It had happened and Sam had lived it. All he could control now was what he did and how he would react when whatever came next happened.

“I don’t feel ready for this,” Missouri admitted. “I am scared for you.”

“You don’t need to be,” Sam said easily. “I’m going to be okay.”

Missouri smiled, but Sam could tell that he hadn’t really reassured her.

“Really, Missouri, I will–”

He cut off as he heard the sound of an angel’s arrival. He slashed across his palm and lifted his hand to the sigil as he spun to look into the living room. He relaxed as he saw Anna walking towards them.

“It’s just me,” she said.

Sam nodded and washed his bloody hands in the sink. He dried them on a cloth and asked, “How did it go?”

Anna smiled. “He believed me. He’s given me, us, more time.”

Sam sighed with relief and Missouri clapped hand to her chest.

“What did you tell him?” Sam asked.

“Everything we discussed. He thinks you’re close to breaking and some time without Dean will finish you. He didn’t seem surprised even.”

“Why do you think that is?” Missouri asked.
Anna considered before answering. “Archangels have a certain level of omniscience. Michael believes it is foretold that you will give consent, he can see it happening, so he can be patient.”

“Lucifer said the same thing,” Sam said. “He told me I was going to say yes within six months, in Detroit.”

“Which is where we will find him,” Anna said. “But from there, it will be our plan that unfolds, not theirs.”

“And he didn’t show any doubt you were on his side still?” Sam asked.

“No. I played my part well. I channeled all my hatred for Lucifer when I was talking to him, and he took that as faith he would win.”

“Well done,” Sam said.

“What happens next?” Missouri asked.

“We go to Crowley,” Sam said. “We had to wait for it to be time, and it finally is. He has the Lance, and I’m pretty sure he’ll hand it over.” He turned to Anna. “We should go.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” she replied.

Sam tossed down the cloth and nodded, but Missouri jumped to her feet and said. “Wait!”

Confused, Sam watched as she circled the table and came to him. She wrapped her arms around him and then pulled his face down to her. Sam smiled as she kissed him firmly on the lips and then, as she pulled back and said, “Be careful,” he nodded solemnly and said, “I’ll see you soon.”

Missouri stepped back, wiping her eyes, and Sam nodded to Anna. “I’m ready,”

xXx

Anna and Sam stared through the broken gates and Sam felt disappointment chill his gut. The house had been gutted by a fire. There wasn’t a single window left intact and the paved area around the house had been blackened with smoke.

“Well, he’s not living here anymore,” Sam said bitterly.

“No,” Anna agreed. “I wonder what happened.”

A woman speed-walking a poodle came towards them, the jacket of her peach velour tracksuit swishing in the air. “Can I help you?” she asked, her tone a little snippy.

Sam realized he and Anna didn’t look like they belonged in this exclusive Beverly Hills neighborhood. It was funny in a way, as Sam could more than afford any of these houses. “We were looking for the man that lived here,” he said. “He’s an old friend.”

“Oh, Mr. Crowley,” she said, her tone softening. “Poor thing. He was a friend of ours, too. He gave my husband Donnie some great investment advice. Poor Donnie was a little down on his luck since the banks started folding, but our portfolio practically tripled overnight. We have a house in the Hamptons now.”

“That’s nice,” Anna said blandly.

Sam was thinking that Crowley had been doing a little work from home. He was prepared to bet
that ‘poor Donnie’ was about ten years away from a hellhound visit. The things people were stupid enough to deal for never ceased to amaze him.

“Do you know where Mr. Crowley went?” Sam asked.

“No idea,” the woman said. “It happened a few weeks ago, and it was the strangest thing. I was walking Bruiser, when I heard the sound of shouting. It was like there was a fight happening inside. Bruiser got very upset. Didn’t you, boy?” She fondled the poodle’s ears. “The fire seemed to happen all at once. One moment it was fine, next moment it was completely consumed with flames. But there was no explosion. All that black smoke… I didn’t know what to make of it.”

“And Mr. Crowley?” Sam prompted.

“I never saw him again. I called the 911, but it took the longest time for anyone to show up. I heard there were bodies pulled out though. We can only assume one of them was him. God rest his soul.”

“Doubt that,” Sam muttered, and then raised his voice to speak to the woman. “Thanks for your help.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help you more,” she said. “Maybe if you speak to the police… They might have identified the bodies.”

“We will,” Anna said. “Come on, Sam. We should go.”

Sam nodded and they began to walk away from the woman, in the opposite direction to the one she had come in. When they had turned a corner and were out of her sight, Sam stopped and said, “What do you think?”

“Lucifer,” Anna said. “If he knew Crowley had the colt, he would know that he gave it to you. He would want revenge for that. He’d come for him, or at least send demons. Black smoke.”

“You think he’s dead?”

Sam felt horrified. Their entire plan revolved around getting the Lance from Crowley. They had no idea where he kept it. If he was dead, how were they going to find it?

“I don’t know,” Anna said. “I hope not. If he is…”

She didn’t need to finish. If Crowley was dead, they had a far bigger task ahead of them than just facing the Devil. They needed to find the weapon first. And they only had as long as Michael believed Sam needed to break. It would be an almost impossible task against a ticking clock.

“We have to know,” Sam said. “We can try summoning him.”

“Yes!” Anna said, seeming relieved to have a plan.

“You’ll have to get what we need,” Sam said. “I have nothing to summon a demon. I’ve spent almost three decades avoiding them.”

After Azazel had escaped, Sam had realized he needed to steer clear of the creatures that could report back to Hell on his presence. He had no way to kill them without Ruby’s knife. All he could have done was exorcise them, leaving them free to talk about what—and who—they had seen,

“I’ll take you home and then get it,” Anna said.

Sam felt the swoop in his stomach and then he was standing in his own living room. Missouri was
outside the window on a ladder, a cloth in one hand and a bucket in the other. Her mouth dropped open as she saw Sam, and she climbed down the ladder and disappeared. A moment later she came through the front door and rushed to Sam.

“Do you have it?” she asked.

“No. Crowley wasn’t there.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said, his frustration evident in his voice. “His house had been burned down. It looks like Lucifer and the demons came to him for revenge.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Anna is getting the ingredients for a summoning. We’re going to try that.”

Missouri rubbed his arm. “That’s good. He might just be hiding.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.”

Sam rubbed a hand over his face and sighed. Crowley had to be alive. They needed him. Everything depended on the Lance, and that depended on him handing it over or having it beaten out of him by Anna. Sam had no idea where he would have hidden the weapons he’d been entrusted with. If Crowley couldn’t tell them, they would have to search Heaven and Hell for them, all the while with Michael waiting for Sam to snap.

Anna arrived with a flutter of sound, carrying a stuffed paper sack. She set it down on the kitchen table and took out candles and baggies of herbs. Sam left Missouri standing in the living room and he took a metal mixing bowl from the cupboard and set it down on the table. He positioned the candles and Anna tipped ingredients into the bowl and chalked a symbol onto the tabletop.

“Ready?” Sam asked her when they were done.

She nodded, and Sam took a box of matches from beside the stove. He lit the candles and cut across his palm with the X-Acto knife Anna handed him. He squeezed his fist closed before the wound healed and then dropped a lit match into the bowl. “Et ad congregandum, Eos coram me.”

The flames rushed up and Anna pulled Sam back. Sam held his breath, looking around the room for a sign of the demon, listening for the snarky accented voice. There was nothing though. All he could see was Missouri standing opposite him, her hand over her mouth, and all he could heard was the crackle as the herbs burned and the ticking of the clock.

Sam cursed loudly. “He’s dead!” he spat.

Anna touched his shoulder. “He might not be,”

“Then where is he?” Sam asked.

Anna bit her lip and then said, “He might be hiding from us, too. He is, or was, the King of the Crossroads. He’s not a normal demon that would be forced to come. And he was Lilith’s right-hand man. He could have learned something from her. He could be alive.”

“He could,” Sam agreed. “But that doesn’t help us. How are we supposed to find him if he’s in hiding?”
“By searching,” Anna said. “I spent fourteen years following him. I know the places he goes, what his habits are. I will find him.”

“Even if he is alive, he won’t be anywhere obvious,” Sam said. “If you know where he hangs out, the demons will, too.”

“He won’t drop his standards though,” Anna said. “Crowley likes luxury; he would never give that up, no matter what he was hiding from. I am sure I can find him.”

Sam stared into her eyes, seeing the certainty there, and trying to feel it for himself. He couldn’t get past the fact that it was more likely that Crowley was dead than hiding, and by looking for him they could be wasting the valuable time Michael had given them.

“Trust me, Sam,” she said.

“And if he’s dead?”

“Someone has to know,” Missouri said quietly.

“She’s right,” Anna said. “If the demons or Lucifer managed to kill him, it would be spread far and wide. Lucifer would want them to know what happened to people that betrayed him.”

Sam could see the sense in what she was saying, and it heartened him a little. If Anna was going to dedicate herself to searching for Crowley, he would do what he had to do to find out if he was still alive. He didn’t need to hide from demons anymore. He could find them and do what he needed to do to make them talk.

“Okay,” Sam said tiredly. “Okay. You search for Crowley, and I’ll search for demons. If Crowley is alive, they’ll know.”

“You’re going to hunt demons?” Missouri asked, her voice steeped in worry.

Sam smiled to reassure her. “I can do this, Missouri. I used to do it all the time.”

Though he’d had his powers back then. He didn’t think it would be much more complicated to do it without. He didn’t even need the knife. He could make them talk with salt and holy water. It was going to cost some meatsuits, but it was that or the world. Sam was used to making tough choices now.

“This will work,” Anna said. “If you find out anything at all, call and I will come.”

“Yeah, and you let me know if you find anything, too.”

She nodded. “We can do this, Sam.”

“I know,” Sam said, feeling a little more confident now they had a plan.

Anna opened her mouth and then closed it again without speaking.

“What?” Sam asked.

“Just… Be strong, Sam. I know this is a disappointment, but we both have to be ready when it’s time. We need everything we have for Lucifer.”

“I know,” Sam said.
He had to be strong enough to overpower him. And he would be. He had waited this long and come out of it strong. He could last a little longer.
Sam circled the bound demon as it tried to keep its eyes fixed on him, twisting its neck into unnatural positions.

He had set the kitchen up for interrogating demons, pushing the table out of the way and setting a chair in the middle of the room to bind the demons to with ropes soaked in holy water. It had proved effective for hurting them, but not effective enough.

“Are you going to talk yet?” Sam asked conversationally.

“I can’t!”

The demon was in the meatsuit of a man in his thirties. In its navy suit and spotted tie, it looked like a bank manager. The black eyes spoiled the illusion; that and the salt smeared around its mouth.

“It’s a simple enough question,” Sam said. “Is Crowley alive?”

The demon pressed its lips together and glared up at him.

With an exaggerated sigh, Sam picked up the bucket of holy water and the small measuring cup he was using to douse the water over the demon. He’d learned there was no need to soak it—drenching his floor at the same time. The holy water was so painful that he only needed a little at a time.

He trickled the water over the demon’s face, making sure it ran into its eyes. The skin smoked and sizzled, and the demon howled in pain. Not for the first time, Sam blessed the solitude of his house in the woods. He could do what he liked here and no one would hear it.

The cup emptied, Sam tossed it back into the bucket and exchanged it for a box of salt. He gripped the demon’s chin and forced it down then poured the salt into its mouth. It sputtered and choked, and Sam smiled grimly. He wasn’t enjoying what he was doing, but he knew he needed to play the part to scare the demon further.

He dropped the box of salt onto the counter and filled the cup with holy water again. He poured it into the demon’s mouth, and it gurgled as its mouth and throat burned.

When it choked its way to calm, Sam gripped its chin and forced its head up to look at him. “Is Crowley alive?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” the demon panted.

Sam frowned. This was the first time he’d gotten anything close to an answer. Each time the demon had said it couldn’t tell him. That was all any of them would say. It had been two weeks and this was the fourth demon he’d interrogated. None of them had come this close to talking. They were scared of Sam, but more scared of someone else. Sam guessed it was Lucifer. The demons were too afraid to even speak his name. When Sam did, the name slipping between his teeth like a curse, they flinched. They feared him as much as Sam hated him, an impressive feat.
“Keep talking,” Sam said. “What do you know?”

The demon spat the salt from its mouth and said, “I am not in that league. I’m strictly low-level. I heard he set you and your brother up with the Colt, and I saw that his house had been burned down, but I don’t know if they caught him.”

Sam considered. If the demon didn’t know, it lent credence to the theory that Crowley was still alive. If Lucifer had killed him, surely, he would have declared it far and wide as a threat to other demons that might be thinking of betraying him. It was more likely that Crowley had escaped and Lucifer hadn’t made it common knowledge.

“Thank you,” he said. “You’ve been very helpful.”

The demon winced. “You have to kill me now.”

Sam frowned. “You want to die?”

“If Lucifer finds out I’ve been talking to you, he’ll do worse than kill me.”

Sam shrugged. “I can’t. I don’t have the knife. My brother and I are taking a sabbatical from each other, and he has it.”

“Get it back!”

“I can’t,” Sam said again.

“Then let me go! Give me a chance to hide.”

“And let you run around in that poor man for the rest of time? I don’t think so. You’re taking a trip downstairs.”

“I’ll tell Lucifer!” it threatened. “He’ll know you’re looking for Crowley.”

“I don’t think that will come as a surprise,” Sam said. “Crowley sent us after Lucifer with a gun that wouldn’t work. My friends died because of it. If Lucifer knows me as well as he thinks he does, he’ll know that I am going to kill Crowley for that.”

He had already fed the other demons he’d exorcised the same story. If they did have the guts to go to Lucifer and tell him what Sam was doing, the devil would think Sam was on a revenge mission.

Anna could have killed them instead of Sam exorcising them, saving Lucifer from knowing even that much, but Sam couldn’t add more deaths to his quota. They may be demons but their meatsuits were innocent. They could be someone’s Dean or Bobby, their Missouri or James. They were each important in their own right, and they deserved a chance at life.

He dropped the cup back into the bucket and began to chant the Latin exorcism. The demon bucked and writhed, begging to be killed, and Sam spoke over him. He was almost done when he heard a flutter and Anna cleared her throat. Sam held up a hand to her and spoke the last two words that sent the black smoke funneling out of the demon’s mouth. “Audi nos!”

The meatsuit flopped forward against the ropes and Sam checked for a pulse. There was one and it was steady. He assumed the shock of the exorcism had rendered the man unconscious. He would be awake soon though.

“Can you take him to a hospital?” he asked Anna.
“I need to talk to you.”

“After?” Sam asked. “I don’t want him waking up and getting a look at me.” He picked up a cloth from the counter and wiped the salt and water from around the man’s mouth.

Anna sighed and said. “Don’t go anywhere,” then came and touched the man’s shoulder. A moment later, they were both gone. Sam unwound the ropes from the chair and put them on the counter then took out a glass and poured himself some water.

He sipped it, staring out of the window, and thought over what he’d potentially learned. Was he believing Crowley was alive because that was what he wanted to believe or was he actually right? Lucifer wouldn’t want to the other demons to know if Crowley escaped him, but this demon was a self-proclaimed low-level. Had the news just not trickled to him yet?

Sam needed to find out, which meant a new demon.

He heard Anna’s arrival and he turned away from the window to look at her.

“I dropped him off at a medical center in Tennessee,” she said. “Now can we talk?”

“We need to,” Sam said. “I think Crowley’s alive. The demon said he didn’t know what happened, but I figure if Lucifer had killed him, he’d want all the demons to know, right? I mean, it could be that he just hasn’t heard yet, he was a bottom feeder, but there’s a chance.”

“I think there is more than a chance,” she said. “And I have news for you, too. Something is happening in Sioux Falls. There are strong demon signs.”

Sam’s heart skipped. “Are they okay?”

“Dean and Bobby are, but people have died. I think we need to investigate.”

“I do need a new demon,” Sam said thoughtfully. “But Sioux Falls…”

“I think we have to go. These signs are powerful. They could be a group of strong demons, the kind you need, or they could be something else.”

Sam frowned. “Something like what?”

“I don’t know,” Anna admitted. “But it’s something big. We can’t ignore everything else while we look for Crowley. The world is already suffering. We might be able to save some lives.”

Sam nodded. “Yeah. I know. But what if Dean sees me?”

“That’s a risk we have to take,” Anna said.

Sam ran a hand through his hair. He didn’t want to risk seeing Dean, but he had to help if he could. People needed him to clear up his mess. And he might be able to get another demon out of it.”

“Okay,” he said. “We’ll go. Let’s hope Dean is too distracted by Valentine’s Day for the hunt.”

Anna frowned. “Valentine’s Day?”

Sam smiled a little sadly. “He calls it ‘Unattached Drifter Christmas’. He’s far more likely to get lucky tonight than any other day of the year.”

Anna looked annoyed with him. “Do you really think he’d be distracted by something like that
with you missing? Don’t you think he’d be more concerned with finding you?”

"I said hope,“ Sam pointed out. “And I left a note.”

Anna sighed. “I think you’re underestimating your brother if you think he’s just distracted or angry.”

“Hope, Anna,” Sam said. “It’s what I have.”

Did he know in his heart of hearts that Dean was going to be looking for him? Yes. But he couldn’t let that change his mind about staying away. He needed to protect Dean and them all from what was coming. He couldn’t let them try to stop him, not if he was going to succeed and kill Lucifer.

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Dean was sitting in Bobby’s kitchen, his hands clasped around a cold mug of coffee. Bobby was opposite him, his laptop open and his brow furrowed as he read the article he’d found.

Dean was thinking about Sam. It had been two weeks since he went missing, and Dean had moved past initial concern and was deeply entrenched in anger. He’d done everything he could think of to find Sam and had come up empty. There was no trace of him leaving Colorado.

The fact that Sam was doing this to him, after everything that had happened, was plain wrong, and Sam should have known that. He’d left him to search in vain for Lucifer, with just that crappy note left behind. If it was so important what he was doing, why didn’t he explain it more?

Dean wasn’t stupid. If he thought he needed to take a step back and let Sam go it alone, he would have, if there had been a good enough reason. He could think of no such reason though. Nothing was important enough to make him abandon Sam, so how could Sam do it to him?

“Are you listening to me?” Bobby asked.

Dean’s head snapped up. “What?”

“I’ve been talking to you,” Bobby said irritably. “And you’ve not heard in a damn word of it, have you?”

Dean took a sip of his coffee to give himself a moment to think, and then spat it back into the mug as he registered the chill. “Gross. What were you saying?”

“Something is going on in town,” Bobby said. “A couple bodies have come into the morgue and they’re way up there on the freaky scale.”

“What happened?”

“It looks like they ate each other.”

Dean grimaced. “Correction. That’s gross. How did it even work?”

“I guess that’s down to you to find out.”

“Me?”

“I’d do it myself, but I’m a little handicapped. Literally,” Bobby said. “You’re the closest hunter I know, and you’re not doing anything.”
“I am doing something,” Dean argued. “I’m looking for Sam.”

“You think you’ll find him at the bottom of a cup of cold coffee? Or maybe he’ll be in a bottle of whiskey. You’ve been getting though enough of them lately.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to lecture me on drinking, Bobby? Seriously?”

Bobby glowered at him. “I have a damn good reason to drink, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“And I don’t?”

“Not the reason you’re using, no.”

“Sam is missing,” Dean snapped.

“No, Sam is not here. There’s a difference. He’s working off his own back and there’s nothing wrong with that. He’s trying to protect you.”

“I don’t need protecting!”

“So you keep saying, but you’re not showing it. You’re a mess. Sam took off on his own because he knew it was the right thing to do. Do I wish he was here? Yes. But I accept it was his choice to make.”

“Was it though?” Dean asked. “He didn’t drive away from that hotel. There were no stolen cars reported.”

Bobby sighed. “We’ve been over this, Dean. He must have hitchhiked out of town and then picked up a car somewhere else. Probably because he knew looking for a car to track would be the first thing you did. He doesn’t want to be found. He left a note telling you that.”

“A note you didn’t notice him leaving,” Dean grumbled.

Bobby glowered. “I’m sorry I fell asleep, but I am human still, even if my legs don’t work. Even if I’d been awake, what do you think I could have done? Sam was determined enough to give you the slip that he’s hidden this long; he wouldn’t have stayed because I asked him to.”

“Would you have asked him to?” Dean asked.

It was a fair question. Bobby was with Sam on this solo act, even knowing what it was doing to Dean, because he thought Dean needed to be shielded or something like a civilian. He didn’t.

“I would have asked him what he was doing,” Bobby said, evading the actual question.

“Would you have stopped him though?” Dean wasn’t willing to let the older man off the hook.

Bobby rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I’d have sat on his lap till you got here. I’m sure he could never have gotten away from me. Listen to yourself, Dean. You’re blaming me and Sam when the truth is there is no need for blame. Sam isn’t doing something wrong. He’s just doing something you don’t like. Now, are you going to take this hunt, save some lives maybe, or do I have to call someone else in to mop up the mess because you’re too busy having a pity party?”

“I’ll take it,” Dean said.

“Good, call Cas and I’ll sort out the details for you.”
“Cas is on the God hunt,” Dean said.

“Just call him.”

Dean felt a surge of irritation. “Don’t you think I can handle it alone? Do none of you have any faith in me?”

“I have the same faith in you that you have in Sam,” Bobby said. “Only you and I know how much that is.”

Dean ducked his head. He knew what Bobby was trying to do. He wanted Dean to put himself in Sam’s position. It was different though. Dean had faith in Sam to do the right thing, but Sam’s idea of the right thing and his weren’t necessarily the same. The fact he’d taken off was proof of that. That was Sam screwing up. Dean was worried for a good reason.

Sam needed his brother and much as Dean did. It was just for different reasons.

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Sam chose to drive to Sioux Falls, so it was late afternoon before he arrived.

It was so strange to be back. He hadn’t been in town since he and Dean were last staying with Bobby, when they’d gone on a beer run. Everything was exactly the same except for him. He was as changed as it was possible to be from the man he had been then. A long life had changed him.

His eyes scanned for the Impala as he drove through the streets, though he didn’t really expect to see it. Sioux Falls was a big place, and the odds of them bumping into each other were very low.

When he reached the hospital, he pulled into the parking lot and went inside to get directions to the morgue. He’d found, over a life hunting, that it wasn’t the kind of place people put signs up for. They preferred death to be kept out of the way when you were coming to hospital to be healed.

A woman at the front desk directed him to the basement for the morgue, and Sam took an elevator down. The air was cool, and Sam knew it was going to get worse. The nature of a morgue was that it was a cold place. It had to be. Sam had been to enough in his long life to not be creeped out anymore, but he still didn’t like them.

He knocked on the swinging doors at the end of the hall, and a rotund man in a white coat opened it. “Hello,” he said, his tone friendly. “How can I help?”

“I’m Agent Cliff,” Sam said. “I was hoping to see the couple brought in yesterday? That ones that…”

“The couple with the munchies. No problem.” He held out a hand and Sam noticed the smell of whiskey on his breath. “Doctor Corman. I have to say, I didn’t expect to see more of you?”

Sam followed him through an office area into a large room with industrial fridges and tables set up with shower attachments hanging overhead and drains beneath. “Have you already been visited by the bureau?” he asked, wondering if Dean had been in.

“Yes, two agents came by this morning. An Agent Marley and another that didn’t introduce himself.” He lowered his voice. “He was a little strange to be honest. Agent Marley seemed fine, maybe a little dour, but this is a nasty case, so that makes sense. His friend was different. I’m not sure he was the full ticket. He was talking about cupid and hearts. Hey… is that code?”
"Yes," Sam lied smoothly. "It’s better that you forget you heard it." Dean was on the case, and he’d apparently brought Castiel with him. He was pleased that Dean had a little backup, and protection against the demons Anna said were in town.

"Okey dokey," the doctor said cheerfully.

He opened a fridge and pulled out a tray with a sheet-covered, misshaped body on it. He pulled back the sheet and Sam saw one of the most disgusting sights of his life. The body had been torn apart. He would have blamed animals, but there were teeth marks that were obviously human.

He swallowed hard. "Are they both like that?" he asked.

"Yes. Strangest double suicide I ever saw."

"Suicide?"

"That’s what the other agents said. It tallied with the other two we had brought. Another double suicide last night. Gunshots for them both. I’ve done my prelims and weighed and chilled the organs if you want to see them?"

Sam remembered that he’d said Castiel was talking about hearts, so he asked to see them. The doctor opened a fridge and pulled out two plastic boxes.

"May I?" Sam asked, grabbing a pair of gloves from the rack on the wall.

"Help yourself."

Sam pulled on the gloves then opened the box and examined the heart it contained. He spotted a mark on it, and he lifted it out to examine. It looked Enochian. He set down the heart and checked the second, finding the exact same mark.

The doctor had pulled on a pair of gloves, too, and he was holding the other heart up to his eyes. "That’s weird," he said. "I didn’t see that before. Does the other have it?"

"Yes," Sam said.

"Well I’ll be damned. No idea what that is. This is going to be interesting."

Sam nodded and snapped off his gloves and said, "I think I’ve seen enough."

"Do you know where these marks came from?" the doctor asked. "Is it something infectious?"

"No," Sam said smoothly. "Like you said, suicide. These are just defects."

"The exact same defect on the hearts of two different people?"

Sam shrugged. "Strange, I know, but you’re the doctor."

"Well I’m sans clues for this one." He took a hip flask out of his pocket and swigged on it. "It’s going to be interesting to explore it though. I might write this one up."

"Yes," Sam said distractedly. "That’s a good idea." He threw his bloody gloves into the bin and made for the door. "Thanks for your help."

"You’re welcome, Agent."
Sam hurried out of the room and into the hall. As he strode along it, heading to the exit, he said, "Anna, I’m at the St. James medical center, Sioux Falls. Meet me in the car."

When he got outside, he saw Anna sitting the passenger side of his Mustang. He climbed in and said, "Hearts. Cupids."

“What about them?"

“Dean and Cas are working the case, too. The coroner overheard Cas talking about cupids and I just saw an Enochian sigil on the each of the hearts of a double suicide."

“Ah, I see."

“What do you see?” Sam asked.

“Cupids are a class of angels. They are the ones that tie destined mates together. They literally bring people together, making them fall in love, and leaving a brand on their hearts.”

“So the dead couple were hooked up by Cupid and then shot themselves in the head? Any chance there’s something going on with the cupid? He’s gone rogue maybe?"

“No,” Anna said.

“How can you be sure? It’s not like angels are particularly trustworthy.”

“It was no cupid that did this to me.”

Sam frowned and examined her more closely. Now he noticed that she looked weird. Her hands were fisted on her lap and her teeth were gritted. She looked like she was fighting against something.

“What’s wrong?"

“I want to kill Lucifer,” she said.

“Me too. Isn’t that kinda the point of all this?”

She shook her head briskly. “No, I mean I really want to kill him. I need to.”

“Again, me too,” Sam said.

“You don’t understand! Something is affecting me! Don’t you feel it too? Aren’t you craving something?”

Sam considered. Maybe he was a little more on edge than usual. He wanted this case done so they could find a demon and get back to work on their plan for Lucifer, but he didn’t feel like Anna looked.

“No,” he said. “I feel pretty much normal.”

She looked stunned. “Is it always like this for you?”

“Is what always like this?”

“The way you feel. Do you always want it this much? Lucifer, I mean. Don’t you feel this need to take him out? Don’t you crave something?”
“Maybe a little,” Sam said. “But not much. I always want to kill Lucifer. I’m maybe more impatient now, but that’s not exactly a new concept to me.”

“How do you do it?” she asked. “How do you live?” She forced her fingers to uncurl and gripped her knees. “It’s Famine. He’s affecting the town. That’s why I am feeling like this. I don’t understand though. If you’re not craving something else, it has to be Lucifer for you, too. But you don’t feel it, so it means you always feel it… I don’t understand.”

“Me either,” Sam said, disregarding the rest and focusing on the mention of Famine. “Are you telling me there’s a horseman in town making people crazy?”

“Yes.”

Sam grinned. “That’s awesome. We can kill it. One more crossed off the list.” One less for Dean to face. “How do you think we can find it?”

Anna looked exasperated. “How can you talk as if… Never mind. I think we find it through me. The closer I get to it, the worse the need is going to be. I’ll scout the town and then come find you. We’ll have to tackle him together.”

“Sure,” Sam said. “That’s fine, but since you’re an angel, wouldn’t it be easier for you to just swoop in and do it as soon as you find him?”

“Because I have no idea what will happen to me when I get close. If you’re unaffected, you will be able to do it easier.”

Sam shrugged. “Okay. I’ll be in the Red Rock Motel. Come find me when you’ve got something.”

Anna stared at him for a moment, seeming to be seeing something more than she usually did, and then she disappeared.

Sam started the engine and pulled out of his spot, mulling over what Anna said. If he was supposed to crave Lucifer’s death, he didn’t really feel it. He didn’t think it was possible for him to crave it more anyway. He was giving up everything to ensure it happened: his chance at a little more time with Dean, his family, his life. Maybe Famine couldn’t affect him because he was Lucifer’s vessel, or maybe he couldn’t affect him because he already lived with that kind of craving and had for years. He’d just learned to live with it.

xXx

Dean patted his hands nervously against the steering wheel and hummed under his breath. He and Castiel were staking out of the hospital, waiting for the demon to come collect the soul of the coroner who had drunk himself to death that afternoon. He’d seemed fine when Dean saw him, annoyingly cheerful even, though he had taken sips from his hip flask while talking to them. He was another victim of what Castiel was sure was Famine. He had been under the influence of him, just as Dean and Castiel were now, though Dean would have preferred Castiel’s hunger for White Castle rather than what he had.

“Calm down, Dean,” Castiel said through a mouthful.

“Stop eating, Cas,” Dean retorted.

Castiel took another bite of his hamburger and looked guiltily at Dean.

“Exactly,” Dean said. “You can’t stop eating, and I can’t stay calm. So how about you put up and
shut up."

Castiel sighed. “You need to keep your mind on what we’re doing.”

“And you need to quit eating them!” Dean snatched the bag of burgers out of Castiel’s hands, crumpled it, mashing the meat and bread into a lump, and tossed it into the backseat.

Castiel’s eyes followed it and then he scowled at Dean. “My taste for red meat is not distracting me from what matters.”

“And what I’m feeling isn’t distracting me from what matters either. You just don’t agree with it.”

Castiel sighed. “You feel that you need to find Sam.”

“I know I need to find him,” Dean corrected. “There’s a difference.”

When Castiel had started mainlining burgers, Dean had started to feel the first signs of panic for Sam. It had felt important to find Sam ever since he realized he’d gone, but now it was overwhelming. He knew, deep in his gut, that Sam needed to be found, and it was only the fact that he had no idea where to start looking that had him still on this hunt. He understood it was important. Famine had influenced a lot of people, and Castiel said it would spread, but that felt less pressing than Sam being in trouble somewhere. No matter how many times Castiel told him it was because of Famine, not some connection to his brother that told him he needed him, he couldn’t get the idea out of his head that Sam was in danger.

“But Sam doesn’t want to be found,” Castiel said. “There have been no clues at all. He has done everything he can to avoid you, even leaving a note where he knew you would go to tell you he needed to be alone. You have to listen to him.”

“Sam doesn’t always know what he needs, Cas,” he said. “He makes mistakes.”

“He does,” Castiel said. “We all do. Admittedly, Sam’s have been much greater, but that just means his lesson has been learned more forcefully than ours. I trust him to know what he is doing.”

“You didn’t trust him before,” Dean pointed out.

“I do now.”

“Convenient,” Dean said. “The day you decide you need me to track down a horseman is the day Sam suddenly can do no wrong.”

“That is not what I am saying. And this isn’t a new realization. I have felt this way for a while. You never asked before.”

Dean rolled his eyes. “You just don’t get it. I need to find him.”

“And I need meat. I know that’s not a true need though, it won’t kill me to go without it, so I can control it.” Even as he said it, his eyes drifted to the backseat where the remains of his feast sat.

“Real convincing, Cas,” Dean said.

Castiel thought he needed to eat the burgers, but that was a simple hunger compared to what Dean felt. He didn’t need a snack. He needed his brother. What Castiel felt couldn’t compare.

Castiel turned back to Dean with evident difficulty and said, “When we’ve done this, when we have Famine’s ring, I will help you look for Sam if that’s what you still feel you need. Just focus
on this a little longer. We have a job to do.”

Dean nodded. “Fine. Hey, head’s up. Do we have a demon?”

A man in a black suit was coming out of the hospital with a briefcase in his hand. He could have been a doctor or visitor, but Dean had a feeling, call it experience with the bastards, that told him this was what they were waiting for.

“That’s a demon,” Castiel confirmed. “Let’s go.”

Dean started the engine and waited for the demon to reach the sidewalk before pulling out of his spot and following.

xXx

“He’s here?” Sam asked doubtfully.

They were standing in a smelly and dirty alley behind the Sioux Falls Biggerson’s. Anna had brought him here from the hotel after telling Sam she’d found the horseman, but Sam couldn’t think of a less likely place to find Famine than in a chain restaurant with a history of health code violations.

“He’s here,” Anna said. “If you weren’t… different… you’d feel it too.”

“You make it sound like a judgement that I’m not crazy with bloodlust. I think you’ve got it backwards, Anna.”

“I want Lucifer’s death, too,” she said. “Even before Famine, I wanted it more than anything. But you should be feeling it like I am. You should not live with this feeling and still be able to operate the way you do. It’s not natural.”

“Haven’t you heard?” Sam asked. “I’m a freak. Besides, how do you know it’s not because I’m the vessel. Maybe it’s common courtesy to not make me want to kill his boss.”

“It’s not,” Anna said. “I know it.”

“Then I’m obviously well adjusted. I can hunger for the devil’s death while also grocery shopping. I think I got the better end of the deal.”

Anna shook her head. “You’re not—”

“Can we just get in there?” Sam asked. “The sooner we get that ring, the sooner we can get out of here and get you back to low level need for death instead of… this crazy person.”

Anna scoffed. “Crazy. Yeah, sure.”

Sam tried the back door and found it unlocked. It opened without noise, and he crept inside, followed by Anna.

There were bodies on the floor. A man with blistered hands was crumpled in front of the deep fat fryer, his mouth crammed with fries. Sam observed that it seemed a particularly nasty way to go. A little further in was a woman with bloody vomit staining the floor in front of her. Sam didn’t know what she’d done to herself, but it hadn’t been a pleasant end for her either.

He crept forward to the red door that led into the restaurant and peered through the window. There were six people inside, five were black-eyed demons wearing dark suits and looking worried. Sam
couldn’t see the sixth as he was in a wheelchair facing away from them, but he saw a shock of grey hair. There was a tank of oxygen in a frame on the back of the chair. Sam assumed it was Famine, though he had no idea what could have landed him in the chair.

He eased open the door ever so slightly so he could hear what was happening inside, and a desperate voice said, “Hungry. Where is my meal?”

“I’m sure he’s coming,” one of the demons said. “He’ll be here soon.”

“Hungry,” the voice said again, and Sam realized it was the man in the wheelchair. He was almost moaning now, as if he was craving as much as Anna seemed to be.

One of them men took a careful step forward. “Shall I go look for him?”

“No,” the man in the chair said. “I need you for our guest. He’s hungry, too.” He raised his voice. “You can come in now. I can sense you hiding there.”

Anna prodded Sam in the back.

Sam whispered, “Wait here,” before he pushed open the door and stepped inside. He walked around the demons and faced the man in the chair. He had a cannula threaded under his nose, delivering the tanked oxygen, and he was smiling widely.

Looking at the door he noticed Anna’s shadowy face at the window. He was pleased she was listening to him and not rushing out. She could strike when Sam had Famine distracted.

“Sam Winchester. It’s so good to see you, dear boy.”

“Famine,” Sam growled.

“Yes,” the horseman said. “I hoped I would have a chance to meet you before Lucifer took you over. I wanted to look into the eyes of the man that was created just for him.”

“I wasn’t created for him,” Sam said bitterly. “I am my own man.”

Famine raised a withered hand. “Let’s not argue. I’m sure you’re hungry. You should eat.” He waved a hand and said, “Feed him.”

One of the demons stepped closer to the chair and Famine drew his fingernail across the demon’s wrist. Blood welled in the wound and dripped to the floor.

“Feast yourself,” Famine said, “I have plenty more.”

Sam looked at the blood and waited for the old longing to come. It didn’t though. His mouth didn’t water and his stomach didn’t clench. He hadn’t been face to face with a demon since Azazel, and then he’d been too distracted to notice temptation, but now he felt none. Apparently, all he’d needed to kick the addiction was thirty-two years of abstinence. The only thing he craved now was what he always craved: Lucifer’s death.

“No, thanks,” he said.

Famine’s face clouded with confusion. “You don’t want him?”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t. I want this.”

In rapid fire Latin, he began to speak the exorcism he’d memorized a lifetime ago. The words
blurred but he could tell they were working. The demons looked scared. One threw its head back to apparently escape, but Famine held up a hand. “Wait!” he commanded. “Let him work. I want to see this.”

“Sir,” one of them said worriedly.

“I said wait!”

Sam finished the exorcism on a triumphant note, and the demons poured out of their hosts’ mouths. The smoke didn’t disappear though. It funneled in the air, reaching for the ceiling.

“Thank you,” he said. “I am overdue a meal.”

He swept a hand towards himself as if calling them to him, and the smoke funneled around the chair. Famine opened his mouth and sucked in air. The demons poured into his mouth his eyes became blissful.

Sam shouted, “Anna!” and she rushed into the room. “Do it!” Sam commanded.

Famine seemed unable to stop what he had started. The smoke continued to pour into him as Anna lifted her blade and slammed it down on his wrist. The severed hand flopped onto the floor and blood spurted from the wound.

Famine choked as the last of the smoke disappeared into his mouth, and he brought his bloody stump to his chest seeming unable to speak. A dribble of drool slipped down his cheek and he moaned.

Anna bent to pick up the hand, but Sam shouted her name as he heard the rumble of an approaching engine that he knew as well as the sound of his own heartbeat.

Dean was coming.

Anna snapped up, the hand forgotten on the floor, and stared at Sam.

“Get me out of here!” Sam shouted.

He felt the swoop in his stomach, and a moment later, he was gone.

xXx

Dean pulled to a stop within sight of the Biggerson’s the demon had come to.

“Guns blazing?” he asked.

“I should go first,” Castiel said.

Dean nodded and then stopped, his hand on Castiel’s arm. “Look.”

The demon had opened the door and froze in place. The oblique view Dean had of its face told Dean it was petrified.

“What the hell?”

No sooner than the question had left him, the demon’s head flew back and smoke poured from its mouth and disappeared into the sky.
“Wait!” Castiel snapped.

Dean started to protest, but Castiel was already gone.

Dean climbed out of the car and rushed toward the restaurant. He had to step over the dead or unconscious meatsuit to get inside, and when he did he saw something to stop him dead in his tracks.

There were five men on the floor, and in a motorized wheelchair was a wreck of a man with grey hair. He was cradling the bloody stump of an arm against his chest and sobbing wretchedly.

Castiel was beside him, picking up something from the floor. He straightened and showed Dean a pale hand with a silver ring on one finger.

“Famine?” Dean guessed.

“Yes,” Castiel said. He pulled the ring free and dropped the hand to the floor.

Dean walked forward and took the ring from him, examining the black stone set into it. “What happened here?” he asked.

“Let’s ask them,” Castiel said, pointing at one of the people on the floor that was stirring. His wrist was bleeding, a steady flow of red.

Dean took a handful of paper napkins from the dispenser and hoisted the man up and into a chair. He pressed the napkins to the man’s wound and said, “You’re okay. We’re going to get you help. Tell me what happened.”

“The black smoke came,” the man said, his voice quiet over the moans coming from Famine.

“Demons,” Castiel said. “They must be. The others are all dead.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Dead!”

“The black smoke came and shoved itself down your throat,” Dean said to the traumatized and bleeding man. “Yeah I get that. What happened next?”

“It was so long,” the man said. “It made me hurt so many people. I wasn’t in control. I just had to watch.”

“What happened here,” Castiel asked intensely. “Who did this?”

“The tall man. He came and made the smoke go. It was ripped out of us. That’s the last thing I remember until I woke up.” He looked around. “Are they really all dead?”

Dean barely heard the question. His mind was reeling. The ‘tall man’. It had to be his brother.

“Sam,” he whispered.

“He beat Famine,” Castiel said, sounding awed.

“How?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know. He must have exorcised the demons. But how he had the strength to defeat Famine, I don’t know. Especially when he would have been under his influence.”
Dean’s heart sank. He looked from the bloody napkins on the demon’s wrist to the bodies on the floor. Sam had exorcised five demons solo. How had he done that while fighting whatever Famine made him crave? What would he crave even? There was only one thing Dean could think of.

He gripped the man’s collar and leaned in close. “Tell me!” he snapped. “Did the tall man drink your blood?”

Castiel gasped. “Dean!”

Dean shook the man. “Did he?”

“No,” the man said. “The old man cut my wrist and told him to feed, but the man didn’t. He was speaking, words so fast I couldn’t understand them, and then the smoke was gone and I passed out.”

“No blood,” Castiel said firmly. “He didn’t drink.”

Dean gripped the back of the chair to steady himself as relief rushed through him. He had been so scared Sam had slipped back on the blood. It would make sense. He had gone off on his own after all, but he man said he hadn’t drunk. He’s had used the Latin exorcism, not his powers.

“How did he do it though?” Dean asked, “And why would he just leave this mess here? These people needed help.”

“I don’t know how he exorcised five demons, or how he beat Famine, but I think I know why he left.” Castiel looked at Dean sympathetically. “He must have heard us coming.”

“But I didn’t see…” Dean realized his mistake at once. He raced through the red door at the back of the room and into a kitchen. He ignored the two bodies on the floor and threw the open back door wide. His eyes scanned the alley, but there was no one there. “Sam!” he shouted.

A woman peered out of a window about him and called down. “Hey, keep the noise down!”

“Have you seen a man?” Dean asked loudly, his voice carrying up to her. “He’d be really tall. Probably running.”

“I saw them going in,” the woman said. “I was watering my window plants. Figured they were the new shift coming on. They looked the sort for that place.”

“A woman?” Dean asked.

“Redhead. And a really tall man,” she said.

“Did you see where they went?”

“What are you, stupid? I already told you I saw them going in. I didn’t see anyone coming out.”

Dean backed into the kitchen and started as he saw Castiel standing behind him.

“Did you hear that?” he asked.

Castiel nodded. “He’s not alone.”

“No,” Dean said. “He’s with some woman.”

“This is good,” Castiel said. “We know he’s okay, and he’s not alone. Whoever he is with was able
to help him take down a horseman. I don’t think you need to worry for his safety.”

“Who is she though?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we need to. Sam is keeping her and what he’s doing a secret for a reason.” He smiled. “Sam is okay, Dean. He’s fighting even. His plan, whatever it is, is working for our cause.”

Dean closed his eyes and tried to push down his disappointment. Sam was okay, and that was great, but he’d run from Dean, abandoning a horseman’s ring as he was in such a hurry. He wanted to avoid Dean *that* much! What the hell had he done wrong that would make Sam hide from him like this?

“Don’t you understand?” Castiel asked. “This is good.”

Dean opened his eyes and stared at Castiel. “You don’t crave it anymore, do you, Cas?”

“I’ve lost my need for red meat, yes.”

“I haven’t,” Dean said.

He didn’t feel it the same way. It didn’t consume him now, he could think around it, but he still needed Sam.

And Sam had run from him.
Chapter Sixty-Eight

It was afternoon and Dean was standing at the stove, stirring a pan of canned chili for an early dinner. He didn’t feel particularly hungry, but he knew he should eat. Eating was one of the things you had to do when you were human, as Bobby constantly reminded him.

It had been two weeks since Sam had run from them in that restaurant, leaving Famine’s hand on the floor, and Dean was in no better a place than he had been then. His worry for Sam was consuming him. He knew Lucifer didn’t have him, Castiel said the world would know if he did, but the belief that Sam would be protected if they were together was strong. He just needed to find him.

The chili began to smoke, and Dean quickly removed it from the heat. “Dinner,” he called to Bobby.

Bobby sniffed the air. “Burned again. That’s just great.”

“I’m doing my best,” Dean said grumpily.

“Don’t I know it,” Bobby muttered.

He wheeled himself to the counter and took cutlery out of the drawer. Dean spooned the chili into two bowls and carried them to the table. He sat down and poked at his unenthusiastically. Even when it wasn’t burned, it wasn’t that good, and it wasn’t tempting his paltry appetite at all.

Bobby shook salt over his and began to eat, staring at Dean pointedly until he did the same. They were halfway finished when Dean heard the sound of an engine approaching.

He looked up. “You expecting someone?”

“No,” Bobby replied. “And I’m guessing you ain’t either.”

Dean shook his head and crossed the room to the door. He went out onto the porch and watched the red car approach. It was a new model Ford that he didn’t recognize. He couldn’t see who was driving as the sunlight was on the windshield. The car came to a slow stop and the door opened. The person was small and stout, and Dean thought it might be someone that hadn’t heard Bobby was out of action, coming for business.

Then the person stepped into the shade of the house, and Dean saw who it was. “Missouri?”

She smiled him and said his name, her voice steeped in some emotion Dean couldn’t decipher.

“What are you doing here?” Dean asked.

“I came to see you, of course.”

She walked up the steps, gave Dean a strange smile that was almost sympathetic, and then said, “Shall we go in? We have a lot to talk about.”

Dean opened the door and gestured her inside then followed her. Bobby was still seated at the
His eyebrows were high and he looked as confused as Dean felt.

“Hello, Bobby,” Missouri said. “It’s good to see you.”

“You two know each other?” Dean asked.

“We’ve never officially met,” Missouri said. “But we’ve spoken before.”

“She hooked me up with Taylor years ago,” Bobby explained.

Dean knew the name Taylor. He was one of the contacts in his father’s journal. He’d never spoken to him though, and he hadn’t even known he was still operating. Bobby hadn’t mentioned him.

“Yes, Taylor…” Missouri said with a strange smile.

“Not that it’s not great to see you,” Dean said. “But are you here for a reason?”

“Yes,” Missouri said. “I’m here to break a promise.”

Dean frowned. What promise could she have made that would relate to him and Bobby? Who did they have in common apart from… “Sam! You know where he is!”

He couldn’t believe it, and he felt equal parts elated and angry. Sam hadn’t been hiding from everyone. Apparently, Missouri was in on the secret.

“I do,” Missouri said seriously.

“Where?” Dean asked eagerly.

“We’ll get there, but there’s a lot to talk about before I tell you that. You should call Castiel back. He’s not going to find Sam anyway, and we only want tell the story once.”

“We?” Bobby asked.

Dean had a more pressing question. How did she know that Castiel was looking for Sam?

Missouri looked at him and smiled. “We’ll get to that soon, Dean.”

Dean was reminded that one of the most striking things about Missouri when she’d met him was that she could read his mind.

“Get to what?” Bobby asked.

“Guess no one told you Missouri’s a mind reader,” Dean said.

“No,” Bobby said, looking uncomfortable. “No one mentioned it.”

“The angel?” Missouri prompted. “The sooner he’s here, the sooner you can get your answers.”

“Cas,” Dean called. “Can you come by Bobby’s? We’ve got news on Sam.”

There was a flutter and Castiel said, “I am here, Dean.”

“Castiel, Missouri Mosely,” Dean introduced. “Missouri, you apparently know about Castiel.”

“Sam’s told me a lot about you,” Missouri said. “It’s good to put a face to the name. Now, shall we sit? There’s one more person that needs to be here, and I think if we’re all sitting and calm, it will
go a lot smoother.”

“In case you haven’t noticed, I don’t have much of a choice but to sit,” Bobby said.

“We’ll get to that in a moment,” Missouri said. “Dean?”

Sure that the sooner he obeyed, the sooner he’d have a chance of seeing Sam, Dean pulled out a chair and sat down. He placed his hands on the table top and concentrated on not letting them curl into fists.

Missouri took a seat beside him and Castiel leaned against the counter. Missouri didn’t seem surprised, and she went on without comment. “There is someone else that needs to be here for this conversation, and I want you to all stay calm and let us explain before you try to attack her.”

“Who is it?” Bobby asked.

“Calm,” Missouri said again, and then raised her voice. “You can come now. They’re here.”

There was a flutter and one of the angels Dean hated most appeared by the door. He was out of his seat in a moment, his face flushed with anger and his hands in tight fists. “You!”

Castiel’s blade dropped into his hand and he took a step forward, raising it threateningly.

Anna drew her own blade but didn’t raise it. “Don’t force me to hurt you, Castiel,” she said.

“Kill her, Cas!” Dean ordered.

“Stop!” Missouri barked. “If you want answers, you will wait and listen. Castiel, Anna, put those away. No one is going to hurt anyone. All of you calm down.”

“Do you know what she did to Sam?” Bobby asked angrily.

“I know,” Missouri said. “And so does Sam. He’s forgiven her, so you should, too.”

Sam had forgiven her! Sam was not the forgiving type. He’d hunted Lilith for a year because of what she’d done to Dean. He’d been consumed with revenge. Anna had killed him, but he’d written it off? What the hell was that about? What had Dean missed in the past month?

Anna tucked her blade away in her jacket and she nodded to Castiel who still stood poised to attack.

“Stand down, Cas,” Bobby said. “I want to hear what’s going on with Sam, and they’re not going to talk unless we all play along.”

“You can kill her after we know where Sam is,” Dean reassured him.

Castiel hesitated a moment and then stowed his blade away, too.

Missouri pulled out a seat then sat and gave Anna a pointed look. Anna came and sat down between Missouri and Bobby. Bobby didn’t look happy to have her so close, but he didn’t move away.

“You were the redhead with Sam,” Castiel said, his eyes locked on Anna.

She nodded. “I was. I have been with him for a long time.”
Though it had felt like a lifetime to Dean, a month wasn’t exactly a long time. What had they been through together that made Anna sound like that? He’d have to find out from his brother.

“Sam,” he prompted. “Where is he?”

Missouri rubbed a hand over her face and said, “I am betraying him doing this. Sam is one of the most important people in my life, and he will not be happy when he knows what I’ve done.”

“He’ll forgive you,” Anna assured her.

Missouri cast her a small smile and then looked at Dean and said, “Sam is in Lawrence.”

Dean was half out his seat in an instant, but Bobby laid a hand on his arm and said, “Wait. I want to hear the whole story.”

Dean sank down again and stared at Missouri. “Has he been with you the whole time?”

“In a way, yes.”

“Why are you the one telling us this, not Sam?” Dean asked. “Why is he hiding from us?”

“He thought he was doing the right thing,” Anna said. “For a while, I thought he was, too, but things have changed.”

“Is he okay?” Bobby asked.

“He’s Sam,” Missouri said, as if that was any kind of explanation.

Dean felt anger rise within him. His pulse began to pound in his ears. Sam had been hiding from him this whole time, in Lawrence of all places, working with Anna and having Missouri in on the secret. Dean had been going out of his mind for a month.

“Did he know what this would do to me?” he asked. “Didn’t he realize when he took off, leaving us that note, what he was putting me through?”

“He tried not to know,” Anna said. “But I think he guessed.”

“He was gone a month!” Dean shouted. “Doesn’t he know what they felt like?”

A giggle bubbled out of Missouri. “A month. He was gone a month.”

Her giggles became laughter, and then choking and gasping hysteria. Dean’s fury rose. This wasn’t even a little funny.

“Missouri,” Anna said gently, laying a hand on her arm. “Calm down.”

Missouri coughed and the laughter slowed and ceased. “I’m sorry,” she said. “But a month?”

“They don’t understand,” Anna said. “You haven’t told them.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” Missouri said, wiping her eyes.

“Can we just get this over with?” Dean asked. “Apparently my brother is in Lawrence, and he’s due an ass kicking.”

Anna smiled wryly. “You might have a little trouble with that. Sam’s been… training.”
Missouri cleared her throat and her expression became solemn. “What happened to you when Michael brought you back, Dean? Where were you?”

“In the hotel we’d left out of in Colorado,” Dean said. “And Sam was gone.”

“Sam was never there,” Missouri said quietly.

“You mean Michael dropped him off somewhere else?” Bobby asked.

It explained to Dean how Sam had gotten away from him so fast, and how he’d been able to leave the note and be gone before Bobby woke up. If he’d stolen a car from wherever Michael left him, Dean wouldn’t have had a clue.

“I mean he didn’t drop him off at all,” Missouri said.

Dean frowned, but Bobby seemed to have understood something. He gasped. “He left him there?”

“Yes,” Missouri said. “He was trapped in 1978.”

Dean laughed. “Sammy was trapped in ’78! How the hell did he deal with that?”

It had been a head trip for him to be there, and it was his second trip through the past. How had Sam handled it being trapped in the world of flared pants and Pinto’s?

“He did what he had to do,” Missouri said. “He found me quite quickly, and I think that helped.”

“How long was he stuck there?” Dean asked. “How did he get back?”

There was a long silence as Missouri and Anna exchanged a look laden with meaning, and then Missouri said, “He didn’t get back, Dean.”

“But he was here,” Dean said. “He left that note. He was in town for Famine.”

“Yes,” Missouri said. “Because he was still here. He had to wait for time to catch up again.”

Bobby gasped. “He lived from 1978 to now?”

“Yes,” Missouri said. “You know him even. He’s been going by the name Sam Taylor.”

“But I spoke to him…” Bobby said weakly. “It was years ago. I used to talk to him all the time.”

“Since 1979,” Missouri said, nodding. “I remember.”

Dean felt the conversation continuing around him, but he couldn’t follow it. He was in shock. Sam had lived all that time. Decades. A lifetime. He’d been gone longer than he’d been alive before. He’d lived in the past longer than Dean had been alive. How was that even possible?

He was an old man! He was closer to Bobby in age now than he was Dean. What did he even look like?

“He’s not that old, Dean,” Missouri said pointedly. “I’m older than him.”

“And he doesn’t look his age,” Anna said.

“So he’s a young-looking fifty-year-old,” Dean said sarcastically. “That’s still not right.”

“He’s nearly fifty-eight,” Missouri corrected.
“And he doesn’t look any older than when you last saw him,” Anna said. “He’s not aged even a day since Michael left him. He did something to him that froze him at the point of life he was then.”

Dean shook his head jerkily. “I can’t do this. I can’t handle it.”

“You have to handle it,” Bobby said firmly. “It’s Sam.”

Dean pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes, blocking out the room as if that could block everything else out. His mind was reeling. Sam had been gone all that time. He had been without Dean. How had he gotten through it without losing his mind? He’d been gone a month for Dean, and that had been hell. He couldn’t have handled one year, let alone thirty-two of them.

He broke it down into small facts. Sam had been gone, but he was alive and relatively okay. He was in Lawrence. Dean knew where he was, so he could see him.

“Cas, can you take us to him?” he asked then addressed Missouri. “Is he at your house?”

“No, he lives in the old Campbell safe house. But wait! You can’t all go at once.”

“I can’t go at all,” Bobby said bitterly, slapping the wheels of his chair. “Not sure angel air can handle taking along this. I don’t want to end up on my ass on the floor with it on top of me.”

“I can help with that,” Anna said, then answering Castiel’s questioning look, she said, “I have been readmitted to the Host. I can heal.”

“How?” Castiel asked.

“That’s a story for another day,” Missouri said quickly. “Bobby, do you want Anna’s help?”

“Yes,” Bobby said fervently. “Sam obviously trusts you, so I will, too. And if you can give me my legs back, I’ll do pretty much anything.”

“You don’t need to do anything but give me room,” Anna said.

Bobby wheeled back from the table and looked up at her with a light in his eyes that Dean hadn’t seen in months, years even.

Anna got up from her chair and walked to him. She smiled at him and pressed her hand to his chest. A glow of light shone and then she was stepping back, saying, “It’s done.”

“Bobby?” Dean said tentatively.

With a look of wonder, Bobby raised one foot from the rest of his chair and set it on the floor. He did the other and then stood upright. He took a step backward, and his smile grew. He turned his gaze on Anna and said, “I don’t know how to thank you,” weakly.

Anna smiled at him. “You don’t need to. It’s what Sam would want me to do, and I owe him still.”

“Then I’ll thank him,” Bobby said with a laugh.

“Can we go now?” Dean asked. “I need to see him.”

“Maybe just you and me for now,” Missouri said. “I know you all want to see him, but he’s not at his best right now.”
“What do you mean?” Dean asked. “I thought he was okay.”

Anna gave him a measured look, “It’s been thirty-two years, Dean. What do you think she means?”

Dean didn’t want to guess at it. He just nodded and said, “I’m ready.”

“Anna,” Missouri said.

Anna nodded, and then there was a swoop in Dean’s stomach as his eyes squeezed shut.

When Dean opened his eyes and looked at the safe house, he hardly recognized the place. The last time he’d seen it, it had been a wreck. The windows were so dirty you couldn’t imagine how light got through, and the clapboards were hanging off in places.

It was different now. The clapboards were new and varnished, and the windows clean. There was a new front door, and on the porch was a small table with two chairs and a Coleman lantern; it looked as if someone liked to sit outside after dark. Dean tried to imagine Sam doing that, enjoying a simple pleasure, and found he couldn’t, not the Sam he’d known.

“He’s not here,” Missouri said, sounding relieved.

“How do you know?”

“His car is gone,” she said.

Dean hadn’t thought of that. Sam would have to have a car. How else would he have gotten around all those years? As far as he knew, Sam had never had a car before. He wondered what piece of crap plastic model he’d chosen.

“I should go,” Anna said. “I will come back when you’re ready to go home.”

Missouri nodded and took a key from the pocket of her jacket and walked to the door and unlocked it as Anna disappeared. She pushed open the door and gestured Dean inside.

He took a deep breath and then stepped into Sam’s house.

He realized at once that this was more than just a house. It was where Sam really lived. The wide hall he was in was painted cream and there was a coat rack with jackets and a long black overcoat hanging from it, the kind they used when posing as FBI, though theirs were never that kind of quality. There was rack of shoes underneath the coats and a table where Missouri dropped her keys in a bowl. There were framed pictures on the wall, among them a sunset over an ocean with a surfer silhouetted riding a wave.

“Come on through,” Missouri said, walking past him and through an arch into another room. She seemed perfectly comfortable here, letting herself and Dean in, and he saw a glimpse of just how connected she and Sam were now. This was her space, too. She belonged. Dean didn’t. This was too weird for him.

He followed her into the large space he remembered with the kitchen leading off of it. It was furnished with black metalwork and lightwood tables and units that were dated but well cared for, with no scratches or scuffs. Someone obviously took care of this place. There were light blue drapes at the windows that complemented the walls, and two grey leather La-Z-Boy recliners, the kind Dean always thought he would have if he had his own home.

He realized this was a home. It was Sam’s home. This was where he came at the end of the day.
This was where he woke up. These chairs were where he sat to watch his TV. One of them had a pillow on it, and beside it a table that held a bottle half full bottle of whiskey and a clean glass.

“Sam’s a drinker now?” he asked.

“What?” Missouri saw where Dean was looking and said, “Oh, that. No. Sam drinks sometimes, but that was George’s. Sam never took it away after he was gone. I think he likes to remember.”

“Who’s George?” Dean asked.

Missouri walked to the empty fireplace and pointed at one of the framed photographs Dean hadn’t noticed before. It was of a bearded Sam and a man that looked to be in his seventies. They were sitting at the table on the porch, each holding up a glass of whiskey and smiling into the camera.

“He was Sam’s friend, a hunter,” she said. “He died seven years ago.”

“What happened?” Dean asked.

“Old age,” Missouri said sadly. “It wrecked Sam to lose him. He found him dead in his bed one morning. They used to live here together.”

Dean’s looked at the face of the man that had been Sam’s friend, and he wondered about him. What kind of person was he? How had Sam met him? How had he become that important to Sam that losing him had wrecked him?

His eyes moved along the mantle and he spotted something out of place. It was a very old box of candy cigarettes. “What’s with these?” he asked.

Missouri saw what he was looking at and she frowned. “They’ve always been there. I’ve never asked.”

“I used to love these when I was a kid,” Dean said.

Missouri smiled. “Then I think you have your answer.”

Dean frowned. Had Sam had these things on his mantle for thirty-two years because of a childhood memory of Dean? If not that, then why?

He looked at the photographs more closely and he saw one of himself. It was a little grainy from where it had been enlarged from the picture Sam kept in his wallet for emergencies, but it was in the very center of the other pictures. Was it pride of place or just a random choice? Dean wished he knew.

“Who are the rest of these people?” he asked.

“This is Sam’s son, James, with his wife and daughter,” Missouri said, pointing at a group shot of a small family and a dog.

Dean choked on his indrawn breath. His eyes watered as he coughed to clear his throat, and Missouri patted his back.

“Sam has a kid!” he rasped. “He has a granddaughter!”

It was too much. Sam hadn’t just existed thirty-two years without Dean, he had lived. He had a family, a child! He couldn’t handle it.
“They’re Sam’s, but not in the way you’re thinking,” Missouri said, a glint in her eyes that told Dean she’d known how he would react to what she’s said, and she’d wanted it. He didn’t understand why she’d want to shock him like that though.

“James is my son,” she continued. “My husband died when James was a child, and when Sam came, he… I guess you’d say he took Richard’s place. James loved his father still, but he loved Sam, too. We both did. Now he’s married and has a daughter, Patience. She calls him Uncle Sam, and she adores him.”

“Sam’s good with kids?” Dean asked, realizing that was something about his brother he’d never known.

“He is with Patience,” she said. “I don’t really see him with others. He probably is though. He good with people in general. He cares.”

He always had, Dean thought. He cared too much. That had been a part of his problem in the beginning.

“Did you and Sam ever…” Dean couldn’t even finish the question. He could barely think it.

“No,” she said with a smile. “We were never close in that way. But I do love him. He’s one of the most important people in the world to me.”

“And are you to him?” Dean asked.

“Yes,” she said simply. “We’ve known each other a long time and we’ve been through a lot.”

It dawned on Dean that Missouri knew his brother better now than Dean did. They’d had more years together. They had a whole life that he knew nothing about. Dean had missed so much. Even if things slipped back into the balance they’d always had, brothers that mattered more to each other than anyone else, Missouri would have a part of Sam that he never could.

“I need a drink,” he said.

Missouri went to the table and poured him a drink from the bottle she’d said was George’s. He took the glass from her and knocked it back.

He looked at the other photographs, seeing Sam with two women in wedding dresses, and him with a man standing among a crowd. The picture was old and their outfits dated. Dean wondered what the circumstances of the photo had been.

“Who are these people?” he asked.

“Just Sam’s friends.”

“He has a lot?” Dean guessed.

“Yes,” Missouri said. “He’s had a long time to meet people.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Dean muttered.

He wondered about all these people, they were just the ones Sam thought important enough to have photographs on display of. Did he love them? He wasn’t jealous, but it had been just him, Sam, Bobby and Castiel only a month ago, and now Sam had all these people. It was hard for him to wrap his mind around.
Suddenly, Missouri stiffened and said, “He’s home.”

Dean heard the engine, too, and he wondered if she was regretting bringing him here after all. She looked worried. He was worried, too. He didn’t know how Sam was going to react to seeing him. He’d been determined enough to keep his distance to run away from him after all.

There was quiet for a moment and then the sound of a key snagging in the unlocked door. It opened and Sam called, “Missouri? I thought you were…”

He trailed off as he appeared in the archway that led to the hall. He was carrying a paper sack of groceries, and he was wearing a leather jacket. His face above his beard paled and his eyes widened.

Missouri rushed forward and plucked the sack from his hands. She set it down on the floor and said, “Breathe, Sam.”

Sam took a long slow breath that made his shoulders rise and then fall as he released it. He didn’t smile, he looked too shocked, and Dean grappled for something to say, anything to break the moment and stop Sam looking at him like he wasn’t sure whether or not to turn and run again.

All that occurred to him was, “Nice beard, Sammy,” and he flinched as the words left him.

Sam cleared his throat. “No one’s called me Sammy in a long time.”

“Thirty-two years, yeah?” Dean asked.

Sam nodded and wiped a hand impatiently over his face.

Dean realized Sam was crying. He walked forward without making a conscious decision to, just knowing Sam needed him. He stared into Sam’s wet eyes for a moment, and then put his arms around him. Sam’s chest shuddered and his hands came up to embrace him in return.

“It’s okay,” Dean said. “I’ve got you.”

Sam gripped him tighter, and all Dean’s worries about where they fit together faded. Years were between them and that meant something, but Sam needed him now and Dean knew what he needed to do. No matter how old Sam was, Dean was still his big brother, and it was his job to take care of him.
Chapter Sixty-Nine

Too soon for Dean, Sam pulled away and wiped at his face again. He cleared his throat and turned to Missouri. “Anna?” he asked in a tone that Dean didn’t want to call anger but thought just might be.

“Both of us,” Missouri admitted quietly.

Sam nodded but didn’t speak.

Once again, Dean found himself without words. This was a big moment for him, a huge one for Sam, and he didn’t know what to say. He had questions, he wanted assurances and explanations, but he didn’t feel like he could ask for them. Sam’s reaction had wrongfooted him. He’d expected some happiness at their reunion at least. It had been thirty-two years for Sam. Even though he’d tried to hide, it had to feel better to be together again, didn’t it?

“I should go,” Missouri said.

“Do you want a ride?” Sam asked.

Dean’s eyes widened. He’d had a matter of minutes with his brother, and yet he was apparently ready to leave him already. What the hell was that about?

“I’ll call Anna,” Missouri said. “I left my car at Bobby Singer’s. I’ll have her take me back there and I’ll spend the night in Sioux Falls and drive back tomorrow.

Sam nodded. “I’ll see you when you get home.” There was more than a simple promise in his voice; it sounded almost like a threat.

Missouri smiled, apparently unconcerned. “I know.”

She had said she was betraying Sam by telling Dean where he was, and Anna said he’d forgive her, but if he was Missouri, he wouldn’t bank on that.

She walked into the hall, and Dean heard the rattle of her keys as she picked them up and then the sound of the door opening and closing.

For a moment, these was silence apart from the tick of a clock and then Sam shrugged off his jacket, draped it over the back of a chair, and said, “I need to put these away.” He picked up his sack of groceries and carried them into the kitchen.

As if drawn by a magnet, Dean followed and looked around the room. The table was pushed up against a wall, its chairs stacked, and there was a free chair in the middle on the room with a coil of ropes on it. Beneath it was a devil’s trap painted onto the floor.

“You’ve had demons here?” he asked.

“Yes,” Sam said, but didn’t go on.

Dean looked at the things Sam was unloading on the counter and stowing in cupboards and the
fridge. Coffee, milk, dish soap, toothpaste, cheese, bags of prepackaged salad leaves, fresh pasta, tomatoes, zucchini, ground beef, three boxes of salt. Apart from the salt, which Dean thought was for the demons, it was so normal. The actions and ingredients of a normal life in the place Dean had almost been choked to death by Uriel only a month ago.

As Sam folded the paper sack and closed the fridge door, Dean saw letters and notes pinned to it with magnets. There was a stuffed envelope from the First Bank of Kansas. Dean wondered if that meant Sam had an actual bank account. Was he that much of a civilian now? Under the envelope was a photo of a little girl with a baby resting on her lap, her arm cradling his head. Beside it was a crude painting in bright colors. Dean wasn’t sure, but the green blob with a brown line beneath in the center made him think it was a picture of a tree.

“That Patience’s work?”

Sam smiled slightly. “Missouri told you about her?”

“And James,” Dean said. “She said he was your son.”

“Yes,” Sam said simply. He looked at the picture and said. “It’s not Patience’s. She’s eleven now. This is Sammy’s work.” He pointed at the photo of the little girl and the baby. “That was him and Gracie not long after he was born. He’s five now.”

Dean wanted to know whether the fact they shared a name was significant, but he didn’t know how to ask. He was more than curious about how those children came to be in Sam’s life, but again, he didn’t know how to ask. He’d never felt like this with Sam before. Sam had always been open, too open sometimes; he would push Dean to talk about things he didn’t want to, to delve into feelings. Now their situations were reversed. Sam wasn’t hostile, but he wasn’t making Dean feel comfortable either. He felt more like a visitor in Sam’s home than a brother.

“You want a coffee?” Sam asked. “Or a beer?”

“Beer would be good.”

Sam took two bottles out of the fridge and handed one to Dean then walked into the living room and sat in one of the recliners. Dean followed him in and took a seat on the couch, not wanting to take what had obviously been Sam’s friend’s spot.

Sam unscrewed his cap, took a swig and then set the bottle down on a coaster. Dean kept hold of his own, needing something to hold on to.

Once again, silence fell that Dean struggled to break. “You’ve got a nice place here,” he said and then bit his lip. A month apart for him, three decades for Sam, and he was going with small talk. What the hell was wrong with him?

“Thanks,” Sam said. “It was pretty much a wreck when I moved in.”

“I remember,” Dean said, his eyes drifting to the spot where he’d seen his brother lying dead. There was a sideboard there now with a cordless phone charging, a lamp, and more photos, one of them showing some graffitied wall, the words in English and what looked like German. He wondered what the story was there.

“Yeah, you would,” Sam said. “We did a lot of refurbishment and repair the first year, and then me and George did a complete overhaul in ’93 after the flood.”

Dean was struck by the casual way he said it. ’93, as if it was just another year. Sam should have
been ten that year. He shouldn’t have been a grown man.

“You were flooded?” Dean asked,

“Yeah. It was pretty big, hit the Midwest hard. Around fifty people died. We got off lucky here. George and I just lost clothes and furniture. Missouri’s place is on an incline, so she only had a trashed garden.”

Dean sighed with relief as he realized they’d stumbled on a topic he could pursue that might open Sam up a little. “Missouri told me a little about George.”

“George…” Sam sighed with a small smile. “He was my best friend. He lived here for years before he died. He was a hunter, but his knee got busted in a car crash. You’d have liked him. He reminded me a lot of Bobby.”

“Bad tempered then?” Dean asked with a smile.

“You have no idea,” Sam said fondly. “But he was a good man. Patience loved him, and he wasn’t the easiest person to love. She had him wrapped around her little finger. To be honest, she has most of us pretty much like that. She’s a good kid.”

“You see much of her?” Dean asked.

“Every few months. They live in San Francisco, so Missouri and I make the trip there when we can. I saw her just before Christmas.” He frowned suddenly, his eyes darkening.

Dean wondered what he was thinking. He didn’t feel he could ask though. This older version of his brother was different. He wanted to find something to connect with them rather than these other people Sam knew. He stumbled on a piece of news Sam wouldn’t yet know,

“Anna fixed Bobby’s legs,” he said.

Sam’s frown was wiped away and he smiled widely, his eyes lighting up. Dean was glad of the change, but it bothered him that it was Bobby that had brought it out of him. Why wasn’t it enough that he was there after all this time?

“That’s great!” Sam said enthusiastically. “He must be so happy.”

“Yeah, he’s feeling the love right now for sure.”

Dean wasn’t. There was nothing Anna could do to make up for the fact she’d killed Sam. Fixing Bobby was a drop in the ocean compared to Dean having to watch Sam die while Uriel had him pinned, powerless to do anything.

“Apparently, he knows you, too. Taylor, right?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, I spoke to him a lot over the years.”

“How come he didn’t recognize your voice?”

“I changed it,” Sam said, lowering his voice and adding a drawl Dean had never heard from him before.

“Okay, that’s freaky,” Dean said.

Sam smiled slightly. “It worked.”
“Dad knew you, too,” Dean said. “Your name is in his journal.”

“Yeah,” Sam said slowly. “He used to call sometimes.”

“That must have been weird, talking to him, I mean. Didn’t it bother you?”

“No, it was a gift. I got to help him, tell him what he needed to know to make him safer, to protect me and you when we got involved. Besides, talking to him on the phone was nothing compared to seeing him.”

Dean gaped. “You saw him!”

Sam looked at him and said, as if confessing something, “When we came to Missouri for the first time in 2006, I wanted to see you, so I hung around when you arrived. I went to Missouri’s that evening to speak to her, I wanted to know what she thought of us, to connect a little more, and Dad showed up.”

Dean’s heart began to increase its pace, though he wasn’t sure whether it was due to shock or anger. “He came…”

“He said you called him. He came but, obviously, he hid from us.”

“What the hell!” Dean said angrily. “How was that supposed to help? We were going out of our minds looking for him.”

“I know,” Sam said. “I said all that to him, too. I was pissed. He really thought he was doing the right thing though. I walked out when he arrived, as I really thought it was going to end in a fight, but I went back the next day and he was still there. We had a talk.”

“What did you talk about?” Dean wondered what he would have said if he’d been given the chance to see his father again. He’d longed for it once. Now he wasn’t sure how he’d handle it.

Sam’s knee began to bounce and he pressed a hand down to still it. “I told him about Yellow-Eyes. I told him we’d get him one day, and that the Colt was real. I told him some about the special children, that I was one of them.”

“Did you tell him what was going to happen to him?”

Dean wasn’t sure what he wanted the answer to be. He wasn’t sure whether he wanted his father to go into his deal knowing what was coming for him, fully aware of what it meant, or to live a few more months of peace before that happened.

“No,” Sam said. “There was no point.”

“No point?” Dean asked.

“None,” Sam said firmly, his tone a clear end to the conversation.

“Did you see us at all after that?” Dean asked. “Were you, I don’t know, hanging around hunts?”

He wondered whether Sam had needed to see him again. If it had been him, he would have wanted to see as much of Sam as he could.

“No, but I saw you a few times before that, when you were a kid, I mean.”

“You saw me as a kid?” Dean was surprised, it seemed too weird, but he supposed he should have
realized. He had been living in Lawrence after all. Their paths were bound to cross.

“Yeah, sometimes. The last time I saw you properly back then was when you came to Missouri’s Trick or Treating.” He laughed softly. “You were Dracula.”

Dean had a vague memory of that Halloween. He remembered walking the street with his parents and Sammy. “I bet I made a kickass Dracula,” he said.

“You did,” Sam said. “You were real proud of yourself, and pretty happy when I said you could eat my candy, too.”

Dean felt a swoop in his stomach. He remembered that, the man that had admired his costume and given him extra candy because Sammy was too small. His dad had told him he had to thank Sammy, as if the baby could understand him. It had amused Dean. The fact that had been his time traveling brother there made his head spin.

“I remember that,” he said quietly. “Not you exactly, but the man that gave me Sammy’s, yours I guess, candy.”

“You do?” Sam asked. “I figured you’d be too young.”

Dean shook his head. “It stood out.” His heart lurched. “That means you saw Mom, too?”

A shadow fell over Sam’s face as his expression morphed into sadness. “I did. I saw her sometimes back then. At the lake with you and dad, on the streets with you and then me as babies, in the market when I was shopping.”

“Did you talk to her?”

“Not really.”

“What was it like?” Dean asked. “Seeing her.”

“It was different,” Sam said, and then pointedly changed the subject. “I saw you once more, when you were grown, I mean. You were about twenty. You were here.”

“I was?” Dean asked, stunned. “Why don’t I remember?”

Sam looked sad. “You called me as Taylor, asking for information for a hunt. It was a djinn, and I gave you the lowdown, but you were caught by it. Missouri had a vision of you strung up, so Anna and I came for you.” He ran a hand through his hair. “I kinda lost it. Anna killed the djinn, but you were still unconscious. I should have put you in the Impala to wake up and then left, but I just couldn’t; I needed a little longer. I had Anna bring us back here.”

Dean didn’t understand. If it had mattered to Sam so much back then to bring Dean back to his house, that he’d ‘lost it’, why was he acting like this now? If he’d wanted to see him so much then, why was he so different now? Why had he hidden? He seemed almost indifferent to the fact they were together now that his anger seemed to have passed. What had changed in the last eleven years? Sure, it was a long time, but they were brothers.

“I planned for you to be here just long enough to make sure you woke up okay,” Sam went on. “But you woke up without me there. You saw your own picture on the mantlepiece and then you saw me. I had to explain, you were too smart to lie to, and it seemed okay for a while, I thought it was awesome even, but then you overheard us talking about the apocalypse.” His eyes became faraway, lost in memory. “You were scared, of course, freaking out, and I had to save you. Anna
wiped your memory of me and the hunt.”

Anger rose in Dean. How dare he? What gave him the right to screw with his memories like that? Maybe if he’d known in advance, he could have changed things. The apocalypse might not have happened at all.

“You screwed with my memory!” he said angrily. “That’s messed up.”

“You let us do it,” Sam said, no defense in his voice, just fact. “You gave us permission. You knew it had to happen, too.”

“It could have changed things. I could have saved us all this if I’d known.”

“You couldn’t,” Sam said with finality. “You would have just lived in fear. It had to happen that way.”

“That’s real shitty, Sam.”

Sam shrugged. “I did what I had to do. It’s not like I really had a choice anyway.”

Dean was on the point of answering, making Sam see how messed up it was and how pissed he felt, but at that moment, the phone rang.

Sam got to his feet and checked the caller ID, and then set it back in its cradle. “I’ll let the machine get it,” he said.

It rang for a long time and then an old-fashioned answering machine asked the caller to leave a message. There was a beep and Dean heard a heavily accented voice say, “Sam! Mein Freund, where are you? I make this expensive call and you are not even there to answer. I have news! Wunderbar news! Lena is going to have a baby! I am going to be a großvater! You must come to Berlin now. No more excuses. You will call me soon, ja? I have much to tell you.”

The message ended and Dean saw Sam was grinning. He’d barely been able to get a smile out of him, and yet this call had him looking like that.

“Who was that?” he asked.

“My friend, Dieter,” Sam said.

“He’s German?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you meet him?”

Sam frowned. “Germany.”

Dean was at his limit. He didn’t know why it was this call that had done it instead of the other jarring topics they’d discussed, the fact of Sam’s difference and his reaction to Dean, but he needed to get out of this strange house with this strange version of his brother.

He set down his undrunk beer on the table and got to his feet. “I need to get back to Bobby’s,” he said. “Do you want to come with me?”

Sam’s eyes widened and he paled. He looked like a deer caught in headlights.
“Or do you want to come tomorrow?” Dean asked. “I guess you’ve probably got things to do. You should call your friend back.”

“Yeah, tomorrow,” Sam said, sounding relieved. “Do you want to borrow my car?”

Dean forced a smile. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll let you hang onto whatever piece of plastic you’ve been driving around.”

Sam laughed then, looking and sounding like the brother Dean had known again. “Come with me.”

He stood and walked to the front door. Dean followed him out onto the porch and his eyes widened as he saw a beautiful Mustang. It was electric blue with a black racing stripe, and the paint and chrome shone.

“Is that a Mach 1?” he asked.


“She’s in great shape,” Dean observed. “Did you master mechanics at last?”

“Nah,” Sam said easily. “I never learned anything more than you managed to teach me. There a place in town that does classic cars. They take care of her for me. Do you want to borrow her?”

Dean wanted to drive it, but he wanted to get back to Bobby’s quickly. He needed to tell them what had happened and to be with people that understood what it felt like for him to see Sam, for him to be so different.

“No. Baby will get jealous,” he said. “I’ll call Cas.”

Sam nodded. “Okay. I’ll come by Bobby’s tomorrow.” He turned opened the door again and stepped through.

Stunned by the abrupt goodbye, the fact Sam wasn’t even going to stay until Castiel came, Dean said, “Sammy?”

Sam turned. “Yeah.”

“You will come tomorrow, won’t you?”

Sam nodded. “I’ll leave early and be there lunchtime.”

“Okay,” Dean said, then hesitated before going on. “It was good to see you.”

“Yeah, you too,” Sam said, an obvious lie.

He went back into the house and closed the door behind him, a curt end to their meeting, leaving Dean alone outside, wondering what the hell had just happened.

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Sam closed the door behind himself and breathed out in a sigh. That had been one of the toughest hours of his long life, and he’d barely gotten through it. It was over, for now, and he could relax, but there was something he needed to do first.

“Anna,” he said stiffly. “We need to talk.”
He went back into the living room and sat down, picking up his beer and draining half of it before setting it down as he heard the sound of her arrival. He hadn’t been sure she would come, but he was pleased she had.

She looked at him for a moment and then said, “How did it go?”

“How do you think it went?” Sam asked, speaking between his teeth.

“I imagine Dean was happy.”

“He probably was,” Sam said. “Until he came here and actually spoke to me. I don’t think he was happy when he left since I barely gave him an inch.”

“Why not?”

“Why?” Sam lurched to his feet. “Why do you think? Because you just sideswiped me with him, and I had no time to prepare for it! Because I had no idea what to do or say, and he probably went home thinking I’m a bigger disappointment than I was thirty-two years ago!”

Anna sighed, looking more disappointed in him than Dean had been.

“What the hell were you thinking, Anna?” he asked. “I told you I didn’t want to see him again. I had made my peace with that. I was protecting him from this, and worse, and you and Missouri destroyed that! I understand Missouri doing it, as she didn’t know the full story of why I wouldn’t go to him and I know she’s been worried about me, but you… You know this fight is going to kill me, and now it’s going to be a hundred times harder to keep him out of it. Why did you do it?”

“Because of Famine,” she said.

“He’s dealt with already,” Sam spat. “We didn’t need help with him.”

“No, but you needed help, and Famine was the one that made me see it.” She walked past him and sat down on the couch in the spot Dean had just vacated, saying, “Sit down, Sam.”

Sam rolled his eyes and sat. “I didn’t need help. Famine barely even affected me.”

“Exactly. Do you have any idea how messed up that is?”

“Why?” Sam asked.

“Because your need to kill Lucifer couldn’t be worse than it already was. I felt what he did to me, and it was terrifying. You felt… what? A little more on edge? A little impatient? You feel what I felt then all the time, and that’s not normal. This is going to kill you, and you’re running towards it. You should be scared.”

“I was,” Sam said. “I was terrified, but I’m not anymore. I am living in a time again in which people are dying because of me. What else can I do but die to make it right? I’m ready.”

“You’re suicidal,” she accused.

Sam flushed with anger. “No. I’m not. I just know what I have to do.”

She shook her head. “You’re running towards your death. Why do you think I brought Dean here?”

“I wish I knew,” Sam said. “Then I’d understand why you betrayed me.”
“I did it to connect you to the world again. It’s more than just making things right that matters. You have to want to win for more than atonement. I know you already started saying your goodbyes. I saw how you were when you were in San Francisco when you had to leave. Even Patience noticed it. She asked her mom if you were okay. Tess lied to her because she didn’t know how to explain her fears to her daughter.”

Sam felt a wave of frustration. He thought he’d handled it well. He’d made his goodbyes to them when the trip came to an end good ones, knowing it was the last time he would ever see them. He hadn’t even connected the increase in the frequency of James’ calls and Tess’ emails to anything they’d noticed.

“You were spying on me,” he said bitterly, not wanting to address the rest of what she’d said.

“I was checking in on you,” she corrected. “There’s a difference. I knew things were going to be harder for you when the time drew close, and I wanted to make sure you were okay. I also know about the letters you’ve written.”

Sam glared at her. “Been poking through my office, too?”

She didn’t answer. “You do realize they read like suicide notes, don’t you?”

“They’re not,” he said.

They were his chance to say goodbye and to explain what he’d done and why to Missouri and Dean. He’d wanted them to know he’d done it willingly and for a reason that mattered to him. He didn’t want them to doubt him after, to blame themselves. He’d wanted them to know how he felt when he rarely said it in life.

“Even if I was suicidal, how does seeing Dean help? This is ending with my death either way. It has to.”

“It helps because you’ll have a reminder of what you’re dying for. Dean isn’t just a memory anymore. He’s alive to you, and he needs to be protected. It will make you stronger. We have spent all this time preparing for the fight, keeping you strong, but that has ended with you being disconnected. I understand that, I wouldn’t want to see what I was leaving behind either, but you need to be as strong as you can be. Seeing Dean will do that for you.”

Sam stared into her eyes and saw her certainty there. It made sense even. He understood it, but he hated it. Surely there had been another way for her to make him see what he was fighting for instead of dragging Dean into it.

“I will apologize if you can say something to me. If you can place your hand on your heart and swear on Patience’s life that seeing Dean here wasn’t the best thing to happen to you in thirty-two years.”

“I won’t swear anything on her life,” he said. “Her life isn’t mine to use.”

“Then swear on something else. Tell me honestly, wasn’t it the best thing?”

Sam shook his head. He couldn’t do it. It had been amazing to see Dean. For that split second, before he realized what it meant for Dean, he had been so happy, happier than he had been since the angels saved Dean from Hell. He had forgotten all the reasons he’d had to keep him away, and when Dean had hugged him, it had been like coming home at last.

“I was a dick to him.”
Anna smiled. “I’m sure you were.”

“I couldn’t let him connect at all.”

She nodded. “He’ll be fine. Dean’s as strong as you are.”

“It’s been thirty-two years, and I didn’t show I was happy to see him at all.”

“It’s only been a month to him,” she said. “We told them how long it had been, and maybe Dean thinks he understands that but he can’t really. He didn’t live it. Those years are just a number to him. Besides, you have time to make it right. When are you seeing him again?”

“Tomorrow. I’m going to drive to Bobby’s.”

“Then you can make it right then. Stop trying to defend yourself from it and let yourself feel what it’s like to be with him, with them all, again.”

Sam took a slow, deep breath. “I will.”

“Are you going to thank me?” she asked.

“No,” Sam said firmly. “I get why you’ve done this to me, but you have no idea what you’ve done to Dean. I am dying soon, and after he’ll think he could have stopped me. If he’d not seen me at all, he’d not have had that chance. How do I fix that?”

“Write another letter, record a video for him, leave a voicemail. Do whatever you think will work. Tell him. Explain how it feels for you now, how it’s felt for years. Do a good enough job of that, and he’ll know he never stood a chance.”

“And if I can’t?” Sam asked.

“Then you’ll have another chance one day,” she said, going on when Sam looked confused. “Heaven, Sam. You’re doing a good thing stopping Lucifer. Even Michael can’t keep you out of Heaven after something like that.”

Sam felt a flicker of hope as he remembered a promise someone once made him. “How does it work there, Anna?” he asked. “Am I going to have a chance to see the people I love again?”

She smiled. “You’ll see Dean. You two are what we call a ‘special case’.”

“And other people?”

“It’s possible to move between heavens if you’re determined enough.” She nodded. “I think you and George will find a way between you.”

Sam exhaled in a rush. He would have a chance to apologize to Dean and make him understand if he didn’t already, and he would find George. More even. He could find everyone he loved. He would see his parents again. He would tell his mother the story of his long life, and he would tell his dad he understood. John had primed Dean to kill him, but he had been doing the right thing to him. Perhaps the right thing over all. So much would have been different if Dean had done what John charged him with.

But it didn’t matter anymore. Sam was dying, and soon, but it didn’t end there. He would make up for what he had done wrong, and he would have peace with the people he loved. And tomorrow he would see the people he loved that were still within his reach. He would see Dean again, Bobby
and Castiel, and he would make up for how he’d behaved today. He would make Dean see how happy he really was to see him again. He would leave him in no doubt of how much he cared.
Chapter Seventy

Dean was standing at the kitchen window pretending to wait for the coffee to brew but really watching for Sam’s car.

He was equal parts eager and nervous for his brother’s arrival. He wanted to see him again but he was worried it was going to be the stilted, awkward meeting of the day before all over again. He had told Bobby and Castiel what it had been like, and he’d warned them not to expect too much. He had no idea if they’d taken it in though. Bobby had been in an unexpectedly good mood all morning, and Castiel had already checked in twice to see if he’d arrived.

The coffee burbled and spat as it finished, and Dean had just drawn his eyes from the window to serve it when he heard a car approaching. His eyes snapped to the window and he saw Sam’s Mustang pulling to a stop beside the Impala.

“He’s here,” he called to Bobby.

Bobby got up from his place behind the desk and hurried to the window. “That’s a beauty of a car,” he said.

“Yeah, Sam has taste.” Dean smirked. “Who knew?”

Sam climbed out of the car and Bobby blinked twice as if clearing his vision. “He’s grown a beard. You didn’t mention that.”

“I was distracted by explaining the crap-storm that was our talk. Sorry if I didn’t get to the finer points of his grooming.”

Bobby didn’t answer. He went to the door and opened it.

“Remember what I said,” Dean hissed. “Take it easy. He’s different.”

Sam walked up the porch and Bobby greeted him happily, “Hey, boy.”

Sam laughed, and Dean’s eyes bugged. He wasn’t expecting that.

“Boy?” Sam asked wryly. “Haven’t I got you beat on years yet, Bobby?”

“No, I’ve still got a couple on you,” Bobby said. “And the less said on that the better. I can only take so much crazy in a day.”

Dean turned with two cups of coffee in his hands in time to see Bobby and Sam embrace. Sam’s eyes closed a moment before he slapped Bobby’s back and released him. Dean was shocked. Since when had Bobby been Sam’s favorite? He had been disconnected from Dean the day before, but now he was all about the happy reunions with Bobby. In what backwards world did that make sense? He didn’t want to seem like a jealous teen, but he was pissed. After three decades apart, Sam had been distant with him, but it was like he’d arrived today a different man.

“You think that’s crazy?” Sam asked. “Try having an eleven-year-old granddaughter. That’ll make
“you feel _old._”

Bobby whistled between his teeth. “Yeah, you’re a grandfather. That’s my limit on weird.”

Sam laughed again. “It’s good to see you, Bobby, especially upright.”

“You can thank Anna for that.” Bobby said.

Dean huffed a laugh. “I’ll be sure to thank the bitch that stabbed my brother.”

Sam frowned. “She’s my friend.”

“Then you’re obviously a more forgiving man than me,” Dean said.

“She’s done a lot for me,” Sam said seriously.

Dean opened his mouth to retort, but Bobby spoke over him. “Come sit down, Sam. Dean’s made coffee. Let’s talk. You ready to see Cas?”

“Sure,” Sam said.

Bobby nodded and said into the air, “Cas, Sam’s here if you want to come say hi.”

With a flutter of noise Castiel arrived, and he looked at Sam for a long moment before saying, “Hello, Sam,” in a more animated tone that usual.

“Hey, Cas.” Sam held out a hand and Castiel glanced at it for a moment before shaking it.

Dean set the coffees down on the table and took a seat. Sam and Bobby sat down on either side of him, and Castiel leaned against the counter. Sam sipped his coffee and said, “Thanks, Dean.”

Dean tried to smile in return, but he was pretty sure it looked more like a grimace. He was struggling to deal with this change in Sam. Had he done something to piss him off? He couldn’t think of something worth holding a grudge over for all the years they’d been apart, but Sam had been so closed with him, and he seemed so happy now. Was it him that was the problem and Bobby and Castiel the ones he wanted to see?

“What have you been up to then?” Bobby asked.

Sam grinned. “You mean the past month, or since 1978?”

“Well, start with the past month, but I want to know the rest one day soon, too,” Bobby said.

Sam drew a deep breath and looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well, you know about Famine, of course.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “We just missed you apparently.”

Sam nodded, no sign of regret or apology in him. “You did. We’d barely gotten his hand off of him before you arrived. It was a tough kill, but he was more interested in meeting me that anything else, so we had an advantage. Anna struggled with it more than I did.”

“What did you crave?” Dean asked.

Sam considered a moment, as if deciding how much to share. Dean wondered if he was going to censor himself, to not mention the blood he must have longed for. “The same thing I always do,”
“Demon blood,” Castiel stated.

Sam frowned at him, looking almost hurt. “No, Cas, not that.”

“Then what?” Dean asked.

“Lucifer,” Sam said. “I craved his death. It was a little different for me though; I didn’t feel it the way Anna did. We’ve been searching for a way to kill him since ’83, ever since Anna came through for me. It was already pretty intense. Anna was really struggling, but it didn’t really affect me. I wanted it so much already that I didn’t feel it.”

“You didn’t feel it at all?” Castiel asked, sounding stunned.

Dean remembered how it had felt for him to be under Famine’s influence, how he had needed to find Sam more than anything. Castiel, an actual angel, had stuffed down hundreds of hamburgers. But Sam hadn’t felt it, which meant he always felt that.

“I felt more on edge,” Sam said. “It was definitely more prominent in my mind, but it wasn’t the same for me as Anna.”

“Do you know how unusual that is?” Castiel asked.

“Anna made it pretty clear,” Sam said, and there was a touch of something like anger in his voice. “You’ve got to understand though, that I’ve felt that need since the day I freed him. I’ve had more than three decades for that feeling to intensify. It was because of Lucifer that Michael trapped me. I couldn’t want him dead more than I already did. I just know how to think around it. I’ve had practice.”

“When you say it was because of Lucifer…” Bobby said. “Why exactly did Michael do it?”

“He wanted to break me,” Sam sighed. “He wanted me to give consent to Lucifer and to be a weaker vessel for him when I did. I didn’t understand it back then. It wasn’t until Anna explained later that I got it. He thought making me live out those years alone, to have all that time to think about what I had done, to experience all the things that happened to us all over again, would be too much for me to handle.”

“Did it work?” Castiel asked.

“Do you mean am I broken?” Sam asked. “Do I seem it?”

That was a loaded question, Dean thought. If he’d asked it the day before, after Dean had seen him, he wouldn’t have known how to answer. It would have been possible. But today, with Sam acting the way he was, he seemed the furthest thing from broken. He seemed stronger than Dean had even known him.

“No,” Bobby said firmly.

“I came close a couple times when things happened,” Sam admitted. “There were some real dark days. But no, I am not broken. I know exactly what I have to do to make it right, and that makes me stronger than ever. His plan backfired.”

“How did it happen?” Dean asked. “The last time I saw you, you were dead. Michael said he’d healed you and sent you back, but you weren’t there when I got back, obviously.”
“I woke up in New Mexico,” Sam said. “Michael showed up pretty fast, and he gave me some cryptic crap then dumped me full of grace before taking off and leaving me behind.”

“He gave you grace?” Castiel asked, his eyebrows rising with surprise.

“Yeah,” Sam said, and he looked pleased.

“What does that mean?” Den asked.

“You got a knife, Bobby? It’s easier to show than to explain.”

“I’ve got one,” Dean said.

He bent to his boot and pulling out the silver switchblade he kept there for emergencies. He handed it to Sam, and Sam released the blade. He tossed it from hand to hand for a moment, and then nodded and plunged the knife into his wrist, shoving the blade right through to the tabletop. Dean and Bobby lurched to their feet, shouting, “No!”

For a horrible moment, Sam smiled at them knowingly, and Dean wondered if this was why he was different. Had he been plotting to do this the whole time? Was he killing himself to avoid his fate as Lucifer’s vessel?

Dean grabbed a cloth from the counter and rushed to Sam’s side to staunch the bleeding, but Sam pushed his hand away and gripped the handle of the blade.

“Sam!” Dean shouted, knowing that the moment that blade left him he was going to bleed out.

“It’s fine,” Sam said. “Look.”

Sam pulled the blade out slowly and held out his wrist. It was bloody, but there was no wound. There wasn’t even a scar.

“What the hell?” Bobby breathed.

“Grace,” Sam said. “I can’t be hurt.”

Castiel was the only one that didn’t seem surprised. Dean’s heart was still pounding, and Bobby looked pale as he fell into his seat again. “I guess you couldn’t have just told us that?” he said weakly.

“Would you have believed it if you hadn’t seen it?” Sam asked.

“Maybe not,” Bobby admitted.

Sam stood and walked to the sink to wash the blood from his wrist and the knife. He dried it with the hem of his shirt and sat down again. Dean took a moment, looking at the patch of unmarred skin on his brother’s wrist, then he sat, too.

Sam closed the blade and handed it back to Dean then said, “I’ve been hurt in pretty much every way imaginable and I’ve healed every time.”

“Why did he do it?” Castiel asked. “As far as I know, no angel has ever done that to a human before. I wasn’t even sure it was possible.”

“He didn’t stick around in ’78 with me, so he couldn’t spend his time putting me ‘back me together each time I fell apart’. He did the grace dump and had Anna prove the point by stabbing me in the
“She stabbed you again!” Dean said angrily. “She’s making a habit of that.”

“She was working for him back then,” Sam pointed out. “And she was doing that to save her own life. He charged her with watching me. She came around to our side after a while, and since then she’s dedicated everything to the cause. She’s the reason I have more time now. She persuaded Michael I needed a little longer before I’d be ready for Lucifer. If it wasn’t for her, he’d have me already.”

“She sounds like a good person to have on your side,” Bobby said.

Dean scowled at him. She was doing good now, sure, but she had been the one to kill Sam and she’d worked with Michael. Sam might be able to forgive that, but Dean couldn’t.

“She is,” Sam agreed. “Between her, Missouri and George, I’ve made out good.”

“George Collins, right?” Bobby said, and Sam nodded. “I haven’t heard that name in an age. He was a good hunter.”

Sam’s whole face transformed with a wide smile. “He was the best. Did you meet him?”

“Yeah, in the early eighties,” Bobby said, “I was real sorry when I learned he’d passed. He was living with you at the end, wasn’t he? I heard he took over from you as lore man,”

Sam’s smile faded. “He did. His knee was trashed in a car accident, so he came to live with me. He ran the phones until he died. He helped save a lot of lives.”

Not for the first time, Dean wondered about this man that had been so important to Sam. He wanted to ask more about him, to find the place George had in his life—was he a father figure or had he taken Dean’s place as a brother? He didn’t know how to ask though, and just then Sam’s cell rang them, denying him the chance.

“Excuse me,” Sam said, pulling the phone from his pocket and frowning at the screen. He connected the call and said, “Taylor.”

It was weird to hear Sam saying his other name. He wondered if that felt more natural to Sam now than Winchester. He had been Taylor for longer. The idea upset him. Sam was a Winchester.

“No, I didn’t get the message,” Sam said. “I’m out of town.” He rolled his eyes. “That’s why I’m a silent partner, Sinclair. It’s not my job to work out things like that for you. It’s why you take the big bucks.”

Dean and Bobby exchanged a confused look.

“Does it sound like I’m complaining?” Sam asked. “Well I’m not. But we have foremen for a reason. I’ve been off site so long I wouldn’t even know where to start.” He rolled his eyes. “Sure. Fine. I’ll be back in town tonight, so I’ll come by the office tomorrow. Yeah, see you then.” He ended the call and sighed. “Jackass.” He looked up and saw all eyes were fixed on him. He looked confused. “What?”

Dean huffed a laugh. After that call he didn’t understand why they might have questions. “The office?”

“Oh,” Sam said with dawning realization. “Yeah. I have a stake in a construction company. That
was my partner complaining that I’d missed a meeting I didn’t know about. I’ll fix it tomorrow though. It’s not really my job to deal with that stuff anyway. I’m supposed to be dealing with the crew only.”

“You have a stake,” Dean said slowly, “in a construction company.”

“Yes.”

Dean shook his head disbelievingly. His brother was all business magnate, and it was apparently nothing.

“I think what Dean is asking is how the hell that happened,” Bobby explained.

Sam laughed softly. “Short story, there was an issue with the old owner of the site that I worked for, so I went into partnership with another firm and funded the buyout. I am supposed to be a silent partner, only getting involved with the personnel side of it, but my partner, Sinclair, is getting a little more demanding lately.”

“You had a job?” Castiel asked.

“Yeah,” Sam said, saying it as if it should be obvious. “How do you think I got by for money in 1978?”

Dean honestly hadn’t thought about it. He knew from Bobby and his father’s journal that Sam had been the lore guy, so he’d assumed he was hunting back then, maybe funding himself with credit card fraud the way they always had.

Sam looked from face to face and said, “I started out on the roofing crew for the company. I took a break in ’81 when the economy was struggling, as I didn’t need the money, but I went back in ’88 as foreman. We bought out the firm in ’98, and I stopped working then and went hunting fulltime.”

“You didn’t need the money?” Bobby asked with a raised eyebrow.

Sam laughed. “I really didn’t. I took your advice, Dean.”

“Of course you did. I always give good advice. Now, exactly what advice was that?”

Sam nodded with an enigmatic smile, as if he was cradling a great secret. “I brought stocks in Microsoft. Apple, too, and Google when they came around. We stuck to tech stocks at first but went pretty expansive in the dotcom bubble. We did well.”

Dean gaped at him. Sam had money! It sounded like a lot of money. They’d never had money in their lives. They’d lived on credit cards and the takings from hustling after Sam got over his need for honest work.

“How well?” Bobby asked shrewdly.

“Very well. Missouri, too.”

“How well is very well?” Dean asked.

Sam leaned back in his chair, looking supremely satisfied. “JP Morgan handles our assets.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” Dean asked blankly.

“Yes,” Bobby said, looking at Sam with wide eyes. “Let’s just say, you’re never going to need to
apply for another shady credit card again.”

Dean looked at Sam. “You’re rich?”

“We’re rich,” Sam corrected.

“How did you manage that without an identity?” Bobby asked.

“I have one,” Sam said easily. “Sam Taylor officially exists. Missouri fixed it for me back in ’78. I have a genuine passport, birth certificate, the works. It was easier back then, and now I’m in the system, it’s all legit.”

Dean blew out a deep breath. “And you’re not a wanted man anymore?”

“Sam Taylor isn’t. I guess Sam Winchester still is. I don’t think I can make that go away easily. It doesn’t affect anything for us financially though. It’s all codes and numbers in banking now, not faces and names.”

“But your house…” Dean said.

“What about it?” Sam asked.

“Well, it’s not exactly a McMansion.”

Sam shrugged. “Why spend money on things I don’t need? That place has a lot of memories for me.”

Dean laughed as what Sam was telling them sank in. They were rich. Money had never really been an issue for him. He’d used fake credit cards without guilt as he figured he was screwing companies, not people. Besides, no one was exactly paying them for saving lives; it balanced out. But he would be lying if he said the idea of never worrying about money again didn’t appeal to him.

Castiel had evidently not been following their conversation carefully—Dean supposed he had no concept of money as he’d never needed any—and he cleared his throat and said, “You were hiding from us.”

“Yes,” Sam said, darting a glance at Dean that made him think it was him alone that Sam had been hiding from. He probably wouldn’t have minded seeing Bobby and Castiel.

“Why?” Castiel asked.

Sam became somber again, and he said, “We’ve been looking for Crowley.”

“The dick that hooked us up with the colt? The asshole that got Ellen and Jo killed?”

“That wasn’t him,” Sam said seriously. “It was me that killed them.”

“Sammy…” Dean started,

Sam held up a hand. “No. It was me. I own what I did. But, yeah, that Crowley. He has something we need for Lucifer.”

“What?” Castiel asked.

“A weapon.”
Dean rolled his eyes. “Awesome. You think this one will work or are we just lining up to lose more people we love?”

Sam didn’t answer him directly. He looked at Castiel as he said, “It’s the Lance.”

Castiel frowned. “The Lance of Michael?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that?” Bobby asked.

“It’s the weapon he wielded when he banished Lucifer to the Cage,” Castiel said. “Its design is solely to kill Lucifer in the most painful way. Michael never used it to kill, as God wanted Lucifer trapped, but he injured him with it.” He fixed his eyes on Sam. “Lucifer will not have forgotten that weapon.”

“Exactly,” Sam said. “We’ve been looking for it for a long time. Ever since Anna came to our side in ’83, she’s been searching for something for us to use on him. It took eleven years of searching, but she found out Crowley had it. We couldn’t take it then though, as the demons would have known it was gone. We had to wait for it to be the right time, when there was only one of me here, to search. We can’t find him though. After he gave us the Colt, Lucifer sent demons to kill him. We think he escaped, but he’s in hiding, and he’s damn good at it. Anna is searching for him now.”

“And if you find him and get the Lance,” Bobby said. “What then?”

“We kill Lucifer,” Sam said darkly. “We have a plan.”

Dean’s mind was reeling. Lucifer was the biggest threat they’d ever faced, and though they’d been searching for something, the task seemed insurmountable. The Colt had failed. Castiel hadn’t been able to find God. They hadn’t known what else there was to use. This Lance seemed like an impossible gift, a way to really end it.

“Why did you hide though?” Castiel asked. “With us all searching, we might have found him.”

Dean looked at Sam, waiting for the answer at last. He had asked the same question many times over the past month, even more since he’d found Sam had been trapped all that time. He hadn’t understood why Sam would have left him behind after so long apart.

“I made a choice,” Sam said.

“The wrong one,” Dean said.

Sam shook his head. “Lucifer can’t kill me, Dean, but he could kill any of you. If he denies Michael his true vessel, it will be easier for him to win. He needs me. I knew that if we were doing this, going for the kill, that I was the only one that would be safe. It’s not just that he can’t physically kill me, he can’t because he needs me, too. I am the only one that can take the shot safely. I chose not to come back to you when time lined up because I knew it was the safest thing to do for you all.”

“That’s bullshit,” Dean said angrily. “That’s not how it works for us. We’re a team.”

Sam seemed unconcerned by Dean’s anger. “If the situations were reversed, if it was you that couldn’t be killed and it was Michael we were going after, would you want me there?”
Dean wanted to say yes, to refuse to support Sam’s misguided plan to go it alone, but he couldn’t lie. Sam would know. The truth was he would protect Sam at any cost. He had before and he would again.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think, Dean,” Sam said. “And I’ve lived through a lot. I’ve lost a lot. I lost mom and dad, you and Jess, I lost George. I learned that sometimes you have to make a hard choice to do the right thing. Keeping you out of this fight was the right thing.”

“And now?” Dean asked. “Now that I know what’s going on, how do you plan on keeping me out of it?”

“I’ll find a way,” Sam said.

Dean’s anger rose and he spoke between his teeth. “You can’t think I’ll let you do that.”

Sam rose to his feet. “Come with me,” he said, walking to the door and opening it.

Dean got up and followed him out to his car. Sam opened the passenger side door and took out a paper sack. He handed it to Dean. It was heavy and the sharp corners made Dean think it was a book of some sort.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“My journal,” Sam said. “I started writing it in ‘78. It tells you what I have been doing all this time. It might make you understand why I made the choices I did.”

Dean took it out of the sack and saw it was leather, like his father’s and bulging with pages: thirty-two years’ worth of them,

“That’s my life since I last saw you,” he said. “I have more, photos and things, but the answers you need are in there.”

“Nothing in here is going to make me change my mind, Sam. I am in this fight with you.”

“Just read it,” Sam said, then he hesitated on the verge of speech for a moment.

“What?” Dean asked.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said. “Not for hiding from you, even though I know that doesn’t seem fair to you. I am sorry for how I came back into your life. I was a dick yesterday. All I could see when I saw you was the risk. I decided a long time ago that I wasn’t coming back to you until it was over, and seeing you was like seeing it all fall apart. I made that about you, when that wasn’t right. Honestly, I’ve seen a lot over the years, some amazing things happened to me, but seeing you yesterday was the one of best things I can remember. I’m sorry I didn’t let you see that.”

Dean stared into his eyes and saw his brother’s sadness. He stepped forward and put his arms around his brother and held him tight. Sam returned the embrace, and for a long moment, Dean just held him. When he pulled back, he gripped the back of Sam’s neck and ducked his head to look into his eyes as he said, “I get it. I understand how you feel, at least I think I do. I guess you’ve had more years to wrap your mind around it. But you’re not keeping me out of this. We’re going after him together.”

“We’ll see,” Sam said.

Dean grinned. “Yeah. We will.”
And they would. If Sam was going after Lucifer, Dean was going to be at his side, no matter what the cost. They were brothers. They would do this together.
Chapter Seventy-One

Hey Dean,

Here’s the thing, I’m trapped in 1978. It was Michael. I don’t know why, but this is apparently all part of some master plan. Whatever it is, he can screw himself. I’m doing nothing for him.

Thing is, I’m probably going to be here for a while. I thought I had a way home, a god called Chronos that could travel through time, but that crapped out. Anna killed him before I could make a deal. She said it was for the best as there was a price to dealing with him. There always is, I guess.

I am getting home, but it might take a while. For you it will take no time at all, but for me… I am going to have to live this for a while.

I wish you were here. I have a feeling this is going to be pretty rough before the end, and I could do with some more back-up. I have Missouri Mosely, and there’s this guy called George that might be okay, for an ass, but you would be better to have around.

I will see you,

Sam.

Dean looked at the first page of the journal and tried to imagine his brother sitting down to write this letter thirty-two years ago. He wondered what he had been feeling, seeing the years stretched out ahead of him, wondering how he was going to find a way home. Sam had wished he was there with him, and Dean wished the same. He could have helped him. They could have gotten through it together. They hadn’t though. Sam had faced all this without him.

He turned the page and read the next entry about a werewolf hunt Sam had taken, the date saying it was autumn that year. There were facts about the hunt and how he’d tracked the wolf, but it was followed with more description of an evening he’d spent with James when the kid had stayed the night in Sam’s spare room. It was obvious already that Sam cared about him.

“Reading anything good in there?” Bobby asked from his spot at the sink where he was drying the dinner dishes.

“It’s weird,” Dean said. “It’s obviously written by Sam, but it’s so old, too. It was written a lifetime ago.”

“Yeah, his lifetime,” Bobby said. “Isn’t that kinda the point?”

Dean raked a hand through his hair. “I guess I’ve still not really wrapped my mind around that.”

“Me either,” Bobby said. “He looks pretty much the same as he did a month ago, apart from that beard, until you look into his eyes. They’re different. He’s seen a lot that we missed.”
Dean nodded. “I know. They’re an old man’s eyes.”

“He’s still younger than me,” Bobby said testily.

Dean forced a smile. “Exactly. He’s ancient.”

Bobby threw the spoon he was drying at him and Dean caught it before it could hit him in the face. He tossed it back and said. “He is different. And I think it’s even more than he’d let us see.” He tapped the pages of the journal. “It’s all in here, and I’m not sure how I feel about reading it all.”

“You have to,” Bobby said. “He gave it to you for a reason. He wants you to know what it was like. This is his way of trying to help you understand.”

“And if I can’t?” Dean asked.

“Read or understand?”

“Both.”

“You will read because Sam needs you to, and what’s in there will hopefully make it possible for you to understand. I have a little more insight into what he’s been through, as I lived those years, too, and I remember what the world was like, but I wasn’t repeating them. I didn’t know what was coming. He did.”

Dean nodded and turned the page, coming to an account of a day on the site. It was strange to think of Sam having a real job, making friends at work and socializing with them after hours.

There was a knock on the door, and Dean looked up. “Sammy you think?” he asked hopefully.

“I doubt it,” Bobby said, walking to the door. “He had to be in Lawrence tomorrow for that meeting.” He opened the door and said, “Missouri, Anna, come on in.”

Dean smiled at Missouri and then scowled past her at the angel.

“Hope you don’t mind us showing up like this,” Missouri said. “I brought something for you to see. I thought it would help.” She came in smiling at Dean. “Ah, he’s given you his journal. That’s good.”

“What have you got there?” Bobby asked, gesturing the to large book in her arms.

“Well, that journal is Sam’s life from his point of view, the things he wanted to share with you. This is full of the things I think you need to know. Can I sit?”

“Of course,” Bobby said.

Missouri set the book down on the table and sat.

“Do you want me to stay?” Anna asked.

“No,” Dean said, narrowing his eyes at her.

“Yes,” Missouri said firmly. “You can help me explain some of this. Come sit down.”

Anna took the seat across from Dean, and Bobby sat on her other side. Missouri laid her hands on the book’s cover and said, “I feel like Ralph Edwards saying this, but this is Sam’s Life.”
Dean straightened in his seat. He had been unsure about reading the journal, not knowing if he would be able to handle knowing that he’d missed, but he was curious about what Missouri thought they needed to know.

She opened the book and turned a couple pages before coming to a photograph of Sam with a child in front of a half-painted wall. Sam was clean-shaven and his arm was around the child’s shoulders, and in both of their hands was a paintbrush.

“That’s my son, James, when he was eight,” Missouri said. “It was the summer of 1978, and we decorated Sam’s house together.”

Dean looked at his brother’s image, captured on paper, searching for something there. This was the first year he’d been in the past, probably only weeks after he’d been trapped. He looked happy. Had he really been or was his smile for the photo? How had he been feeling in those early days?

“He looks happy,” Bobby observed.

“That was a good day,” Missouri said. “They weren’t all like that. But James always brought out the best in Sam. They were close even back then. I think James was missing a male figure in his life, and Sam needed him, too.” She smiled fondly. “They kept me on my toes.”

Dean studied James’ face, looking at the child that would become a son to Sam. He looked happy, too.

Missouri turned the page and tapped a black and white pasted in newspaper article. “This was the crew Sam worked with in ’79. There was a story on the building of the library, and Sam was caught on camera.”

She pointed at the top of the photograph and Dean squinted to see Sam standing on scaffolding on the roof. He wasn’t looking at the camera, they only had an oblique view of his face, but he was clearly recognizable. His hair was longer then than it was now.

It was strange to see physical proof of Sam’s civilian life. He had really been there, doing those things. It wasn’t that he hadn’t believed him. It was more than he hadn’t been able to picture it.

She turned another page and smiled down at the images. There were five pasted onto the page. They looked as though they’d been taken on a beach. “The 1980 heat wave,” Missouri said.

“I remember that,” Bobby said. “It was a killer.”

“Literally,” Missouri agreed. “It cost lives and livelihoods. The drought was awful.”

Bobby nodded. “I remember you could practically hear the crops drying out when you drove past them.” He rubbed his forearm. “I got a pretty nasty burn from an intake regulator trying to fix my engine in the early afternoon one time. I never made that mistake again.”

“It was bad,” Missouri said.

Dean nodded as if he was listening and looked at the pictures of his brother again. In one of them he was in a lake with James on his shoulders, surrounded by other people. He was grinning. In another was Sam in a pair of board shorts lying on a towel. There was one of him with a football in his hand and James in the background, his arms raised to catch. Another was a picture of Sam and Missouri that looked as though it had been taken without their knowledge. Missouri was setting out plates of food from a cooler and Sam was sipping a beer. Missouri was wearing a swimming costume, and Dean looked from her to the woman in the photo, seeing the changes. Missouri was a
beautiful woman still, but she’d been a stunner when she was young.

“Sam doesn’t know I took this one,” Missouri said, pointing to the last photograph.

Dean studied it and saw it was a side view of Sam looking away from the camera. Even with the angle it was possible to see the melancholy look on his face as he stared at something.

“Do you see?” Missouri asked.

“See what?” Dean asked.

“Look in the background.”

Dean looked past Sam and saw something that made him suck in a breath. It was his mother and father. Mary was reaching for a baby boy as he walked away on the blanket, her face alight with a laugh, and John was facing him with his arms outstretched.

“That’s you, Dean,” Bobby said.

Dean nodded. He had hardly any photographs of himself so young as they’d been destroyed in the fire. But he was there, with his parents, living a life untouched by the supernatural. His mother’s laugh captured on paper and his father’s smile as he held out his arms to Dean. They looked so happy, that small family. No wonder Sam looked so sad. Did he see them and think of what was coming for them, or did he see the life he should have had with both his parents with him?

“He used to see you sometimes,” Missouri said.

“He told me,” Dean said. “I think it would have driven me mad in his place, seeing us like that.”

Missouri shrugged. “He had hope back then.”

“Hope?” Dean asked. “You mean hope he’d get home?”

“In a way,” she said. “I will explain, but I want you to see more first.”

Dean wanted to know more, but he knew Missouri wouldn’t tell him until she was ready. Even their short acquaintance told him that about her.

She turned to a new page and showed them a picture of her, Sam and James in front of a giant Rubik’s cube. They were all smiling at the camera, and Sam had his arm around Missouri and a hand on James’ shoulder. He looked like he belonged with them, like they were a family. Dean realized that was what Missouri had tried to tell him they day before when she said James was Sam’s son. They were family. Sam loved them.

“This was ’82. We went to the World Fair in Tennessee. Sam got a kick out of seeing the technology of the ‘future’.”

“I’ve seen that,” Dean said, pointing the tower in the background of the picture. “Me and Sam saw it once on our way through Knoxville.”

“The Sunsphere. He told me,” Missouri said. “He told me many things about you, Dean.”

Dean nodded, now understanding the message she was trying to impart. Dean had been a part of that time for them, too. Sam had kept him present in his absence. He appreciated it. Seeing these happy moments of Sam’s life made him wonder how he would have been remembered.
She turned the page and Dean saw a header that said, 1984. “You missed ’83,” he said.

She nodded. “There wasn’t much to enjoy that year. I’ll come back to it though.”

Dean wanted to know what else had happened to Sam in 1983, the year their mother was killed and their lives changed forever when John became a hunter.

The next pictures were of Sam bent over the ground, digging among dirt and small green plants. Standing beside him, holding a small spade, was James. He didn’t look overly impressed by what Sam was doing. On his other arm was a plaster cast.

“What happened to James?” Bobby asked.

“He fell out of a tree while Sam was building his vegetable garden,” Missouri said. “It was a clean break, and it healed fine, but Sam felt so bad about it, no matter how many times I told him it was James own fault for climbing when I’d told him a hundred times not to.”

“I bet,” Bobby said.

Dean knew what he meant. Sam carried blame for things he didn’t need to, and the things he should, like Lucifer, almost broke him. He felt everything so deeply.

Missouri turned to the next page, which carried more photographs than any other, and said, “These are Sam’s own pictures I had reprinted from his negatives. You’ll appreciate this one, Dean. Sam went to Live Aid.”

Dean laughed. “Seriously?”

“Yes. He wanted me to let James to go, too, but he was too young. Sam still enjoyed himself without James though. He spoke about the Black Sabbath slot for a long time after.”

Dean whistled. “Now that is a good use of time travel.” He looked at the photograph, seeing shots of the crowd and stage, and another with Sam standing with a blonde-haired woman. They were both soaked in sweat and grinning at the camera. “Who’s that?” he asked.

“That’s…” Missouri checked the label under the photograph. “Susie. They spent the weekend together.”

“Just a weekend?” Dean asked curiously.

“Yes. Sam never settled with anyone. He met women and spent time with them, but no one ever lasted longer than a few days. I believe he had lost his heart a long time ago.”

“Jess?” Dean guessed.

Missouri nodded. “The only people he stayed in contact with were the ones he never had that kind of relationship with. I think it was easier for him that way. He protected himself.”

She turned the pages slowly, and Dean saw George was more prominent in the photographs now. He and Sam had become friends. She came to a new page, showing Sam with James. James now looked about eighteen and Sam had grown a beard. They were both wearing jeans and leather jackets over t-shirts with the Atlantic 40th Anniversary emblazoned on them.

Dean gasped. “Sam was at Atlantic? He saw Zeppelin!”
“He did,” Missouri said. “He said it was a great show, despite the technical difficulties.”

Dean clapped his hands together triumphantly. “I knew he’d develop taste in music eventually! I tried to teach him by playing the good stuff in Baby, but he always seemed to prefer whiney crap. He got it at last!”

“I think he got it because of you,” Missouri said. “It was his way of keeping you close over the years.”

Bobby smiled knowingly at him, and Dean averted his eyes. He’d been happy enough to see that Sam’s music taste had improved but thinking that it was because of him that it had, that it was his way of staying connected, made him feel good. He’d still been a part of Sam’s life, even though he’d not been there.

She turned the page and Dean saw the next two were covered with photographs. They were varied things, crowds of people, a strange concrete building with a sign over the door saying, ‘Checkpoint C’. There was also a copy of the picture Dean had seen at Sam’s of the graffiti-covered wall and one of the man Sam was standing with in the photo on his mantel.

“Berlin?” Bobby asked with a raised eyebrow

Missouri smiled widely. “He was there the day the wall fell.”

Bobby looked amazed. “Now that’s a good use of time travel.”

“He thought so, too.” Missouri pointed at the man pictured with Sam. “That’s Dieter. Sam met him that night and they have stayed friends since. Sam always planned to go back to Germany to see him, but it was never the right time. Not yet at least. When it’s over he can go.” She nodded decisively.

Though she sounded certain, the mood in the room changed. Anna, who had been a silent observer so far—much to Dean’s satisfaction—cleared her throat.

Missouri turned the pages, and Dean saw new photographs of Sam and George in Sam’s house. There was a cane in the background beside George now, and Dean guessed this was after his accident, when they’d lived together.

She came to one with newspaper articles pasted on and said, “Now this… this is something I really wanted to show you.”

So far everything they’d seen had been good, happy moments for Sam, but she looked serious now.

“Angels of the Riot,” Bobby read then frowned. “That was LA. Was Sam there for the riots?”

“He was,” Missouri said seriously.

“Hold on,” Dean said. “LA Riots. I remember that. I was in school. Some dude was beaten by the cops, and the city went nuts.”

“Rodney King.” Missouri said. “Yes.”

“But what was Sam doing there?” Bobby asked. “Even apparently invincible, it was a dangerous place to be. Was he a part of it?”

“No,” Missouri said sharply, then softened her voice. “James was at Berkeley then, and he and
some friends went to see the verdicts read at the courthouse. Sam knew what was coming, so he went to drag him out. He couldn't though. James' friends got out of there before the trouble started, but James stayed. He was so angry," she said by way of explanation. "We all were. Some people were rioting for a reason. Others were just enjoying the chaos. Sam and James got trapped in the city though." She looked proud as she said, "They commandeered a hotel and turned it into a shelter and medical clinic with the help of a pharmacist called May."

She pointed at one of the photos accompanying the article and Dean saw a red cross painted crudely beneath a sign that declared the place the Hotel Meridian. Beside that was an image of Sam carrying a bleeding boy that looked about sixteen toward the camera, his face set with anger. There was another of him stitching the boy’s arm. There was a shot of James’ wrapping a dressing around a young woman’s bleeding arm, and an older woman with her hair braided over one shoulder holding packages of dressings.

"They saved lives," Missouri said. "Two of them would have certainly died from their injuries if Sam and May hadn’t been there, and they took dozens of people off the streets to protect them. Not all the people in the city knew what they were getting into. Some of them were stupid but innocent. Thanks to Sam and James taking over that hotel, they were protected."

Dean pulled the book over to him and read the article that accompanied the pictures. It was heavily skewed towards the ‘place of safety amongst the danger’ aspect and the ‘angels that saved lives’, making for a more thrilling read, but Dean saw the real story among it. Sam and James found themselves in a dangerous situation and instead of bunkering in and waiting for it to pass, they got to work and helped people, saved them even. His brother, James, and May had been heroes for those dangerous days.

Dean pushed the book back at her and said, "What else did he do?"

She frowned. "Do you mean living or saving? He did both. Living, he went to Washington for the opening of the Korea Memorial and saw the president."

"Which one?" Dean asked, having no idea what year the Korea Memorial had opened so no idea who would have been president then.

"Clinton," she said.

Bobby laughed. "That must have been an experience for him."

"It was," Missouri said, "He went with George. They got the invite as George was a war hero."

"Really?" Bobby asked. "I didn’t know that."

"George didn’t speak about it much to me, only to Sam really," she said. "But he got the Medal of Honor. Sam has it now."

"That’s really something," Bobby said.

"It is. George was an incredible man. I wish you could have known him, Dean."

"Me too," Dean said, thinking how much it would have meant to him to know this man that had been so important to Sam. Perhaps he would have understood a little better if he had.

"What else did he do?" Bobby asked interestedly. "He must have seen so much."

Missouri nodded and her expression became somber. She flipped through the pages, coming to one
of clipped newspaper articles.

Dean recognized the scene in one of them at once as it had been emblazoned on the front pages and news reports for weeks in 2001. “That’s Ground Zero,” he said.

“Sam called it The Pile,” Missouri said.

“He was there?” Bobby asked, his voice stunned.

“Here,” Missouri said, pointing to the people lined up along the mountain of rubble with buckets in their hands. Sam was recognizable from his height and beard.

“Holy…” Bobby raked a hand over his forehead. “He went there, even knowing what he knew?”

“He went there because he knew,” Missouri said. “He was there for it all. He was in the South Tower when the plane hit.”

Dean sucked in a breath. Sam had experienced that! That had been traumatic for the whole country, and that had mostly been experienced through the media. To have actually been there must have been some kind of hell.

Dean’s eyes drifted to the journal in front of him, wondering what it would say about that awful day.

“You can look, but you won’t find it,” Missouri said. “I’ve looked. All Sam says about these things, the riots, 9/11, Katrina, was that he went to the city. He never discusses it with me either. Only George heard even a little about it. We only know so much about the tower because Susannah told James.”

“Who’s Susannah?” Bobby asked.

Missouri turned back a page and a clipping from a newspaper took over the page. It was Sam carrying a woman away from what looked like a warzone. There was debris on the ground, firefighters and cops in the background, and people running for their lives. She tapped the woman’s image. “That’s Susannah. Sam went to help people. He placed himself in that building on that day to save lives. I don’t know what happened exactly, but I know he got Susannah out. He’s never said it, but I think he’s disappointed that it was only one person. When they got out, they found a café. After the tower fell, Sam brought in people that had been caught in the dust cloud to be cleaned up. Susannah said they were caked in the dust. Their eyes, their mouths, it was hard to breathe. Sam helped clean them up with a group of others. Then, after the North Tower fell, he went back.”

She pointed to a picture on the next page. It was a shot of a Red Cross station with people being treated. Dean scanned it and saw Sam at the very rear. He was wearing a Red Cross vest and he had a woman seated on the chair beside him bleeding from the head.

“He helped the injured and then joined a bucket crew.”

Dean sighed out a breath. He supposed he shouldn’t be surprised that Sam had gone to help, it was the sort of thing he’d do, but he couldn’t imagine what it had been like for him there.

Bobby cleared his throat. “I hate to be the one asking this, and I’m not putting down everything he’s done as I know it must have been hell, but Sam knew these things were coming…”

A twisted smile curled Missouri’s lips. “Why didn’t he stop them?”
Bobby looked awkward. “Well… yeah.”

“Because he couldn’t,” Anna said, and all eyes moved to her for the first time. “Sam was trapped in time, but he was also trapped by time. He could change nothing from the years he lived before. If it happened in his life, if he lived it, it had to happen again. He couldn’t change his memories.”

“He tried,” Missouri said sadly. “He tried so hard.” She turned to Dean. “He wanted to save your mother.”

Dean swallowed hard and nodded. He should have known Sam would have tried, any of them would, and it must have been awful for him to fail.

“He had the colt, he was in the nursery even, but Azazel was stronger. He couldn’t do it. He lost everything he’d been holding onto for four years, ever since he realized—mistakenly—that he could change things. It was more than just saving Mary; he was going to save you all. He thought he would be returned to his own time to a mother and father, a brother and a new life. He thought he’d be a lawyer, that he would have Jessica, and that you would have a normal life, Dean. It was going to be everything he’d ever wanted, and it failed. He was devastated, broken.”

“It changed him,” Anna said. “It changed me, too. That was when I started working with Sam. I searched for a way to kill Lucifer.”

“A little late, don’t you think?” Dean asked.

Anna ignored him. “We found a way.”

“I have a question,” Bobby said regretfully. “Sam’s been through all this, losing the people he loves, all the world tragedies that happened the last thirty-two years, and he couldn’t change a thing, so are we sure he’s not broken? I don’t think I could have come out of it intact.”

“I don’t know how he did it, but he has,” Missouri said. “I have seen him suffering more than I thought was possible. He did lose so much, John and Mary, Jessica, you, Dean, and he saw so much, but he’s never been stronger than he is now.”

Anna shifted in her chair.

“You disagree?” Dean asked her.

“I don’t anymore. I did for a while though. Now he is with you again, I know he can do it, but before he saw you, I was worried. It wasn’t natural for him to be unaffected by Famine. I was scared he had disconnected from who he was fighting for. Now he has you again, I think he will be stronger than ever. That’s why Missouri and I brought you to him.”

“Thanks for that,” Dean said, only half resentfully. He was grateful, but he hated that it was her he owed it for.

Anna didn’t acknowledge him. She turned to Bobby instead and said, “Sam is not broken, but he is different. Missouri wanted to show you these things to make you understand what you missed, but I wanted you to see them so that you understood what he’s done and how it’s changed him. Sam is going to rely on you more than ever until we find the Lance, and you need to understand who he is. He’s not your little brother anymore, Dean. He’s–”

“He will always be my brother!” Dean snapped, rising to his feet. “Nothing you or Michael can do to him will change that.”
“He will,” she agreed. “But not in the same way he was a month ago. I know you can see it, too. You can’t pretend nothing has changed, because he will isolate himself, and that will put the whole plan in danger. You have to accept he’s different and find a way to work around that.”

Bobby pushed Dean back into his seat with a hand on his shoulder and said, “We get that he’s different, and we will work out a way to adapt to that, but don’t you think you’re exaggerating maybe? Can it really matter that much to the plan how we treat Sam?”

“Yes,” Anna said emphatically. “Sam is going up against Lucifer, and he has to be at the height of his strength for it. He can’t be that if he is fighting against the man he was and who he is now.”

“We’re going up against Lucifer together,” Dean said. “Sam’s not doing it alone.”

“Sam disagrees,” she said.

“He can disagree all he likes,” Dean said. “It doesn’t make a difference when it comes down to it. It’s me and him that are going against the Devil.”

“We all are,” Bobby said.

Missouri looked pleased, relieved, but Anna looked skeptical still. Dean knew she just didn’t understand. She might have had all those years of Sam, but she’d hardly had any time of Sam and Dean together. She didn’t understand how they worked.

Dean was going to be fighting side by side with Sam when it was time, and the bitch of an angel could see what it really meant to be family.
Chapter 72

Chapter Seventy-Two

Sam walked out of the site office and spotted Ray and Carl bent over a clipboard together. As he clicked the door closed behind him, Ray and Carl looked up from the clipboard. They raised hands in greeting, and Sam did the same. He didn’t want to talk to them, as he had no good reason for why he was there, but they began to walk over and he waited.

“Hey, Sam,” Carl said, holding out a hand to him.

Sam shook his hand and then Ray’s. “How’s everything?” he asked.

“Pretty good,” Ray said. “What are you doing here?”

“I needed to talk to Sinclair about something,” Sam said. “Nothing interesting.”

It actually had been interesting. Sinclair wanted to bid for a project that would take a larger crew than they had. If they got it, they would have to hire many more people. Sinclair wanted Sam to fund the hires for a larger stake in the company. He’d agreed to do it, thinking it would be a good investment when the build paid off. He wouldn’t be there to use the money, but he’d already made arrangements for his money and assets to be passed on to Dean when he was gone. Missouri was going to take care of it for him. The only thing Dean wouldn’t get was his car which would go to James.

“Not his big plans to expand then?” Carl asked with a grin.

Sam looked innocently confused. “He’s expanding?”

Ray laughed. “You can give it up, Sam. We know you and him are in this together. Vic made a point of sharing the news after you two brought him out. He wanted us to know you had been lying to us the whole time about who you were.”

Sam frowned. It was a perfectly dickish thing for Vic to do and he supposed he should have expected it. “Does it matter that I was hiding things?” he asked them.

Carl shrugged. “It doesn’t matter to us that you were secretly Daddy Warbucks when you were working here. What you do with your life is your own business.”

“And reading between the lines of what Vic was saying, you saved us from that incompetent ass,” Ray said. “He was dangerous at the end.”

“No lie,” Carl said.

Sam nodded. Carl had almost been killed by Vic’s cost-cutting. If the ambulance had been slower, if Sam hadn’t been able to do CPR, it could have ended very differently.

“So, what’s the deal?” Ray asked. “Are we bidding for the school?”

“You are,” Sam said. “You going to be okay with that? It’s a much bigger crew to take care of.”

“We’ll be fine,” Ray said confidently. “It won’t be a problem filling the spaces. We still get a lot of
walk-ups asking if we’ve got vacancies. Will we be seeing more of you on site when it happens?"

“No, I’ve got a lot going on at the moment,” Sam said. “I’ll not be around much at all.”

“You’ll be free for a beer though?” Carl asked.

“Maybe in a couple weeks,” Sam said, knowing it would never happen. It should all be over by then.

“Call when you’re free and we’ll arrange something,” Ray said.

“I will,” Sam said. “Thanks guys. You’ve been good friends.”

They exchanged a confused look and then Carl said, “Yeah, you too. We’ll see ya”

Sam nodded and smiled as they clapped him on the back and walked away towards a crew that were working on fitting windows into the cavities in the new walls.

He walked back to his car and climbed in behind the wheel. Though he hadn’t intended to, he realized he’d just said his first goodbye. He hadn’t expected to have a chance to say it to them, and it had been easier than he’d anticipated.

He thought perhaps it was time for another. He didn’t know how fast things would move when they found Crowley again, if he would even have time to make a phone call. It was better to do it now.

He took out his phone and dialed in James’ home number. It rang three times and then Patience answered, “Hello?”

“How’s my favorite girl?” Sam asked.

“Uncle Sam!” she said happily. “Dad, it’s Uncle Sam.” There was a voice in the background and Patience said, “Can’t I talk to him first?” There was a murmur and she said, “I get to talk to you first, but Daddy wants to talk to you after.”

“Great,” Sam said. “Is Momma home to talk too?”

“She’s walking Riley. I had to stay home to practice. I have a recital next week. Will you come?”

Sam closed his eyes. “I would love to, but I don’t think I can. I have a lot going on right now. Make sure your daddy tapes it for me though. I really want to see it.”

“Oh. Okay. What are you doing so you can’t come?”

“I’m very busy with work things,” Sam lied.

Patience thought he did something in construction, which was true to an extent. She’d never really questioned it before. She was happy with what she knew about Sam’s and Missouri’s lives in Kansas.

“That doesn’t sound fun,” she said.

“No, not fun, but very important. What about you? Apart from practicing for your recital, what have you been doing? How’s school?”

“It’s okay. We’re making dioramas of Egyptian pharaoh’s tombs in for History. I’m doing
“Tutankhamun.”

“That will be cool,” Sam said. “His tomb was pretty special.”

“You know about it?”

“I went to school once, too, you know.”

“Yeah, but that was ages ago,” Patience said dramatically.

“Thanks,” Sam said. “Now I feel really old.”

“Well, you are,” she said reasonably. “It’s okay though. I don’t mind.”

“And you’re very young,” Sam said. “You have a whole life waiting for you. What are you going
to do with it? What do you want to be when you grow up? Be a lawyer like Momma and Daddy?”

“No,” she groaned. “I don’t want to wear a silly pantsuit. I want to wear scrubs and a white coat
like Doctor Chan does when I go see her.”

“You want to be a doctor? That’s great.” He thought it would be the perfect vocation for the sweet
and gentle girl that he loved.

“I am going to be a doctor,” she corrected. “I’m already practicing. Momma is taking me to do a
first aid course at The Y. We’re going to learn proper CPR.”

“Wow,” Sam said. “That’s something really special to learn.”

“I know,” she said easily. “I should go. Daddy is tapping his watch. I think he’s ready to talk to
you now.”

“Okay,” Sam said. “Be a good girl. I love you, and Momma and Daddy.”

“Uncle Sam loves you, Daddy,” she said loudly. “I really have to go now. Daddy looks mad. I
don’t know why. I was only talking…”

“Goodbye, Patience,” Sam said.

“Bye.” There was the sound of the phone changing hands and then James’ worried voice came on.
“Are you okay, Sam?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Sam said.

“Are you sure? I was listening to Patience. You were asking strange questions. You said you loved
us.”

“I do love you,” Sam said.

“I know, and I love you, too, but you’ve only ever said that to me once before, and that was when
you were saying goodbye.”

Sam closed his eyes as he realized his mistake. He’d thought saying it to Patience was safe because
he told her he loved her all the time, but James was right; he hadn’t said it to him since he was preparing to kill Azazel.

“I’m okay, James,” he said.

“What’s going on then?”

Sam sighed. “It’s 2010. Time has lined up for me again. My brother is back, I’m back. I’m where I’m supposed to be again.”

“And that’s a bad thing?”

“It’s an important thing,” Sam said. “I guess seeing Dean again has made me want to make sure everyone I care about knows how much they matter to me. I never told Dean before.”

“But you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m going to be busy, though, so I might be out of touch for a while.”

“What are you going to be doing?”

“Things I can’t tell you about, James. You chose not to know the full story when your mom and I told you the truth about me. What I have to do now is about the full story.”

“Can you tell me about it now?”

“Do you really want me to?” Sam countered. “I told you things would never be the same if I did.”

“I guess not. I’m worried about you though.”

“Don’t worry,” Sam said gently. “I’m good at what I do.” He was going to be good enough to beat the devil. “I should go. I’ve got to be somewhere. Take care of yourself and the girls.”

“I will,” James said. “And you take care of yourself, too. Don’t do anything stupid.”

“I won’t,” Sam said, completely honestly; what he was going to do was the furthest thing from stupid. “Goodbye, James.”

The was a deep indrawn breath on the line and James said, “Goodbye, Dad.”

The call disconnected and Sam lowered the phone with his eyes burning and breath coming fast. James had called him Dad. He had never done it before, Sam had never expected him to, and hearing it had been the most incredible thing. He felt like he really had taken his place beside Richard in James’ life. He really was a father.

He started the engine and pulled out of his spot, not wanting people to see him crying in the car. But the tears didn’t come. The burning receded from his eyes and his breaths calmed. Shock had become elation.

He drove through the shopping district of their part of Lawrence and spotted a storefront he’d visited many times before. He made the decision in the moment he saw it. He was running out of time to do this, and it was important. He parked and fed the meter then walked into the barbershop.

“Mr. Taylor,” Louis, the elderly owner said. “What can I do for you today? Another trim or will you let me give you a real haircut for once?”
Sam sat down in the black leather chair Louis swung around for him and turned to look in the mirror. He ran his hand over his beard and said, “Take it off.”

“The beard?” Louis asked, sounding stunned.

“All of it.”

“As you wish,” Louis said, wrapping a towel around Sam’s neck.

Sam stared into the mirror and looked at himself for the last time as he had been for the last twenty-two years. In shedding his beard, he was shedding the persona of Sam Taylor.

He was going to be a Winchester again.

xXx

Sam was home and just finishing lunch when his phone rang. He checked the caller ID and saw it was Dean. He’d not made arrangements to go back to Bobby’s to see them, so he figured that was why Dean was calling, but when he answered, Dean said, “Are you still looking for a demon?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “You got one?”

He was hoping he’d find a demon that would be able to tell them for certain whether Crowley was still alive, and if he wasn’t, one that could be scared into telling him where Crowley would have hidden the Lance.

“I don’t, but Walt and Roy said they’ve got one. They wanted us to bring the knife to finish it off properly, but I figure we can take it off their hands and get some answers for you.”

“Great,” Sam said. “Where are they?”

“Just outside Lincoln, Nebraska. They’re in a place called Rokeby. They say it’s so small we’ll find them easy. They’ve got an old house in the east of town.”

“You want to meet there?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. Castiel is out with Anna.” He said her name with derision. “I figure it’s a few hours for each of us. We can pick up the demon and bring it back to the panic room. It’s better prepared for demons than your kitchen.”

“Sounds good,” Sam said. “I’ll probably get there before you, so I’ll see you when you get there.”

“Okay. I’ll see you.”

“See you, Dean.”

He ended the call and tucked the phone in his pocket. He dumped his dirty plate and mug into the sink and went through to the hall to get his keys and coat.

He felt energized at the idea of speaking to another demon, as if he was actively working on the problem, helping somehow. It wasn’t just down to him and Anna to find Crowley now. Dean, Castiel and Bobby were looking for him, too, and Sam was pleased that they were. Even though he knew it wasn’t going to be easy for them, the task didn’t seem so insurmountable now.

xXx
Sam spotted Walt’s truck outside a house only a minute into the small town, and he pulled up beside it and climbed out. He looked up and down the street, but the other houses looked empty. There were no cars parked outside. He thought they would be able to get the demon out and into the car without too much trouble.

He walked up the steps and knocked on the door and then tried the handle. It was unlocked, and he walked inside, calling, “Walt? Roy? It’s Sam Winchester.”

He heard voices in the room to the right, and he went in. He wasn’t expecting trouble, just a demon to take and maybe a stupid conversation with Walt and Roy whom he’d never really liked, but there was no demon in the room. Walt and Roy stood in front of the shaded window, and they were both exuding tension.

Sam stiffened. “Did the demon give you the slip?” he asked, keeping his voice even.

He knew it hadn’t as there was no sign of one ever having been there. There was no devil’s trap painted into the floor or ropes that they might have held it with. Apart from a dusty couch and armchair that had been abandoned by the previous owners, the room was empty.

“No demon,” Walt said roughly.

“No? Then why did you call Dean and say there was?” Sam asked.

“We wanted to speak to you, Sam,” Roy said. “See, we’ve been hearing rumors.”

“What rumors?”

Roy reached under his jacket and pulled out a gun. Sam had his own tucked in the back of his pants, but he didn’t reach for it. He had no need of it. Dean wasn’t there, so he didn’t need to be defended. They couldn’t kill Sam, so he would hear them out and then deal with them.

Walt smiled, seeing Sam unarmed, and said. “We hear you popped the box on the devil, Sam.”

“Who did you hear that from?” Sam asked.

“Hunters talk,” Roy said darkly.

Sam rolled his eyes. “You mean Tim talks.”

“Doesn’t matter where we heard it. We know it’s true.”

“So what was your plan?” Sam asked. “Lure me here and kill me?”

Roy lifted his gun and aimed it at Sam’s chest. “Damn right.”

“Go ahead then,” Sam said. “Shoot me. I can tell you something, though, you’re just going to piss me off.”

Roy clicked off the safety and Sam spread his arms.

“Something’s wrong,” Walt said, grabbing Roy’s sleeve. “He’s didn’t come here unarmed, so why isn’t he drawing?”

Roy pulled his arm free and glared at Sam. “I don’t care how he dies as long as he does.”

His finger depressed the trigger and Sam felt the hammer blow at the center of his chest. It
knocked him back a few steps, and he breathed through the pain. Walt and Roy looked stunned, and as Sam touched his hand to his chest and looked at the blood on his palm, Roy pulled the trigger again, catching Sam in the right chest.

Sam swore and Walt asked querulously, “What are you?”

“I’m pissed,” Sam said. “I told you I would be.”

“You should be dead,” Roy said.

“And yet I’m not,” Sam said. “Instead you’ve ruined a perfectly good shirt.”

Roy brought up the gun again and Sam moved into his space quickly and snatched it out of his hand. “I don’t think so.” He ejected the clip and threw it on the floor them tossed the gun back to Roy. He caught it and held it in a shaking hand.

“You should be dead!” he said again.

“Yes, he should,” a voice said behind him.

Sam forgot Walt and Roy and spun on his heel to see the newcomer. He was a skeletal looking man wearing a long black coat and suit. In his hand he held a long cane with a gold top. The man radiated power, and for a moment Sam thought it was Michael, that he’d found a secondary vessel the way Lucifer had, and he felt panic flutter his heart, but then he spotted the ring on the man’s finger, and he thought he knew who, or at what, he was.

“Which one are you?” he asked. “Pestilence or Death?”

The man considered him. “I am Death.”

Sam nodded. He had no weapon that would enable him to get the ring from Death’s finger, and he had a feeling it wouldn’t be that easy even if he did. This horseman seemed more intimidating than War or Famine.

“You’re Death?” Roy asked doubtfully.

Death’s mouth pressed into a thin line and he pointed the finger wearing the ring at him. Roy’s eyes rolled and he dropped to the floor with a heavy thunk.

“Hey!” Walt squawked.

Death pointed at him, too, and he dropped down beside his partner.

“Are they dead?” Sam asked.

“Yes,” Death said calmly. “I thought Lucifer would prefer it if people that were trying to kill his vessel were dealt with. Is that a problem for you?”

Sam shrugged. “You saved me a job, I guess. Thanks.”

“I don’t need you to thank me,” Death said. “I didn’t do it for you. I did it for the one that has bound me. Given freedom I would do nothing for either of you.”

“Lucifer bound you?” Sam asked.

Death held out his hands and Sam saw a thin chain made of golden light connecting his wrists. “He
controls me.”

Sam wasn’t sure what to say that wouldn’t piss him off, so he stayed silent.

Death walked forward slowly and brushed a hand over the dirty armchair then sat down. He pointed at the couch and commanded, “Sit.”

Sam obeyed, not sure what was happening but feeling afraid. He was worried Dean was going to show up. If Death had killed Walt and Roy for attempting to kill Sam, what would he do to Michael’s vessel?

As if his thought had summoned him, Sam heard the sound of the Impala pulling to a stop and the creak of a car door.

“Don’t hurt him,” Sam pleaded.

Death merely looked at him.

“Sammy?” Dean called from the hall.

“Stay there, Dean!” Sam shouted. “Don’t come in!”

He wanted to tell him to run, to save himself, but he knew Dean wouldn’t obey and Death might choose to punish Dean to hurt Sam.

“What’s going…” Dean rushed into the room and came to a dead stop. His eyes moved from Walt and Roy’s bodies to Death and then to Sam. He looked angry as he saw the blood on Sam’s shirt, and he glared at Death. “What did you do to him?”

Death raised a hand and pointed it at Dean. Sam tried to jump between them, but he wasn’t fast enough. Dean dropped and Sam cried out in shock and horror.

“He’s just sleeping,” Death said in a bored tone. “I’ll let him wake up when I am done with you.”

Sam bent and checked Dean’s pulse. It was strong and his breaths were even. He did appear to just be sleeping.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Sam said. “He couldn’t have hurt you.”

“I know.”

“Then why the hell did you do it?”

Death looked annoyed. “I am endless, Sam Winchester. I am a horseman, but I am not like my brothers. My ring cannot be cut from my hand. I cannot be defeated. I am the most powerful being you have ever laid eyes on, and if you don’t mind your manners, I am going to show you just how powerful I am.”

“You can’t kill me,” Sam said.

Death smiled. “Oh, but I can. I can reap God Himself. A little archangel grace isn’t going to even slow me down. It is only because Lucifer doesn’t want it that I don’t strike you dead here. Now, if you would sit down, I can have my questions answered and get out of this fetid place.”

Sam sat down and waited for Death to speak.
“I understand you killed one of my reapers,” he said.

Sam nodded. “I did. He was a risk.”

“A risk to what?”

“The plan.”

Death nodded. “That was what I was hoping to hear. Is this plan to defeat Lucifer?”

Sam shifted. He wasn’t sure whether or not to tell him. He didn’t sound like he was a fan of Lucifer’s, but he was bound by him. Would he tell him what they were planning?

“You can tell me. Lucifer does not control my mind or words.”

“It’s to stop the apocalypse,” Sam said. He figured it was safe to say that much as Lucifer already knew he and Dean were working to do that.

“Will you tell me what it is?”

“No,” Sam said. “You either want to know so you can warn Lucifer, which will screw the plan, or you want to know so you can tell if it will work and you’ll be freed. I can’t risk it being the first option.”

“Very wise of you.” He leaned back and said, “I have been tasked with delivering a message to Bobby Singer.”

Sam’s heart stuttered. “What are you doing to him?”

“Lucifer wants to dissuade him from helping you and your brother. I have a plan to do that, but I decided I would talk to you before I act. I wondered if you would have a better offer for me. If you do, I will use my limited freedom to evade Lucifer while you act.”

“What do you want?” Sam asked.

“I want my fullest freedom. I want Lucifer dealt with. I believe you could be the one to do that.”

“I can,” Sam said quickly. “Leave Bobby alone and I’ll do anything.”

A smiled curved Death’s lips. “You say that like you won’t do it anyway. No, Sam Winchester, what I want is an assurance that you will do anything to stop him. I want to know you will sacrifice anyone and anything that’s required to succeed.” His eyes fell on Dean.

“I won’t sacrifice him,” Sam said. He would not, could not, lose him again.

“Then we have a problem, don’t we? If I cannot get this promise from you, I will have to go to Bobby Singer. I can promise you what I have planned for him isn’t going to be pretty.”

“I can do it without losing Dean,” Sam said. “I do have a plan, and Dean will be safe. I can promise to do what I have to do to end it. It’s going to work.”

Death considered. “You sound confident.”

“I am,” Sam said, then an idea occurred to him. “We’re just missing one piece of the puzzle. Do you know where the demon called Crowley is?”
"I do not. I have little to do with demons. They are… distasteful."

Sam sighed, disappointed. "I’ll find him," he said to himself.

"Will you?"

"Yes," Sam said determinedly. "I will, and then I’ll stop Lucifer. I promise."

"I don’t like promises," Death said. "They can be broken. I like deals."

Sam sat up straighter. "You want me to make a deal with you?"

"I do, and a deal with me means more than an eternity in Hell. I can hurt you in ways you cannot even imagine."

"What’s the deal?" Sam asked.

"You will do anything it personally takes to end Lucifer’s plans. You will stop him and free me."

"Personally?" Sam asked. "What about Dean?"

"I have no interest in him and you say he’s not required for you plan so he can go on as he always has."

It was nothing Sam wasn’t already planning to do, and it would protect Bobby from whatever Death was planning to do to him. Dean would be safe. The only one that stood to lose was Sam, and he was so sure of their plan that it wasn’t a risk to him either.

"I’ll do it. Do we shake on it?"

Death held out his hand and nodded. Sam took his hand, feeling the metal of the ring cool against his warm skin. Death released Sam’s hand and got to his feet. "I need to go. If I am to avoid Lucifer, I am going to have to be fast."

Sam stood and said, "And Dean?"

Death pointed his finger and Dean began to stir.

"Good luck, Sam Winchester," Death said. He walked away, but before he reached the door he disappeared soundlessly into thin air.

Sam bent and shook Dean’s shoulder. "Come on, man. Rise and shine."

Dean’s eyes opened and he scrambled to his feet, pulling his gun. He aimed it into the corners and said, "Where did he go?"

"Death?" Sam asked. "Somewhere far away, I hope."

"That was Death?"

Sam pushed Dean’s gun down and waited for Dean to relax before saying, "It was. He wanted to make a deal."

"And you told him to go to hell because you’re not that stupid, right?" Dean asked.

"No, I made it."
“What the hell, Sammy! A deal?”

“It’s okay,” Sam said. “He didn’t want me to do anything I wasn’t already planning on doing. And it’s protecting Bobby. Apparently, he was primed to deliver a message to him next. I have no idea what it was, but it’s not happening now.”

Dean fixed his eyes on him. “What did you promise?”

“That I’d kill Lucifer,” Sam said. “See, nothing new there.”

“Why would he want Lucifer dead? Isn’t he working for him?”

“Not the same way as the others, apparently. Lucifer has bound him. He is making him do what he wants. He’s going into hiding for now though until I get it done.”

Dean sighed and nodded. “Yeah. Fine. I get it.” He looked at Walt and Roy’s bodies on the floor. “What happened to them?”

“They pissed Death off by trying to kill me. He didn’t think Lucifer would like it so he killed them.”

“They tried to kill you?”

Sam gestured to his bloody shirt. “Two shots to the chest. They heard I popped the lid on Lucifer, and they weren’t happy about it.”

Dean shrugged. “Guess not.” He frowned. “You shaved your beard.”

Sam laughed. “Yeah. I figured it was time to leave Taylor behind and be a Winchester again.”

Dean huffed a laugh. “Sammy, you just made a deal with a supernatural creature. No question, you’re definitely a Winchester.”
Chapter Seventy-Three

Dean was standing outside, leaning on the porch post, waiting for Sam to arrive.

The air was cool, but he wasn’t cold enough to go back inside. He wanted to get going as soon as Sam arrived.

Excitement wasn’t the right word for how he felt, but he was looking forward to heading out with Sam. They were going to a crossroads to trap a demon for Sam to question about Crowley. Dean wasn’t looking forward to the questioning as it was too much like torture for him to be comfortable with it, but it would be good to be working with Sam again. It had been a long time for him, a lifetime for Sam, and he was curious to see how that time had changed the way Sam operated. He had taken more hunts than Dean could imagine while he was trapped, and that had to have changed him.

Dean knew about some of the hunts from what he had read in the journal. Sometimes it was just a date and the type of creature Sam had hunted written down, but other times he included details of how he’d handled that particular monster and how he’d handled the differences hunting before the technology he was used to. It was interesting to Dean to read about it; he felt like he was learning a little more about his brother with each entry. It was important to him, and not just because Anna said so. He wanted his brother to be comfortable with him again.

He heard the sound of Castiel’s arrival, and he pushed off of the post and walked forwards before he noticed Sam and Castiel hadn’t come alone. Missouri was with them. He pasted on a smile for them, but he was disappointed. He’d thought this was just going to be him and Sam together, having time as brothers again; they’d not even invited Bobby along. It wasn’t that he didn’t like Missouri, he thought she was great and he was grateful for all she’d done for Sam, but he wanted time with Sam alone. If that made him sound like a child, so be it.

“Hello, Dean. How are you?” Missouri asked. Her words were easily spoken, and she was smiling, but Dean saw something in her eyes that he couldn’t define. It didn’t occur to him at first that she might just have heard everything he’d been thinking.

“I’m good,” Dean said, walking towards them. “You?”

“Oh, I’m fine.”

“We had an idea,” Sam said, looking excited. “We’ve never tried it before, but we’re going to see if Missouri can read a demon’s mind. There will be no need to torture one if we can get the
information right out of its head.”

Dean was impressed. “That could work.”

“That’s what we’re hoping,” Missouri said. “But don’t worry, Dean, I’m not tagging along for the retrieval. I’ll wait here with Bobby while you two go get one.”

Sam frowned. “You don’t want to come, do you?”

“Not at all,” she said easily.

“Okay,” Sam said slowly. “We better go then. You ready, Dean?”

“More than,” Dean said. He took the Impala keys from his pocket and tossed them from hand to hand. Sam smiled at Missouri and patted her arm before walking to the car and climbing in on his usual position in shotgun.

Dean got in behind the wheel and turned the key in the ignition. In the rearview mirror he saw Missouri lifting a hand in farewell.

“What was that about?” Sam asked.

“What was what about?”

“Missouri,” Sam said. “She seemed to be saying more than she was saying when she said she wasn’t coming along.”

Dean grimaced. “Nothing. She was just poking around in my head. How do you stand that, by the way? Doesn’t it drive you nuts?”

“She doesn’t do it to me. She makes a conscious effort not to for me. If you just ask her, she’ll stop. But why would you think she’d want to come?”

Dean shrugged and they pulled away from the house, weaving through the junkers. “I just wasn’t expecting to see her. I thought it was just going to be the two of us.”

Sam sighed. “I don’t have much time left with her, Dean.”

“What do you mean?” Dean asked sharply.

“When Lucifer is dealt with, I won’t be going back to live in Lawrence,” he said. “We’ll be on the road again, and I won’t see her the way I do now. It’s been a long time of living so close to each other, dinners together and coffee in the afternoons, and that’s all going to end. I just want to have what time I can with her now. She had the idea about the demon, and I thought it was a good one. I wanted her to come.”

“I get it,” Dean said, feeling chastened. He hadn’t really thought about how things were going to change after for Sam. He’d just assumed they’d be together on the road again and hadn’t considered what that would mean for Sam after all those years settled in one place.

“It really isn’t long,” Sam said thoughtfully. “We’ll find Crowley soon, and then we’ll be able to end Lucifer. If our plan works, we’ll be able to get the information from a demon easily.”

“Crowley,” Dean groaned. “I hate that he’s the one we need.”

“Well that’s nice,” a snide voice said from the backseat. “Here I am risking everything to come
help you, and you don’t appreciate it.”

Dean slammed his foot on the brake and spun in his seat. Crowley was sitting there, looking a little disheveled but just as much of a smug asshole as he had the first time they’d met him.

“Crowley!” Sam shouted, and there was triumph in his voice.

“Let’s have a chat,” Crowley said, disappearing from the backseat and appearing beside the car.

Sam and Dean were out of the car in an instant, and Sam threw back his head and shouted. “Anna! He’s here! Come to Bobby’s!”

“Want to keep the noise down, Moose?” Crowley said. “I’m a wanted man after all.”

Anna appeared beside Sam, and her eyes lit up as she caught sight of the demon. “How did you find him?”

“They didn’t,” Crowley said. “I found them. I heard them using my name in vain and thought now was a good time to catch up.”

“How did you hear us?” Dean asked.

“I had a magic coin hidden in your car last time I saw you,” he said. “Up until today it’s been boring, you angsting over Sam playing hide and seek, but things just got interesting.”

Sam and Anna looked at each other, and Dean saw they both looked elated. He was happy to have found Crowley, but he apparently wasn’t feeling it the same way they were. He guessed after all this time of them planning and searching, this was a much bigger moment for them than for him.

“We need you,” Sam said.

“I figured that much out myself, thanks,” Crowley said. “Shall we go in? I feel a little exposed out here. I’ve got every demon in existence on my ass, and this place isn’t exactly anonymous to demon-kind.”

“Yes,” Sam said. “We can talk inside.” Crowley disappeared and Sam gasped. “Where is he?”

“He’s still close,” Anna said. “I can feel him.”

Sam ran for the house, and Dean followed. Sam flung open the front door and they rushed into the kitchen to see Crowley standing in the library, just outside of the borders of the devil’s trap painted onto the ceiling.

Missouri had her hand on her heart, and Bobby’s eyebrows were raised. Anna stood opposite Crowley, looking ready to tackle him at a moment’s notice. Sam came to a stop beside her, and Dean stood on his other side.

“Missouri, Bobby, this is Crowley,” Sam said.

“I can see,” Missouri said.

“Is it working?” Sam asked her eagerly.

Missouri nodded. “It is.”

“Is what working?” Crowley asked.
"None of your business," Dean said.

Crowley rolled his eyes. "I’m guessing you mean that little itch in my head that means someone is scrabbling around in my thoughts, Yeah, I know about that. You can’t get much past me. And you can only see what I want you to see. So if we’re going to talk like civilized people, you can stop that. It’s irritating."

Sam nodded to Missouri and she moved her concentrated gaze from Crowley.

"Thanks," Crowley said. "So, why have you been looking for me? I’m not upset that you didn’t find me, I’ve been living in squalor for weeks, single pane glass, used condoms in the grate, hobos trying to share my space, but it was obviously worth it. I did a good job hiding."

Sam raised an eyebrow and looked at Anna. "He did lower his standards."

"Yes, but since he’s here now, I don’t mind being wrong," she said, then addressed Crowley. "We need something from you. A weapon."

Crowley frowned. "I’ve given you my only useful weapon."

"The Colt," Dean said bitterly. "Yeah, that didn’t exactly work out for us."

"I realized that when Lucifer sent a hit team after me," Crowley said. "But what else do you think I’ve got for you?"

"Michael’s Lance," Anna said.

Crowley shook his head slowly. "That won’t work."

"Why not?" Sam asked tensely. "Don’t you have it?"

"I do, at least I have it hidden, but it’s not going to help you. You’d have to get close to Lucifer to use it, and he’s not going to stand there and make himself a target."

Sam and Anna exchanged a quick look, and Sam said, "It’s going to work. We have a plan."

"Oh, really," Crowley said sarcastically. "And what’s your masterful plan?"

"Holy fire," Anna said. "We’re going to lure him out with Sam, and then we’ll trap him. He won’t be able to run. We’ll be able to use the Lance."

Crowley considered carefully. "That could work, I guess."

Dean looked at Sam. "You’re bait?"

"Not now, Dean," Sam said tersely.

Dean thought now was the perfect time to discuss this plan for Sam to dangle himself in front of Lucifer like a worm on a hook, risking everything, but he saw from Sam’s determined look that he wasn’t going to budge on it, so he pushed down his worry and frustration, knowing it would rise again as soon as Crowley was gone.

"I’ll hand it over," Crowley said, and Anna actually laughed breathily with relief.

"Where is it?" Sam asked, his eyes intense and his jaw clenched.
“Somewhere safe,” Crowley said.

“Anna, go with him to get it,” Sam said.

Crowley raised his. “That’s not going to work for me. Say you do manage to kill Lucifer and save the world. I don’t want my hidey-hole on an angel’s radar. I’ll bring it to you. It’ll take a day or so to get to it. Don’t worry though. I’ve got something you can keep busy with in the meantime.”

“What?” Dean asked suspiciously, wondering what the demon could want from them.

“You might not be interested, but I heard about a Horseman.”

“Death?” Dean asked.

“No, the other one that’s not yet a drooling mess. Pestilence. I hear he’s been a busy boy, and I thought you’d want to put a stop to the chaos he’s plotting.”

“Where is he?” Sam asked.

“That’s the thing,” Crowley said. “I’ve not actually got coordinates for him. I know how you’ll find out, though. There’s a demon that reports to him. One of the best and brightest. Find him, you’ll find his boss.”

“Why do you want him stopped?” Missouri asked. “I thought demons liked chaos.”

“Some do,” Crowley said. “I’m not one of them. I like the balance we’ve got. People like you take out a few demons occasionally. People like me take out a few humans. It’s a system of checks and balances. I don’t know what exactly Pestilence is working on, but it’s big. Big enough for the end of the world as Lucifer wants it.”

“What’s the demon called?” Sam asked.

Crowley smiled. “You know him already, Moose. He’s an old buddy of yours. Name’s Brady.”

“Tyson Brady?” Sam asked.

“The very same.”

“Who is he?” Dean asked. He’d never heard of the demon, and he wondered when Sam had met him.

“Sam was his roommate in college,” Crowley said. “He was one of Azazel’s finest.”

Dean look at Sam to see how he was doing with this revelation, but his expression was neutral. He’d never mentioned someone from college called Brady, but then he’d never really spoken about that time. Dean would have expected Sam to have some reaction to finding out his college roommate was a demon though, especially one of Azazel’s.

“Where do we find him?” Sam asked.

“Top floor, corner office of Niveus Pharmaceuticals, Rochester, Minnesota,” Crowley said. “He’s a real high-flier, been on the promotion fast-track since college.”

“We’ll find him,” Sam said. “And we’ll stop Pestilence, as long as you promise to bring the Lance.”
“You say that like you won’t do it even if I don’t,” Crowley said. “We all know better.”

Sam went to Bobby’s desk and wrote something down on a piece of paper. He handed it to Crowley and said, “If we’re not here or at this address, call me on this number.”

Crowley tucked the paper in his inside pocket and said, “I’ll be seeing you soon. I’d wish you luck, but with this crew of experts…” His eyes fell on Missouri and he smirked. “I don’t think you’ll need it.”

He disappeared without a sound, and for a moment there was silence and then Anna said, her voice breathy, “We’ve got it, Sam.”

Sam’s face transformed into a wide smile and he punched the air. “I know!”

“We’re getting it,” Bobby corrected. “In the meantime we’ve got a demon to find and a Horseman to deal with.”

“We can do that,” Sam said easily.

Missouri approached Sam and her hand reached for his face. “It’s happening,” she said quietly.

Sam threw his arms around her and lifted her from the floor in a tight embrace. She laughed and even Anna was beaming. Dean was relieved, too, but he knew he really didn’t understand how this felt for the three of them. They’d been searching for this, planning it, for so much longer than him. This was their moment of triumph.

Sam set Missouri down and kissed her. “We’re doing it!”

“Yes, you are,” Missouri said.

“We better get going then,” Bobby said. “How are we going to handle this?”

Sam became somber and he considered for a moment. “Anna and I will go get Brady and bring him back here.”

“I’m coming,” Dean said quickly. He wasn’t sure if it was because Sam was used to working alone or because he wanted to protect him, but Dean wasn’t letting Sam go after a demon alone. He might not be invulnerable like Sam, but that didn’t make him weak. He could handle himself.

“Okay,” Sam said. “Bobby, it would be easier if you stayed and got the panic room ready.”

Dean raised an eyebrow. Bobby was offered a choice while he had to make demands.

Bobby looked from Sam to Anna and said, “I guess you don’t exactly need me there. I’ll stay back.”

“Do you want to stay here or go home?” Sam asked, touching Missouri’s arm.

“I’ll stay,” she replied. “I might be able to get something from this Brady’s mind.”

“We’ll call Castiel, too,” Dean said.

Sam nodded. “Okay. I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Dean looked at his brother and saw he was eager. It was coming down to the end now, and after all those years waiting, Sam was ready for it.
“Demons,” Anna said.

“Just them?” Sam asked.

“I’m sure there’s more,” she said.

“A lot more,” Castiel said.

Sam sighed. “That means a lot of death. We can’t stop and exorcise them all without tipping Brady off that we’re coming.”

Anna stepped forward and then froze. “We have another problem.”

“What’s that?” Sam asked mildly.

Anna waved a hand through the air and the building lit up with glowing symbols. “Angel warding,” she said. “Castiel and I can’t get in.”

Dean swore. This had just become a hundred times more complicated.

“I can do it,” Sam said.

“We can do it,” Dean corrected.

“They’re armed,” Sam said. “They’re not going to hurt me, but they will try to kill Michael’s vessel.”

Dean looked at him. “You say that like it makes a difference. I’m coming.”

Sam glanced at Anna and she nodded slightly, a movement that Dean wasn’t supposed to see. She stepped towards him and Dean moved back and held up a hand to her. “I swear, Sam, if you try to stop me coming in there with you, I am going to shout that you’re coming so loud that Brady will be long gone by the time you get up there.”

Sam frowned. “You wouldn’t be that stupid.”

“I really would,” Dean said.

He wasn’t letting it happen. Sam was not going to take on those demons alone. Dean could handle himself. They’d gone up against worse before either of them were invincible, and they were getting though it together again.

Sam held up a hand to Anna and she stepped back from Dean.

“We’ll go in and get him then,” Sam said. “Anna, Cas, be ready for us.”

Dean pulled out the demon knife and asked Sam, “Do you want it?”

“You hold on to it,” Sam said.

Dean didn’t argue. He wasn’t stupid.
Sam walked toward the entrance to the building, and Dean fell into step at his side. He knew this wasn’t going to be an easy grab and run, and he was worried, but he was also sure they’d come out of it together. They were both good at what they did, and they were even better working together.

The demons in reception looked up and grinned as Sam pushed open the doors, getting to their feet and advancing on them. Sam ducked left and Dean right. He stabbed the first demon in the throat, and then rushed toward the one Sam was fighting. Sam caught the demon around the neck and spun him so his chest was exposed to Dean.

Dean sank the blade in over the demon’s heart and yanked it back as the light crackled around the room. Sam dropped the body and said, “Upstairs.”

Dean walked to the elevator and reached out to press a button but Sam caught his arm and said. “I don’t want them to know we’re coming. Stairs.”

“This place has like a thousand floors, Sam.”

“We can do it.”

Sam pulled open a door that lead to a concrete stairwell and started up. With a sense of foreboding, Dean followed him. They were on the third floor when Dean heard someone ahead of them. He grabbed Sam’s shoulder, but Sam had heard it, too. He gestured to Dean to duck into the doorway of the floor, and then tucked in beside him. There was a clatter and the sound of footsteps, and Dean peered around the corner to see a man carrying a metal bucket in one hand and a mop in the other. He stopped on the stairs and began to run the mop over the floor.

“Back,” Sam whispered.

Dean eased open the door behind them and backed through it. Sam came through after him and they stopped for a moment. “Elevator?” Dean asked.

“We’ve got no choice,” Sam said. “He could have been a demon. I don’t want to face more than we have to.”

They turned together and then froze in place as they saw a man in a security guard’s uniform standing in front of them. “Who are you?” he asked.

“We’re here for a late meeting with Mr. Brady,” Sam said. “We’re from Brookes Homes and he was interested an investment opportunity with us.”

The man smiled. “And here I was thinking you were the Winchesters coming to kill him.” His eyes turned black and he pulled a gun from a holster on his hip.

Sam pushed Dean behind him and yanked the knife out of his hands.

“Don’t make me hurt you, Winchester,” the demon said. “I’m not supposed to do anything to you, since you’re the vessel and all, but I’m sure the boss can bring you back if my finger slips on the trigger.”

Sam raised the knife and lurched towards the demon. There was a crack and Sam was knocked back a few paces, blood blossoming on his shirt. Dean rushed forward and tried to grab the knife from him, but Sam was quick to recover. He flew forward and pressed the knife to the demon’s throat.

“I really don’t like being shot,” he snarled.
“How do you think he’d like it?” the demon asked, fixing his eyes over Sam’s shoulder on Dean.

Dean saw him raise the gun and he braced himself for pain, but before it came, Sam had shoved the knife through the demon’s throat. Light crackled and Sam pushed the dead demon away from him to the floor.

“Let’s go,” he said tersely.

“Are you okay?” Dean asked.

“I’m fine,” Sam said. “I’m getting used to being shot now.”

Dean grimaced and followed him to the elevator. They stepped into a car and Sam handed Dean the knife again then hit the button for the top floor. “We can kill anyone but Brady,” he said.

“And if they’re human?” Dean asked.

“If they show black eyes, stab them,” Sam said. “Anyone else you can just knock out. I want this done with.”

He seemed angry now. Dean supposed getting shot had dampened his mood. And wasn’t that just a mind-bending thought?

The elevator pinged and the doors opened. They stepped into a thickly carpeted hallway with doors leading off of it.

Dean scanned them and spotted a door in the corner that was marked as belonging to T. Brady, Projects Managing Director. “Here,” he said, pointing towards it.

They walked down the hall together and Dean’s eyes scanned the doors they were walking past, wondering if there were demons concealed behind them.

Sam came to a stop outside the office door and took a breath before flinging it open and rushing in. Dean raced in after him and saw a man sitting behind a desk. He had blonde hair and was wearing a black suit and ugly tie. On the corner of the desk was a trophy that said, “Man of the Year” and in front of him was a goblet of blood that was bubbling. “I’ll have to call you back,” he said, waving a hand over the goblet. The blood stilled and he smiled up at Sam. “Sam! It’s been a while. How’ve you been?”

“Brady,” Sam said stiffly. “We need to talk.”

“We do,” Brady said, leaning back in his chair. “How did you find me? How did you even know to find me? Who outing me?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sam said, walking towards him.

Brady stood from his seat and picked up a silver letter opener. “I am capable of defending myself, Sam,” he said.

“Me too,” Sam said.

Dean rushed forward with the knife, wanting to pin the demon, but Brady flicked out his hand and the letter opener flew at Dean’s face. It caught him across his forehead and blood flowed down into his eyes to blind him.

There was a growl of anger and then a sick thud and cracking sound. Dean wiped his eyes and
pressed his sleeve to his head. He saw Brady folded over the desk and Sam holding the trophy above his head. He brought it down and there was a crunch and Brady groaned.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked.

“Yeah,” Dean said. “It’s just a flesh wound. You?”

Sam slammed the trophy down again and Brady stilled. Sam straightened up panting and said, “Yeah. I’m good. Let’s get out of here. Do you want to carry him or handle the knife?”

Dean gripped the knife tighter. “I’m good with this.”

Sam nodded and hefted Brady over his shoulder. He walked toward the door and Dean rushed to get ahead of him. Sam couldn’t be killed, and he said he was used to being shot now, but Dean wasn’t used to seeing it. If a demon was coming for them, he was going to be the one that stopped them.
Chapter Seventy-Four

Dean buttoned his shirt and checked the bathroom mirror for any remaining smears of blood on his face. Sam had insisted that Anna heal him, though Dean would have been happy to let nature take care of it. He didn’t want to be beholden to her for anything at all, even though he admitted to himself that the wound would have needed stitches and would have scarred pretty badly.

Seeing his face was clean again, Dean walked out of the bathroom and down the stairs to the library. Missouri was the only one in there, and at his questioning look she said, “They’re getting that demon settled. I told Sam I wouldn’t go down until it was safe.”

“He worries about you,” Dean said.

“I worry about him, too,” she said. “You understand how that feels.”

Dean nodded. “It’s not easy.”

She smiled sadly. “It really isn’t. He might not be hurt physically, but he still takes the hits emotionally. Too many. I’ll be glad when this is all over, and not just for the sake of the world. He will finally be able to live again when it’s over. You all will.”

Dean didn’t know what to say. He was waiting for it to end, too, but he knew that in that end, Sam was going to lose the life Missouri was talking about. He and Dean would be hunting again, and Sam’s life would change from what it had been for three decades. He was going to lose the man he had been, the time he was able to spend with Missouri and the friends he had made. It would be different for him, and Dean didn’t think Missouri understood that.

“I better get down there,” he said.

He walked through the hall and down the stairs to the basement. The panic room door was open, and the demon was conscious again. Dean could hear it talking.

“Ropes and chains, Sam. You’re still scared then, even with your two angels hanging around.”

“We’re not scared,” Sam said. “I just enjoy the view of you chained up.”

“These aren’t going to hold me long,” Brady said. “Not when they come for me.”

“No one is coming for you,” Sam said in a bored tone.

Brady laughed and Dean saw Sam step away from him as he entered the panic room. The demon was tied to the chair by the wrists and there were chains around his chest. His blonde hair was matted with blood from Sam’s bludgeoning. Bobby was sitting on the edge of the cot on the wall, his legs stretched out and his expression serene. Castiel and Anna stood on either side of the demon.

“Locked down tight?” Dean asked.

Sam nodded. “He’s ready. I’ll get Missouri.”
He walked out of the room and up the stairs. Brady fixed his eyes on Dean and said, “I’ve heard a lot about you, Dean, you know? Even before my upgrade to black eyes, I knew who you were. Sam would talk about you a lot when he was in his cups.” He adjusted himself in his chair as much as the chains allowed, as if making himself comfortable. “Yeah. I heard all about his big brother. He thought you were some kind of hero. Well… mostly. I heard the story of that last night though. Is it true that you stood by and let Sam walk out of the door when Daddy Winchester told him to stay gone? Not very heroic of you.”

Dean stared back at him, not betraying how he was feeling, but the room became tense.

That night had been one of the worst of Dean’s life, and he remembered every detail of it, including his failure to stop Sam. He had stepped between Sam and his father, trying to calm them both down, but when John had flung those words at him in his anger, ‘If you walk out that door, don’t come back,’ Dean hadn’t acted. He’d never thought Sam would actually do it, and when he’d shouldered his duffel, he’d expected him to stop, to turn back and tell Dean he was staying. He had never imagined that Sam would leave him. The life he could understand, Sam hated it, but his family… That wasn’t supposed to happen. He hadn’t been able to say a word.

There were footsteps on the stairs and Sam came into the room with Missouri behind him. Sam looked at their serious faces and Brady’s smug smile and said, “What have you been saying, Brady?”

“Just shared some stories of our alma mater,” Brady said. “I don’t think Dean liked them.”

Sam walked forward, a steely look in his eyes, and punched Brady across the jaw. His head snapped to the side and he spat blood onto the floor. Sam stepped back from him and said, “Time to talk. Missouri?”

She looked shocked at what Sam had done, but she quickly gathered herself and said, “Loud and clear. He’s vile.”

Sam thanked her and then fixed his eyes on Brady. “Where is Pestilence?”

Brady laughed. “You think I’d tell you that? If it was down to me, I would, I’d like to see you all dead, but I don’t want to piss off the big boss. Pestilence is impulsive, and he’d probably kill you for revenge for what you did to his brothers.”

“Missouri?” Sam asked.

“Yes,” she said quietly. “I have it.”

Brady frowned. “Have what?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Sam said. “I have more questions. Pestilence is planning something for Lucifer. What is it?”

Brady grinned. “I’m not telling, but it’s going to be great. A real world changer.”

Missouri sucked in a breath and Sam looked over his shoulder at her. She nodded to him, looking nauseated. Anna walked away from Brady and stood beside Missouri, close enough that their shoulders touched.

“Where is Lucifer?” Sam asked.

Brady rolled his eyes. “You can keep asking your questions, but I’m not answering them. I would
rather die.”

“That’s next,” Dean said darkly.

“I’ve got it, Sam,” Missouri said.

Sam looked around the room and asked, “Anyone else got any questions?”

Anna, Missouri and Castiel shook their heads. Bobby said, “I think we’ve heard enough,” and Dean said, “I’m done. Let’s get it over with.”

Sam pulled the demon knife out of his jacket pocket and said, “Goodbye, Brady.”

“You think you can kill me?” Brady asked. “Can you kill him?” He closed his eyes and when they opened, they were blue and scared. He looked at Sam and tears began to spill down his cheeks. “Sam? Is that you? What’s happening?” The demon had let the meatsuit talk.

Sam winced. “It’s okay, Brady,” he said gently. “It will be over soon.”

“Why am I tied up?” he asked. “Who are all these people?”

“They’re here to help you,” Sam said. “We’re going to take care of everything.”

“Can you make it go?” Brady asked. “The smoke? It’s been so long. It does awful things. It hurt…” His eyes widened. “Jess!”

Sam’s eyes darkened. “What about Jess?”

“The smoke… It hurt her,” he said. “I tried to make it stop, but I couldn’t. It killed her. I saw it.”

Sam closed his eyes and when he opened them again, they were pained. “It’s okay, Brady,” he said. “Just relax. It’s going to be okay.”

Brady started to speak again, the tears still streaming down his cheeks, but Sam cut across him, saying, “Christo,” and the demon’s eyes became black again.

“What did you think of him? He’s a real traumatized treat, isn’t he? He has been since around November 2005. He didn’t handle it well when Jess roasted on the ceiling.” He laughed. “It was a good night for me though. She had no idea. She invited me in, offered me a beer even. The look on her face when it started… It was perfect.”

Dean stepped up to the demon and punched him, wanting to stop the cruel words being spoken, but it just laughed.

“She screamed for you to save her, Sam,” he said. “She was so sure you’d come. You remember the look on her face when you did, don’t you? She was so scared, but she thought you were there to save her. Do you remember the smell?”

“Enough!” Dean shouted. “Missouri, do you have it?”

“Yes,” she said weakly.

Dean grabbed the demon knife from Sam’s hand and plunged it into Brady’s chest. The light crackled and the demon’s head flew back in a silent scream, and then, as Dean dragged the blade free, his head dropped down to rest on his chest.
Dean looked at Sam, seeing the haunted look in his eyes. He searched for the right words to say to help him, but he had none. He moved forward to hug him, to offer comfort in a different way, but Missouri was already there. She tugged Sam’s head down to her shoulder and put her arms around him. Dean saw the stiff set of Sam’s back and thought he wasn’t going to accept it, but then, as Missouri said, “It’s done. He’s gone,” he relaxed.

Dean realized he wasn’t the only one there that understood what losing Jessica had done to Sam. Missouri had seen it, too. Dean had been by his side after it had happened, but so had she. She had perhaps seen an even more brutal experience, as Sam had known it was coming when he was with her, and he hadn’t been able to stop it. That would have tortured Sam.

“I’ll get something to wrap him in, “Bobby said. “We’ve got to get him burned.”

“No,” Sam said, pulling away from Missouri and holding up a hand. “He needs to go home. Anna, can you take him to San Diego? Drop him off near a hospital where he’ll be found. His mother lives there. She deserves a chance to bury him. She was…” He sighed. “She was nice to me. She invited me there for Thanksgiving once.”

Dean realized then that Sam had just suffered another loss. It was more than the cruel words of Jessica the demon had thrown at him. It was the fact his friend, someone he’d spent holidays with, was dead, too.

“I’ll take him,” Anna said, and she and Castiel started to unchain the body from the chair.

Sam walked out of the room and up the stairs. Dean followed them, watching Sam as he went into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of water. He drank it down in one and then turned to face Missouri who had come up with Bobby and taken a seat on the couch. “What did you get from him?” Sam asked her.

“Pestilence is in Iowa,” she said. “A convalescent home called Serenity Valley in Davenport. He is pretending to be called Doctor Green, but he’d not doing much doctoring. He’s practicing on the patients. He can make them sick—sicker than they already were anyway. He’s experimenting.”

Sam nodded. “Thanks. Did you find out what his plan is?”

Missouri looked sickened. “He’s spreading that Croatoan Virus you told me about. They’re using Niveus Pharmaceuticals to develop and spread the virus through a vaccine for Swine Flu. He’s awful, Sam.”

Sam sat beside her on the couch and put his arm around her. She leaned against him, her head on his shoulder, looking drawn and tired.

“Did he know where Lucifer is?” Sam asked quietly.

“Michigan,” Missouri said quietly.

“Detroit?”

She nodded. “He didn’t know exactly where, but his base is somewhere in the city.”

“That’s okay,” Sam said, stroking her back. “We’ve got what we needed.” He looked up and said. “We’ve got to find and deal with whatever factory they’re using for the vaccines.”

“It’s in Tulsa,” Missouri said. “I don’t know the address, he wasn’t thinking of it, but it’s a big complex where they do the research and manufacture.”
“I’ll find it,” Bobby said. “They can’t have that many bases.” He went to his desk and opened a laptop.

“What do we do first?” Dean asked. “Pestilence or the factory?”

Sam considered and Anna spoke up, “We could split up. I could go to Pestilence with you, Sam, and the everyone else can go to the factory.”

“No!” Dean said brutally. “You two aren’t going off alone together.”

He trusted Sam, but he didn’t trust Anna with him. She had murdered him once, stabbed him twice apparently, and Dean wasn’t completely sold on the fact she was on their side. She had been Michael’s bitch once. How did they know she wouldn’t be again if put on the spot of choosing her own life or Sam’s?

“Anna would never do that, Dean,” Missouri said.

Dean scowled. “If you could stop reading my mind now, that would be great,” he said harshly.

“Dean!” Sam snapped, tightening his arm around Missouri.

“It’s fine, Sam,” she said. “I shouldn’t be doing it. I’m sorry. Dean.”

“Thanks,” he muttered.

He didn’t like that he’d pissed Sam off, but he liked having his mind rooted through even less.

Sam scowled and said in a long-suffering tone. “Okay. If we’re not splitting up, we need to take them both out fast. I think we should go to Pestilence first. If we take out his factory, he could move on and start up somewhere else, and we’d never know. We’ll hit him, and then get the factory next. We’re going to need explosives. Bobby?”

“I know a guy,” Bobby said, looking up from the laptop. “I’ll pick them up while you deal with Pestilence. I don’t think I’ll be needed there. I reckon two Winchesters and two angels can handle one horseman.”

“We can,” Sam said confidently. “Missouri, do you want Anna to take you home?”

“Yes, please,” Missouri said. “Will you call me?”

“As soon as I have anything to tell you,” Sam promised.

She kissed his cheek and then got to her feet and walked towards Anna.

“I’ll see you in Davenport,” Anna said, and then she and Missouri disappeared.

Sam looked Dean and asked, “You ready for this?”

Dean nodded. He was ready for the Horseman and whatever came after. They were doing it together.

xXx

Serenity Valley was a large and old house set in grounds with tended gardens. It was dark by the time they got there, and the parking lot was mostly empty. Dean guessed visiting hours were over. It would make things easier for them if they weren’t dodging civilians while trying to kill a
“What do you think, Anna?” Sam asked.

“I can’t sense him,” she said.

“Cas?” Dean asked. “Got any added insight?” He wanted to remind Sam that Anna wasn’t the only angel on their side. Castiel had been with them through more, and he’d never tried to kill either of them.

“No,” Castiel said. “Anna is probably in a better position to sense anything than I am. She still has a connection to Heaven.”

Sam nodded. “I think we just have to go in and take our chances then. Got the knife?”

Dean opened his jacket and showed him the demon knife in his inner pocket.

“Let’s go then.”

They set off for the rear of the building, and the angels followed. There was a fire door that had been left propped open and beside it a flowerpot full of cigarette ends. Dean supposed this was where the workers came for their breaks.

Dean took the lead through the door, his hand in his jacket wrapped around the knife, and Sam came in after him and fell into step at his side.

“Do we go from room to room?” Dean asked.

“We should find his office,” Anna said. “If he’s really playing the part of a doctor, he could be there.”

“Good idea,” Sam agreed.

“Unless he’s busy on the shop floor experimenting. That’s what Missouri said,” Dean reminded them.

“Check all the rooms on the way through,” Sam said.

They came to a hallway decorated in peach and cream, and Dean saw a wheelchair with a man sitting outside a room. He definitely looked sick, and Dean skirted around him, but Anna stopped and said, “We’re looking for Doctor Green. Have you seen him? Do you know where his office is?”

“He’s doing rounds,” the man said. “I’m waiting for him.”

“Thank you,” Anna said. “Would you like us to help you into your room?”

“Thank you. One of the nurses was helping me, but she ran off in a hurry.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Think we’ve been discovered?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know how,” Anna said. “I didn’t see any demons.”

“Maybe they saw us coming?” Dean said, pointing to the curved mirror set high on the wall by the corner. It was the kind that was often in convenience stores so the clerks could see what was happening down the aisles. It gave a good view of the corridor they’d just come down.
“Damn,” Sam said. “Didn’t see that. He’ll know.”

“In here,” Anna said. She took the handles of the wheelchair and pushed the man into the bedroom he was parked outside. It looked like a hotel room except the bed was a hospital bed and there was a tank of oxygen beside it and a table with an emesis basin across the foot.

Anna parked the man beside the bed and said, “We’re just going to wait in here for with you. Is that okay?”

The man looked uncertain. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea…”

Anna sighed and pressed her fingertips to the man’s head. His head fell forward onto his chin and he snored loudly.

“Did you have to do that?” Dean asked.

“Yes,” Anna said bluntly. “Now get ready.”

She and Castiel moved to stand on either side of the door, and they drew their blades. Dean pulled out the demon knife and stood beside Castiel. Sam moved to stand beside Anna, and they waited.

Dean heard voices outside the room, but they sounded normal. He was waiting for something that would tell him Pestilence knew they were there, shouting demons maybe. He couldn’t hear anything, but after a moment of listening hard, he felt something. At first it was just a prickling sensation, and then his skin flushed with heat; it felt like he had a high fever. Then he felt the tickle of a cough that quickly became choking gasps. He couldn’t get his breath. His knees weakened, and he dropped down to his hands and knees.

“Dean!” Sam’s voice seemed to be coming to him from far away.

He looked up with stinging eyes and Sam’s face swam in front of him. “Something’s wrong,” he rasped.

“I’ll say,” a different voice answered. “It looks like you’re suffering from Scarlet fever, meningitis and a nasty case of syphilis—that one might have been there already; I won’t judge.”

Dean looked up and saw a man come into the room. He wore glasses and had thin grey hair. On his finger was a green-stoned ring. Dean tried to say his name, but all he could do was cough and wince as he saw blood hit the floor.

“Stop it!” Sam commanded. “Leave him alone.”

“Why would I do that?” Pestilence asked. “He deserves it. You both do, which begs the question why aren’t you dying on the floor, too? What is wrong with you?” He squinted at Sam. “Where did you get that grace?”

“It was a gift,” Sam said, still crouching beside Dean with his hand resting on his back. Dean wanted to tell him to go, to attack, sure that Pestilence’s defeat was the only thing that was going to save him, but it was all he could do to keep breathing; talking was an impossibility.

“Some gift,” Pestilence said. “I don’t imagine it will help when I tear you apart though.”

Dean reached with a shaking hand and pushed the demon knife against Sam’s foot. Sam took it and finally got to his feet, advancing on the horseman. Pestilence asked, “Do you really think you can kill me with that?”
“Maybe not,” Sam said. “But we can do this. Anna!”

Dean raised his head with momentous effort and saw Anna and Castiel rush at the horseman. Anna bowled into him, knocking him off his feet and pinning him down with her knees on his chest, and Castiel slammed the knife down on Pestilence’s wrist. There was a howl of pain and Dean felt the tight bands around his chest disappear, allowing him to finally draw a proper breath.

“Are you okay?” Sam asked, hauling him to his feet.

Dean nodded and wiped the blood from under his chin. “Yeah. I’m good. Thanks, Cas.”

“Thank you both,” Sam said, his eyes on the angels.

“We should leave,” Castiel said.

“You can leave,” Pestilence spoke weakly behind them. “But you’re already too late. It’s happening.”

Sam walked towards him slowly. Dean thought he was going to kick him, but all he did was bend and pick up the severed hand. He pulled the ring off and threw the hand down onto Pestilence’s chest.

He turned back to Anna and said, “Get us out of here.”

Anna nodded, and a moment later, they were gone.
The Niveus factory was seven stories high and surrounded by a parking lot full of trucks bearing the company insignia. Even though it was late, there were lights burning in the windows, and Sam guessed it was still heavily manned. They were going to need to get all of those people out before they blew it up. He wanted to save as many people as he could this time. There had already been too much death.

“How are we doing this?” Dean asked.

Though his voice was neutral, as if he was contemplating just another hunt, Sam thought Dean was just as nervous about it as he was. They had to get in, blow the factory, and get out, leaving as few casualties as possible. The place was sure to be guarded by demons and humans alike. Sam couldn’t forget that each of those people mattered to someone. They needed to save as many as they could while still saving the world from Croatoan.

Bobby considered the building for a moment, appraising it, and then said, “We concentrate on the first floor. If we lay the explosives at the corners and supporting columns, it should come down fine.”

“Do you have enough C4?” Sam asked.

“More than enough. I cleared out Sparks’ stash.”

“Your explosives man is called Sparks?” Dean asked with a raised eyebrow.

Bobby shrugged. “He’s likes irony, I guess. His day job is selling fireworks.”

Sam smiled slightly. “Interesting guy.”

“He is,” Bobby agreed. “But he came up trumps for us on this.” He lifted the duffel packed with explosives and said, “Shall we get on with it?”

Sam nodded. “Anna, you stay with Bobby, guard him while he lays the C4. Me, Dean and Cas will clear the building.”

“There will be demons,” Castiel said.

“I know,” Sam said. “Dean has the knife. You’ve got your blade.”

“And you?” Dean asked heavily.

Sam pulled his shotgun out of his duffel and said, “I’ll be aiming for their knees.”

He knew Dean wasn’t happy about it, but it made sense that he go in without the demon knife. He was less vulnerable than Dean, and they had to stack the odds in their favor. He wasn’t making trouble about Dean coming with them, though he wanted to, so he was going to make sure Dean was the one that could defend himself.

“Let’s go then,” Anna said.
Sam felt the disconcerting shift and then they were in a vast, high ceilinged warehouse area filled with pallets of boxes. Anna had brought them to a corner, and Sam looked around quickly for anyone else. There was no one there, and he took a breath. “Okay, Bobby, you get to work. Dean, Cas, come with me.”

He engaged his shotgun and walked along the aisle of boxes, searching for a sign of movement.

They were almost at the end of the aisle when Dean tugged Sam to a stop and said, “We’ve got to empty this building, Sam.”

“How?” Sam asked.

“Fire alarm.”

Sam didn’t know why he hadn’t thought of it. He’d done it before. “Good idea,” he said. “See if you can find one.”

Dean took a right along an aisle of boxes and Sam hissed, “Stay with him, Cas.”

Castiel nodded and followed Dean away. Sam carried on along the aisle, ready for attack.

“Winchester!”

The shout came from the direction Dean and Castiel had gone in. Sam raced towards it, but before he reached them, he heard the reaction sound of a demon being stabbed by the blade. He got to Dean just in time to see him shove a man off the blade.

Shouting started behind him, and Sam turned towards it. A moment later, he heard the shrill ringing of a fire alarm. He ran along an aisle and came to a dead stop as he saw five men ahead of him. One of them had black eyes, and the three of the others were bent over and spitting blood onto the floor. As Sam approached, he saw the demon stuff a vial into the fifth man’s mouth and punch him. The man staggered back a few steps and then bent to spit blood. Sam was momentarily confused, and then he saw the other men raise their heads and snarl at him through bloody lips. Their eyes were red with burst blood vessels. They were infected. Pestilence had perfected the virus. There was virtually no incubation period now.

“We have Croats!” he shouted, raising his gun and pulling the trigger as the men rushed at him.

He hit the closest one in the chest, and the man fell back. Sam pumped the shotgun and fired again. The second man fell and Sam readied to kill the next. They seemed to have no fear for their own safety, and they were almost upon him when he pulled the trigger for the last time. He opened the loading chamber and quickly refilled it with bullets, ready for the next. The demon was still standing by the opened box, a vial in his hand but not man to give it to.

“What do you think, Winchester?” it asked. “Are you still immune? Shall we find out?”

Sam shot the thing’s knee out and it dropped down. He’d never tried it before, and was almost surprised it worked for a moment, before the demon straightened up again and grinned. “You should know better,” it said.

“I’ve got a demon,” Sam shouted.

There were racing footsteps behind him, and Castiel barreled past him to the demon. He speared it on his blade and then pushed it away.
“There are more infected,” he said. “Some of them are armed.”

Sam swore. “Where’s Dean?”

“This way,” Castiel said curtly.

They started running, and Sam was pushing himself to keep up with the angel when he heard a gunshot and a laugh.

“Dean!” he shouted.

“Sam.” The voice that called back was pained and barely audible over the fire alarm blaring, and Sam felt a surge of panic rush through him. He ran faster, away from Castiel, toward the sound of his brother’s voice. People ran past him in the opposite direction, but Sam paid no attention to them. They could be infected or demons, but he didn’t care. He only cared about getting to Dean.

“Dean!”

“Here,” the voice came from an aisle a little away from him, and Sam ran to it, skidding to a gasping halt at what he saw.

Dean was lying on the floor on his side, his legs curled up and his blood slick hands clutching his stomach. His face was a sickly grey.

Sam dropped down hard beside him and said, “It’s okay. I’ve got you. Anna!”

“They shot me,” Dean said, sounding shocked. “It was a damn demon, and it shot me.”

“Lay back,” Sam said. “Let me see.” He shrugged off his jacket and eased Dean onto his back.

Dean was breathing through gritted teeth, and as Sam tried to move his hands away from the wound, he groaned. “No.”

“I need to,” Sam said. “This will hold the pressure on better. Anna!”

Dean moved his hands and Sam saw the blood-soaked shirt. He wanted to check the wound, to see how big it was, but he knew pressure was more important. He pushed the jacket down hard, making Dean suck in a pained breath,

“It’s okay,” he said again. “Anna! I swear to god if you don’t…”

“I’m here,” she said. She knelt on Dean’s other side and said, “Castiel, find Bobby. Let me help him, Sam.”

Sam forced himself to move his hands from Dean’s stomach, even though it felt like if he did, he would lose him, and Anna pushed aside his jacket. She pulled up Dean’s shirt and said, “It’s okay. The wound was small with puckered edges and it was pulsing blood. Sam felt sick, and he placed his hand on Dean’s shoulder to ground himself.

“It’s okay, Dean,” she said. She laid her hand over the wound and a blue-white light glowed.

Dean hissed in a breath and his knees drew up then relaxed as Anna pulled her hand away.

“I have to go,” she said, and then disappeared again.
“You okay?” Sam asked.

Dean ran a hand over his healed stomach and said, “I’m fine.”

Sam stood and helped Dean up. Though Dean didn’t need it, Sam did. He had to have his hands on his brother, reassuring himself that he was okay.

“Come on,” he said. “We’re sticking together now.”

“No argument here,” Dean said.

They walked along the hall and Sam saw a group of people running towards them. They were women and men wearing Niveus overalls. Sam and Dean moved over to block them, and Sam said, “Christo!” harshly.

None of their eyes turned black, and they were clear of the blood of the infected, so he stepped aside and said, “Get as far away from this building as you can. It’s coming down.”

They fled towards the doors, and Castiel rushed to them from the other direction. “Bobby is almost done,” he said. “We have to get out.”

“The people?” Dean said.

“We’ve cleared as many as we can,” Castiel said.

That meant they hadn’t cleared them all, Sam thought. He couldn’t leave more people to die. Not after what he’d seen and experienced before. He ran from them, shouting, “Fire! Get out!”

He ducked up and down the aisles, not noticing at first that Dean was with him until Dean added his voice to Sam’s.

Castiel caught Sam’s arm and said. “Get out. I’ll clear the building.”

Sam hesitated, not wanting to fail the people that might still be here the way he had the people in the South Tower, and Dean yanked on his arm. “Come on, Sammy.”

Sam allowed himself to be tugged away, falling into step at Dean’s side as they ran for the exit. They saw Bobby and Anna outside, and when they reached them, Anna said. “We’re done.”

Sam felt himself being moved, and then they were standing across the street from the factory again.

“Come on, Cas,” Bobby said.

Sam looked at him and saw he was clutching the burner phone in his hand that he had explained would be connected to the explosives.

Castiel appeared beside them and said, “Do it,” curtly.

Bobby hit a speed dial and there was a moment in which nothing happened before the walls of the factory’s first floor swelled with a loud blast. The building seemed to sink into the ground, the roof lowering as the floors beneath collapsed. It was a sight Sam had seen before on news reports that showed an awful day he’d experienced once with a woman called Susannah.

They all watched, entranced, as the building collapsed, and Sam felt sick.
“Were they all out, Cas?” he asked quietly.

“The only people still inside were infected,” Castiel said.

Sam wasn’t sure he believed him as Castiel had been too fast. Wouldn’t it have taken longer to check the whole building for people? Wasn’t it possible that there were still people in labs and offices when the building blew? In the stairwells…

“Let’s get out of here,” Dean said. “I want to get out of this shirt.”

Sam looked at him and realized that Dean looked sick, too. Was he thinking of how close he had come to dying, too? Did he wonder about the people that could be in there and think about how he could have been one of them?

That was all Sam could think about now. He had almost lost his brother. He walked quickly to him and pulled him into a hug, feeling the relief of his living brother in his arms. It had been the worst feeling, seeing him lying there bleeding out, and he never wanted to experience it again.

On the heels of that thought came another. He never wanted to experience that again, but that was what he was about to do to Dean. He was going to die and Dean was going to feel it and worse when he found out what had happened.

He gripped his brother a little tighter, feeling a wave of guilt. There was nothing else he could do. He had to die, and Dean had to go on without him.

xXx

Sam was sitting in his study, staring down at the envelopes in front of him. They were addressed to Dean, Missouri, James and Patience. He had just finished them, as he’d realized the letters he’d written before were suicide notes. Now he used new ways to explain to Dean and Missouri why he had to do it, how he was at peace with his decision and that they couldn’t have stopped him, and how much he loved them. James’ letter was a thank you and a goodbye, and to Patience he wrote an expression of love and thanks for what she had brought to Sam’s life, a reminder to live the wonderful life that awaited her to the full. He didn’t want her to have her letter until she was older, and he thought James would know the right time for her to have it. Each of the letters had been written with love, and he hoped they knew that when they read them. He hoped they would forgive him for going.

He opened his desk drawer and slipped the letters inside. His hands brushed against a wooden box. He took it out and set it down on the blotter. He hadn’t looked inside it for a long time, and his heart beat a little harder as he eased it open. The old letter sat atop George’s medals.

He’d read the letter more than once in the weeks after George’s death, taking comfort from it, but he’d eventually been able to stop, putting it away with the medals, in the place he kept his journal. It had felt right that the book in which he stored the knowledge of his many years was the same place his friend’s last gift lay. He had been an important part of the years recorded there.

He lifted the letter out now and placed it beside the box, running a finger over the medals. Missouri would know from her letter that these were to go to James when he was gone. He had known and loved George, too, and he would appreciate them, perhaps passing them on to Patience one day.

George had thought Sam deserved the medals, too, and that still overwhelmed Sam even now. After all he’d done wrong in his life, George still felt he had earned them the way he had by risking
his life to save his men. Sam didn’t feel like a hero, even now as he awaited his death for the world, but the fact George had thought he was, was something Sam took pride in.

He took the letter from the envelope again and read the old-fashioned script that transcribed George’s last words to him. He came to the end of the letter and smiled.

‘I mean what I have said before. I believe there is a place waiting for us at the end of life, and, if it’s possible, I will be waiting for you with a beer. If I’m unable to wait for you, I expect you to find me. You’re a capable man, and I have no doubt you will succeed.’

George had faith in him. He said he would be waiting. That was a comfort now, as Sam waited, a promise that it wouldn’t be the end for him. His friend would be there, and Sam would have a story to tell him. He would be able to tell of how he’d seen Dean again, how they’d had a little more time together that he hadn’t expected, even though it came at a cost. One day he would be able to introduce them. Anna said they would be there together one day.

Sam ran his finger over George’s signature then put the letter in the box again and tucked it in its drawer. He checked his watch. Castiel should be bringing Dean and Bobby there soon. Bobby wanted to see Sam’s house, and there was nothing else for them to do but wait for Crowley now. Everything else was done. It was almost time.

He went into the kitchen and filled the coffee maker and turned it on, then leaned against the counter and looked around the small room. He wondered what would happen to it when he was gone. Missouri had once planned for it to be a place for hunters to use, and Sam thought that would be a good use of it, unless Dean wanted it. Sam couldn’t imagine him settling in a home, but perhaps having somewhere to come sometimes where he could be alone would be good for him. Sam found himself hoping that would be the case. He liked the idea of Dean coming here, sitting in the chair he’d sat in, drinking his whiskey from the glasses he and George had once drunk theirs from.

He heard the flutter of an angel’s arrival, and he looked up, expecting Castiel, but it was Anna that stood across from him.

“Hey,” he said. “Everything okay?”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I wanted to see you alone before the others arrived. It’s almost time.”

Sam nodded. “It is. Are you ready?”

“I feel ready, but I suppose the test will come when we’re actually facing him.”

“I know what you mean,” Sam said. “There are things I want you to do after. There are letters in the left-hand drawer of my desk. Take them to Dean and Missouri when it’s time. I don’t want them to have to search for them. It helped me to have George’s there to read when I was ready.”

“I will,” she said. “What about when it is time? We don’t know when Crowley will arrive. What if you’re with them when it happens?”

“You have to stop them,” Sam said. “You can put Dean and Bobby to sleep. Banish Castiel if he’s here. Do whatever it takes to put them out and keep them out. I don’t want them knowing what’s happening until it’s already happened.”

Anna nodded. “I can do that. I will stay close now until it’s all over.”

“Thank you, Anna.” He thought it would help to have Anna close. As soon as Crowley came, they
could act. There would be no time for doubts if they came. He would already be there.

“Castiel is coming,” she said, and a moment later Sam heard his arrival and Dean calling, “We’re here,” in a singsong voice.

Sam walked into the living room as they came in from the hall. Dean seemed perfectly relaxed, flopping down onto the couch and leaning his head against the cushions. Castiel was more tentative, looking around curiously, and Bobby went straight to the mantle piece to look at Sam’s photos.

“Is this James?” he asked, pointing at the family shot.

Sam joined him there and said, “Yes, and that’s Tess, his wife, and Patience, his daughter.”

“Your granddaughter,” Bobby said.

“Basically, yeah.” Sam smiled. “She’s great.”

“I bet,” Bobby said. “Though I still can’t quite wrap my mind around it. It’s not just that you were twenty-six a month ago, it’s the fact you were the same age as her a few years before that.”

“A few years?”

Bobby shook his head. “You must know what I mean. Doesn’t it feel like she was born a year ago?”

Sam considered. Patience did seem to have grown incredibly fast, James, too. He seemed to have raced from a child on a Ferris wheel to a college kid and then to a husband and father.

“Yeah, I get it,” he said.

Bobby looked along the mantle piece and moved to the dresser with the photograph of the Berlin Wall graffiti on it. “Was that the wall?” he asked.

“Yes,” Sam said.

Bobby blew out a breath. “That’s just incredible.”

“I have more pictures,” Sam said. “Wait here.”

He went into the study and picked the right photo album from the shelf. He carried it back to Bobby and said, “It’s mostly Berlin in this one.”

Bobby took it from him and sat on George’s old chair, opening it on his lap. Sam thought of the symmetry of the two men. He’d always thought Bobby was a lot like George. He wished he could have seen them together. He bet they’d have shared some great stories with him of times even he’d missed.

Bobby turned the pages of the Charlottenburg Palace without interest, slowing when he came to pictures from the Checkpoint Charlie Museum. Sam perched on the edge of the couch and said, “I met Doctor Hildebrandt there.”

“You did?” Bobby asked. “That’s a slice of history and a half. What was he like?”

“Like you’d imagine,” Sam said. “Pretty incredible.”
Bobby continued to turn the pages and came to the images of the crowds Sam had taken from on top of the wall. “You were actually on the wall?” he asked.

Sam grinned. “We stood on the wall and we jumped on the wall. And we broke down the wall.” He went to the dresser and took out the velvet bag he stored his memento of the wall in. He gave it to Bobby and said, “I took this piece out of it myself.”

Bobby turned it over in his hand, looking awed. “That’s just…” He shook his head. “What did it feel like?”

“I can’t explain it,” Sam said. “It was like a celebration of humanity.” He bent and turned the pages until he came to the pictures of the Easterners crossing No Man’s Land. “That was when the checkpoints opened. They were running across. I saw the East, Bobby, and it was awful. The people fleeing were desperate. It was so grey, and not just their clothes and the buildings. Their lives were so different to ours. When they reached the West, they were absorbed by the color; people were embracing them and handing out flowers. It was like they were long-lost lovers being reunited, but they were strangers. They were all just so happy.”

“I wish I could have seen it,” Bobby said.

“I wish you could, too,” Sam said. “It was amazing.” He took back the piece of wall and set it in its bag again and carried it to the cupboard. As he slid the door closed, he remembered something else he’d stored in there. He opened the door again and pulled out the four records he’d bought what felt like a lifetime ago.

“Here, Dean,” he said, holding them out. “I got these for you.”

Dean frowned and took them and then his eyes widened. “Sammy! Where the hell did you get these?”


Dean examined them with an awed smile. “Physical Graffiti, Houses of the Holy… These are in mint condition.”

Sam shrugged. “I took care of them. I was there for Live Aid and me and Susie were looking around the city. I saw these and…” He shrugged. “Thought you’d like them.”

Dean’s eyes were wide. “In 1985…” he said. “And you were thinking of me?”

Sam nodded. “I was gone a long time, but it’s not like I forgot you, Dean.”

Dean blinked rapidly and then cleared his throat and said, “Do I smell coffee?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Yeah. I’ll get it.”

He went into the kitchen and took mug out of the cupboard. He was just pouring when he heard Dean’s worried voice. “Cas?”

He dropped the pot back onto the hotplate and rushed into the living room. Castiel was standing with his hand on his heart, breathing heavily, and Anna was standing apart from him with wide eyes.

“What?” Sam asked.
“Something has happened,” Anna said. “I felt it through angel radio.”

“What?” Dean asked, turning to Castiel when Anna didn’t answer, “Cas?”

“I don’t know,” Castiel said. “We need to know though.”

Anna nodded. “I will go to Heaven.”

“No Michael?” Sam asked. “Is that a good idea?” Michael hadn’t called Anna back, but Sam didn’t want to give him reason to. He might want to know how Sam was doing, and if he’d heard somehow that Sam was with Dean again, he might think the plan was failing. He might come for Sam.

“We have to know,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

Sam nodded. “Okay. But be careful.”

Anna disappeared and Sam took a breath. “Any idea what it was, Cas?” he asked.

“The only time I’ve even heard something like it was the moment we raised you from Hell, Dean. Angel radio declared the resurrection to the whole host.”

“You think someone’s been brought back?” Dean asked.

“I don’t know,” Castiel said. “It could be anything. Any great event would cause them to cry out.”

Sam ran a hand through his hair. He was worried. They were so close now. If they could just have a little longer, long enough for Crowley to bring them the Lance, it wouldn’t matter. It would be too late for the angels to do anything.

“It might not be that bad,” Bobby said reasonably.

“It might not,” Dean said. “But it probably is. When was the last time you knew us to be lucky?”

There was the sound of an angel’s arrival, and Sam’s eyes found Anna coming into the room. “How bad?” he asked.

“Michael has a vessel,” she said.

“What? But Dean’s here,” Bobby said.

“And I’m the real deal, not a shapeshifter,” Dean said.

“It’s another Winchester,” Anna said.

Sam felt the color drain from his face. “Our dad?” He was scared Michael had decided to go with what had worked for him before and taken John again. Had he been the one that was raised, for this purpose?

“He was called Adam,” Anna said.

Sam and Dean looked at each other, and Sam saw the same horror he felt reflected in Dean’s eyes.

“He’s our brother,” Sam said.

“Well he’s Michael now,” Anna said brutally. “He’s ready, Sam. It’s only a matter of time before
he comes for you. We need to hide.”

“Where?” Sam asked desperately.

“Calm down, boy,” Bobby said. “You’ve hidden from Lucifer and that ass Zachariah this long. You can do it a little longer. Rufus has a place in Montana. We can squirrel you away there and ward the place against angels.”

“Will that work?” Dean asked.

“Maybe,” Anna said. “We need Crowley though. He has the only thing we can use to fight back.”

Sam turned away and looked at his mantle piece of pictures. His whole life was there, and he was going to have to run from it. They didn’t have time to wait for Crowley to come to him here. He was going to have to go into hiding and hope he came soon. How much harder would it be to kill Lucifer if Michael was coming for him though?

Someone cleared his throat, and Sam looked around at the entryway to the hall where Crowley stood. “Trouble? Guess it’s a good job I brought this then, isn’t it?” He raised a long, rich brown lance with a silver speared tip. “Who’s ready to kill the Devil?”
“Who’s ready to kill the Devil?”

Sam stared at Crowley and he felt the rush of adrenaline at his question.

“That’s Michael’s Lance?” Bobby said, sounding awed.

“No, it’s my new walking stick,” Crowley said sarcastically. “Do you like it?”

Sam walked forward and examined the weapon. Intricate runes were carved into the shaft and point, and the metal gleamed at its wickedly sharp point. For a moment, Sam wondered how it was going to feel to be pierced by it. He quickly pushed away the thought.

He glanced to the side to see Anna’s reaction but she wasn’t there. He looked behind him and saw that she was just inside the kitchen. He quickly turned back to Crowley, not wanting to draw attention to her absence as he had an idea of what she was doing.

“So, you’re taking it now, yes?” Crowley asked. “I want rid of the damn thing so I can find myself a nice deep hole to hide in until this is all over. I don’t want to be caught up in this particular fight, thanks.”

Sam took the Lance from him, feeling its weight. He lifted it and noted the perfect balance. It would be a powerful weapon, even without the magic of Michael in its creation.

“Got it?” Crowley asked. “I’m out of here. Good luck.” He disappeared without a sound.

Sam breathed out shakily and turned the Lance in his hand.

Dean reached out and touched the shaft. “It definitely looks like it could do the job.”

“Does that mean we’re ready?” Bobby asked. “Do you have the holy oil, too?”

Sam nodded. “It’s in the study.” He turned back to Anna and saw her standing just in view of the living room. Her right hand was concealed, but in her left was her angel blade and it was bloody.

“Castiel!” Anna said harshly.

Castiel turned, confused, and then held up a hand as if to stop her before he was ripped from the room by the flash of blue-white light.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dean shouted at her as she walked into the living room.

Anna didn’t answer him. She stopped beside Bobby and pressed her fingers to his forehead. He flopped back into the chair, boneless, his chin resting on his chest.

Dean looked from Anna to Sam, and Sam saw he understood what was happening. He raised his hands as she advanced on him, and he said, “Don’t you dare! Sam, don’t do this, not to me. You can’t…”
Before he could finish, Anna had pressed her fingertips to his head and he fell backwards. Anna caught him and guided him down onto the couch; then she came to Sam and held out a hand for the Lance. Sam gave it to her, wanting the weapon that would kill him in the hands of the person that would wield it.

“Are you ready?” Anna asked.

“Give me a minute,” Sam said. He went into his bedroom and took the blankets from his bed and carried them back into the living room. He adjusted Bobby’s head so it looked more comfortable and then draped a blanket over him then went to Dean. He slipped a pillow under his head and covered him with the second blanket, then just look at him for a moment, taking his last look at his brother, before turning back to Anna and saying, “I’m ready. Take me to Detroit.”

“I won’t be able to stay with you when you get there,” she reminded him. “You’ll be on your own with him.”

Sam nodded. He knew this much already from their planning sessions. She would get him as close to Lucifer as she could dare by sensing him, and then she’d wipe the sigils from his ribs so Lucifer could find him. From there it would be down to Sam to do the rest until he had control. He would then pray to her and she would come. And then… then he would die.

“Let’s go,” he said.

He closed his eyes as he felt himself being moved and then opened them when he felt cool air on his face. They were standing in a fetid alley with dumpsters against the wall, overflowing with trash bags.

“He’s here?” Sam asked. He’d imagined somewhere a little more opulent for Lucifer’s lair.

“He’s close,” Anna said. “He should find you.” She laid a hand on his chest and said, “Here goes.”

Sam felt the sharps pains as if his ribs were breaking and healing at once, much worse than what he had felt when Elias had him.

“It’s done,” Anna said. “Good luck.”

“The letters?” Sam asked. It felt more vital than ever that Dean and Missouri get them in that moment. He couldn’t leave them without that goodbye.

“I’ll do it now,” she promised.

She disappeared and Sam took a breath of the foul air. Lucifer was close; he just had to find him.

He walked out of the alley onto the road. He wasn’t alone on the sidewalk. There was an elderly woman with shopping bags in her hands, the kind of woman Sam would usually offer to help, and there were three men leaning against a wall by a recessed doorway, smoking cigarettes. A man passed him jangling a set of keys in his hand.

Sam looked around and wondered how he was supposed to find Lucifer. He had to act quickly before Michael decided to search for him. He wouldn’t struggle to find him now he had lost the Enochian protection.

Knowing that time was of the essence, Sam walked into the middle of the street and shouted. “I’m here! Come and get me, Lucifer.”
He knew he looked like a crazy person, and from the sensation of eyes on him, he knew he wasn’t the only person that thought so, but he didn’t care. As long as Lucifer came, nothing else mattered.

The men leaning against the wall dropped their cigarettes on the ground and walked towards him. Sam paid them no attention, they weren’t who he needed and they couldn’t hurt him, until they were close enough to see clearly. Their smiles were wide and their eyes black.

“I want to see your boss,” Sam said.

“And he wants to see you,” the taller of the demons said.

He grabbed the back of Sam’s neck and pushed him towards the doorway they’d been lurking outside of. Sam didn’t resist. They were taking him where he wanted to be. A demon got ahead of him and grabbed his arm, dragging him through the door and up the stairs. Sam was starting to worry this wasn’t the place, it was awfully dark and dingy, and then the demon opened a door at the top of the landing and pushed him inside.

The only light in the room came from the streetlight outside the window, which silhouetted Lucifer. His vessel had deteriorated since Sam had seen him last. The skin appeared to be rotting off of his vessel’s face. It didn’t make him look weak; if anything, he seemed even more dangerous now.

Sam hadn’t seen him in thirty-two years, but he hadn’t forgotten a detail of him or the way he felt to be around him, cold and full of fear. He had to swallow down panic and force himself to look the devil in the eye.

“Sam,” Lucifer greeted with a warm smile. “How are you?”

Sam gritted his teeth and stared back into his eyes.

“That good?” Lucifer asked. “I am surprised to see you already. I thought it would take you a little longer to come round to the truth.”

“I’m here now,” Sam said.

Lucifer stepped closer to him and Sam had to fight the urge to move back. Lucifer leaned close and examined Sam carefully. “What did Castiel do to you?”

“Nothing,” Sam said.

“The grace… No, that’s not Castiel. He’s not that strong.” His eyes widened. “It was Michael. He engrained you with grace. I can see it. Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know,” Sam said.

“You’re lying to me, Sam. It doesn’t matter really. I will find out soon. Besides, it saves me and you an unpleasant task. Ordinarily you would need to prepare yourself for me, a large dose of demon blood to put your vessel at the peak of strength, but Michael has already done that for you. You should be grateful to him. I imagine you would find the blood distasteful now you’ve kicked the habit. This is much easier all round. Now, before we move on, I have a question; why are you here, Sam?”

“To say yes.”

Lucifer raised an eyebrow. “Really. What did it? Was it California? I imagine that was particularly
hard to bear.”

Sam felt a chill of fear. He hadn’t heard anything about California. “What happened in California?” He hated having to ask Lucifer anything, but he needed to know.

“The San Andreas fault shifted,” Lucifer said solemnly, as if he was distressed by the news. “A 6.9 on your human scale. I hear San Francisco took the brunt of the damage.”

Sam felt the color drain from his face as he thought of the people he loved that could be hurt. James, Tess… Patience! What had happened to them? Were they okay? Had Sam’s great mistake cost them, too?

He felt sick. More than almost anything he wanted to run from this room, to get to a phone and call James, to find out if they were okay. It was only the fact that he knew he could do nothing for them, even if they weren’t, that held him in place. All he could do was stop Lucifer. That was the only way he could keep them safe.

“You didn’t know?” Lucifer guessed. “Then what brought you here?”

“I want it over,” Sam said. “I know we can’t stop you now. All we can do is try to save as many as we can.”

Lucifer nodded slowly. “That’s why you took out my Croatoan operations. I see. Don’t worry, Sam, I won’t start them up again. I will give you that win if you give your consent to me. I will let the world that remains carry on. That’s a fair price for having you.”

“You swear?” Sam asked, as if he was looking for encouragement.

“Cross my heart and hope to die,” Lucifer said with a smile.

Sam nodded. “Then I’ll do it.”

“Is that a yes?” Lucifer asked hopefully. “You have to say the word. Do you, Sam Winchester, give me consent to your vessel?”

Sam drew a deep breath and spoke loudly and clearly, the moment there at last. “Yes.”

Lucifer smiled beatifically and stretched his arms at his sides. The light seemed to pour from him and come at Sam. It blinded him, filling his vision and chilling his body, and then it was in him, turning his skin to ice, and darkness descended.

xXx

Sam opened his eyes and found he was still in the same room the demons had dragged him to. The demons were gone, but Lucifer was still there. He looked different though. The skin on his face was whole and healed, and he seemed to have an aura of the blue-white light that Sam associated with angels. He didn’t understand. He had given consent, why was he still here?

Lucifer tilted his head to the side and said. “Well, that’s quite some story, Sam.”

“What’s happening?” he asked.

Lucifer smiled. “Ahh, I see. You think we’re still out there. No, Sam, this is your head. I’m surprised you chose this place to rest, but I suppose you were overwhelmed. Would you like me to help you out? Let’s take you home.”
The room around him shimmered and Sam found himself in his own living room. Dean and Bobby weren’t there, but everything else was just as he’d left it. There were coffee cups on tables, and Sam’s photo album was on the side of the chair where Bobby had left it.

“That’s better, isn’t it?” Lucifer asked. “Familiar surroundings will make this easier for you.”

“You’re in me?” Sam asked. “This is my head?”

“It is. I wanted you to have a place where you could feel safe while I did what I needed to do.”

So Sam had to get out of here to take control. It was going to be more complicated than just leaving, he knew. He had to physically take control. It was time to fight.

He ran at Lucifer, surprised when he was able to catch him around the chest and barrel him down to the floor. He gripped Lucifer around the throat and squeezed, but the devil just smiled as he pulled Sam’s hands away and rolled him so he was pinning him down.

“That wasn’t nice, Sam.”

Sam reached for his eyes with clawed hands, but Lucifer leaned back and said, “I don’t think so.” He sighed. “I know what you’re doing. I see you and that Anna have the Lance, but you will not be able to use it. I am stronger that you. I am an archangel. You cannot control me; I control you. I will not allow that weapon again.” Sam noticed there was a note of something like fear in Lucifer’s voice now. He may not be scared of Sam, but he was scared of the Lance. Castiel was right: he hadn’t forgotten.

“I will kill you,” Sam gritted out between his teeth.

“I know you’ll try,” Lucifer said. “And I understand it even. You have had a long time to prepare for this moment, more than three decades, and you thought you were ready, but you’re just not strong enough, Sam. No man is.” He pushed off of Sam and stood up. “Now, if you will be quiet and listen to me, we can make a deal.”

As soon as Lucifer was off of him, Sam jumped to his feet and ran at him again. Lucifer caught him and threw him back against the mantle piece, knocking some of the photos to the floor. He hit his head hard and he felt blood slipping down the back of his neck. He’d been hurt and the pain wasn’t going away as it should. Apparently Michael’s protection didn’t extend to this battle within his own mind.

He saw the glass of the photographs that had been knocked down had broken. Patience’s face had been slice by a shard of glass, her beautiful smile marred. Sam stared at it and felt a wave of shame. He had failed. He’d thought that, by living through the years he had and staying strong enough to not go to Dean at the end, he would be able to do this, that it meant he was strong enough for this fight. Not once had he and Anna discussed what would happen if he couldn’t control Lucifer. They had both been arrogant enough to believe they’d win. And now Sam had doomed the world.

Michael had his vessel, and he would come to fight Lucifer soon. All the people Sam loved would be lost in the shockwave.

He felt a cry of misery rise in his throat that he forced down. He would not let Lucifer see his pain.

“If you’re not going to behave, I’ll have no choice but to bind you,” Lucifer said.

“Fuck you,” Sam snarled.

“So be it,” Lucifer said.
He pointed a hand at Sam and gold chains made of light encircled his wrists and held them together like handcuffs. It was the same thing Lucifer had done to Death. Sam struggled to free himself, but the light was as strong as iron chains.

“I have things to do,” Lucifer said. “Michael will be here soon. If you would like to watch, feel free to come, but know that you can’t interfere.”

He walked out of the room to the hall and Sam heard the front door open. He followed him outside, but instead of seeing the trees that surrounded the house in the real world, Sam saw they were in a cemetery. The graves were old, and the letters on the headstones were barely discernable. The grass was unkempt and, in the distance, there was an old chapel that listed to the side. The entrance, that seemed to lead into mist, was marked by an iron arch that declared it as Stull Cemetery. Sam knew the place as he’d driven past it many times over his life. It was just outside Lawrence.

Lucifer walked away from Sam and said, “He’s not here yet. We have a little time. Let’s talk about what Michael did to you. I want you to know that I would never have done that to you. I wouldn’t have taken you away from your brother. I of all people know how much that hurt you. I can see all that pain in your mind. I can see everything and what a sight it is. The things you saw… And let’s not forget the people. So many more for you to love now, Sam. It’s them I would like to talk about. You know now that you can’t win, I am going to kill Michael and I will control the world, but it doesn’t have to end there for the people you care about. Dean and Missouri, Castiel and Bobby, your son and his wife, even sweet Patience, I can save them all. They’ll live a happy and peaceful life if you let them. If you don’t, I will peel the skin from that little girl’s flesh and make her grandmother eat it.”

Sam’s mind blazed. He hadn’t been tempted by Lucifer’s offer, he’d known he would have to keep fighting to win for the world, but Lucifer had threatened Patience, and that was one step too far. If there was anything to guarantee Sam would fight back again, it was the sweetest, most innocent person in Sam’s life.

He lifted his hands and the golden bonds broke. He roared with rage and ran at Lucifer, knocking him back to rest against one of the gravestones. He pinned him down with his knees on Lucifer’s chest and gripped Lucifer’s hair and slammed his head into the gravestone. Blood slicked his hands and Lucifer’s eyes widened with what Sam hoped was fear. He did it again, cracking Lucifer’s head into the old stone until he felt something give inside, some part of him breaking. Lucifer’s eyes drifted to half mast, and Sam leaned in close and growled into his ear.

“I am in charge now.”

As the words left him, the scene around him shimmered and changed. He felt cold air on his face and the breeze ruffling his hair. There was give to his steps on the long grass. It was morning again; the sun was just reaching for the height of the sky. He had lost time inside himself.

Lucifer was still crumpled at the base of the headstone, his hair bloody, but his outline was insubstantial, as if he wasn’t really there. Sam was in control, and he knew what he had to do.

“Anna!” he shouted.

She appeared with a flutter of noise, and Sam saw exquisite relief on her face. “I thought…”

“He nearly did,” Sam said, knowing what the fear she was speaking of. “It was a hell of a fight.”

“You have control now,” she said. “Are you ready?”
Sam took a deep breath. “Yes.”

She walked towards him, lifting the Lance at her side to strike, her expression sad but determined.

“Take care of them all for me,” Sam said. “Especially Dean. He’s not going to understand.”

Anna nodded. “I will, I promise. Thank you, Sam.”

Sam smiled and spread his arms at his side, lifting his head to the sky and closing his eyes. “Thank you, Anna.”

They were to be his last words, and he thought it was right that they be used to thank the person that made the moment of victory possible. He waited for the pain to come, but then there was a flutter of noise and a cry of shock.

His eyes snapped open, and he saw Michael walking towards him at the same moment Lucifer sprung up from his place on the ground and rushed at Sam.

Lucifer caught him in the side and threw him to the ground. Before Sam could even rally a defense, Lucifer was raining blows on his face. His nose broke and blood spilled from it, wetting his face. His eyes squeezed close as if that could protect them, and Lucifer’s fists beat at him mercilessly. Sam tried to headbutt him, but Lucifer caught him with a blow across the jaw, dazing him.

“I am in control now,” Lucifer snarled at him.

Sam felt the weight leaving him and he rolled onto his side. He knew Lucifer was right in what he said straight away. The air was motionless again, and there was no coolness against his bruised and swollen face.

Sam’s eyes found Anna and he saw that she was crumped on the ground, her lip bleeding. The Lance was feet away from her, lying useless on the grass. He staggered towards it, and reached down to pick it up, but his hand moved through it as if he was made of smoke. He wasn’t really there. He was trapped inside his own head. It was just because Lucifer was letting him be that Sam was there to see what was happening.

“Hello, Brother,” Lucifer said, walking towards Michael.

“Lucifer.”

“You’re been busy,” Lucifer said. “I know what you did to Sam.”

Michael nodded stiffly. “It worked to a fashion. You have him.”

“You didn’t anticipate her involvement though, did you?” Lucifer asked, gesturing at Anna on the ground.

“I didn’t at first,” Michael agreed. “But I realized she was plotting something only a short while ago. I let it play out, as I wanted to know what she was planning. Now I know, and I will kill her for the betrayal—after I kill you, of course.”

“Why though?” Lucifer asked. “We’re brothers. We shouldn’t fight.”

Michael laughed harshly. “We were brothers until you betrayed us. You were the one that did this, Lucifer. When I kill you, it will be your own fault.”

“It was not my fault,” Lucifer said. “I was doing what Father wanted. He wanted me to betray Him.
He needed the Devil to make Himself look even more powerful.”

Michael shook his head. “You’re wrong, Lucifer. You were always wrong. You brought this upon yourself.”

Sam looked at the angels he hated, not sure which one he wanted dead more. They both threatened the world, and they’d both done this to him. Michael had trapped him, taking him away from Dean, leaving him to create the relationships that were tearing him apart now in his failure. And it was because of Lucifer that it was happening. He had needed Sam, and that was why Sam was in this place now.

“We fight then?” Lucifer asked regretfully.

Michael nodded. “We fight.”

He stepped forward slowly, as if he wasn’t remotely concerned for his own safety, and landed a blow to Lucifer’s jaw. A rumble of thunder rolled directly overhead, pressing in at Sam’s ears, and lightning struck the cross on the top of the chapel.

Lucifer’s head rocked to the side, and he staggered back a few steps.

“Sam,” Anna whispered. “Fight.”

But how? Lucifer had beaten him bloody once. How was he supposed to beat him?

Michael lay another blow, this one on Lucifer’s chest, and Sam realized what he had to do. He knew he couldn’t overpower Lucifer alone now, but he might be able to with Michael’s help. He rushed to stand behind Lucifer and grabbed his head, one hand under the chin and another gripping his forehead. When Michael landed his next blow, Sam used the momentum to twist, and Lucifer’s head turned unnaturally, his neck breaking. He fell to the floor and Sam felt himself being thrust forward, and he felt the air again just as Michael landed a blow to his chest. It was so powerful that Sam knew it would have turned his heart to pulp if he hadn’t had Lucifer’s strength and grace protecting him; it still made him stagger back though.

“Sam?” Michael said questioningly. “Is that you?”

“Yes, you bastard,” Sam said bitterly.

Michael smiled. “You do realize the mistake you just make, don’t you? It will be a hundred times easier for me to kill you than to kill Lucifer.”

“I don’t think so,” Sam said.

He was fighting for more. Lucifer didn’t want to hurt his brother; Sam wanted little more. He wanted to see Michael dead, punished for what he had done, and he wanted to save the world. This would be an even better outcome than that of their original plan. He would end them both, not just Lucifer. The world would truly be safe.

Michael punched him across the temple, and Sam shook his head to clear it. “You’ll have to do better,” he said, his words almost drowned out by the thunder above him.

He saw Anna in his peripheral vision, getting to her feet and creeping toward the Lance, but Michael knew somehow what she was doing. He thrust out a hand and the Lance rolled away from her. “I don’t think so,” he said.
Sam wished for a weapon. He considered running for the Lance, he was surely faster than Anna now, but before he could act, he felt something cool sliding into his hand. He gripped it automatically, and saw that, on the ground, there was a blade in Lucifer’s hand, too. He had given Sam the archangel blade; he wanted Sam to do it, too.

Sam slashed up with the sword, cutting Michael across the chest, and Michael fell back a few steps. Sam advanced on him. Michael drew his own blade and jabbed at Sam who had to jump back to dodge it.

Anna appeared behind Michael and she did something strange. In her hand was her own blade, but she dropped it and held out a hand to Sam. He understood what she wanted, and even though it was a risk, he trusted her. Perhaps she knew something he didn’t.

He lurched into Michael’s space and punched him with all his strength. Michael’s head rocked to the side, and Sam shouted, “Anna!” as he threw Lucifer’s blade to her. She caught it and raised it threateningly.

Michael turned to her and said, “Do you really think you can kill me, mouse?”

“Yes!” Anna said viciously.

She struck at the same moment Sam did. He threw his arms around Michael, pinning his arms to his sides as she thrust forward with the blade, sliding it into Michael’s chest.

Sam was thrown back and he landed hard on the ground as white light blazed from Michael’s eyes and mouth. The archangel fell to the ground, blood blossoming on his chest over his heart, and still the light poured from him as his back arched.

Anna staggered back and Sam got quickly to his feet, moving back from Michael. He almost feared some kind of explosion, but the end, when it came, was anticlimactic. Michael’s back flattened on the floor, and the light disappeared. His eyes remained open, but there was no awareness there.

“You killed him,” a voice said behind Sam.

He turned and saw Lucifer still lying on the ground, his blade no longer in his hand. He looked defeated, bloodied and beaten.

“You wanted it,” Sam said.

“I did,” Lucifer said.

“Sam?” Anna said.

He turned away from Lucifer and saw that she was walking toward him with the Lance in her hand. He nodded and walked forward to meet her.

“It’s time,” she said.

“I know.”

Sam thought he could go with more peace than before now. Michael was dead, Lucifer would be, the world was safe and Sam was going to see the people he loved again when it was over. He was leaving so many behind, and they would grieve him, but one day they would be reunited.

“George is waiting,” Anna said.
Sam smiled. “Yes.” He held out his arms and looked her in the eyes. “Do it.”

She drew back the Lance and Sam closed his eyes. He was ready. He heard Anna’s indrawn breath and then a voice he’d not thought he would ever hear again in life; he’d hoped he wouldn’t because that meant he would see.

“Sam! No!”

It was Dean. He had come.
“Dean! Wake up!”

Someone was shaking him, dragging him from the peaceful dreams of a life where Sam had never been trapped and Lucifer had never risen. He had Sam were in the Impala, driving back from a successful rugaru hunt, heading to Bobby’s where beer and pizza awaited them. Dean didn’t want to leave the dream as he remembered pain in the real world that he didn’t feel ready to face.

There was a sharp blow across his face, and his eyes snapped open to see Castiel leaning over him, his right hand fisted and prepared to strike again. There was a phone ringing.

Dean caught his wrist and said, “Okay, I’m up. Take it easy. What’s going on?”

“Sam,” Castiel said tersely, moving to Bobby and shaking his shoulder.

Dean sat up, pushing off the blanket that covered him and looking around. He was on the couch in Sam’s living room. Bobby was in the chair with a blanket over him, too, and Castiel was now trying to rouse him.

“What about Sam?” Dean asked.

“Don’t you remember?” Castiel asked as Bobby stirred.

Dean searched his memory and then gasped as what had happened rushed back at him. Crowley had come with the Lance, Anna had banished Castiel and then knocked him and Bobby out. Sam had gone after Lucifer alone!

He scrambled to his feet and looked around the room as if an answer for what he could do would present itself to him. There was nothing. He had to stop Sam, but he didn’t know how.

The phone stopped ringing and the machine picked up. Sam’s voice spoke for a moment, asking the caller to leave a message, and then Dean heard Missouri’s panicked tones. “Sam! Please, if you’re there, pick up. Don’t do this. You can’t. Please, just talk to me. There has to be another way.”

Dean snatched up the phone. “Missouri?”

“Dean!” she said wildly. “Is he there? You have to stop him. He’s doing something terrible. He left me a letter.”

“He’s going after Lucifer,” Dean said.

“He’s going after him to die!” Missouri said desperately. “He said he has to. He’s going to kill himself.”

“Sam would never do that.”

“He thinks it’s the only way to do it,” Missouri said. “He says he has to die to win.”
Dean swore harshly. Sam wouldn’t kill himself, but he would let himself die to stop Lucifer.

“He’s got the Lance,” he said quietly.

He heard Missouri sob.

“I have to go,” Dean said. “We’ll stop him.”

He ended the call and dropped the phone down onto the dresser. “Sam’s going to die,” he said, surprised to find that his panic hadn’t made its home in his voice. He sounded calm, factual.

“He’s gone after Lucifer,” Bobby corrected.

“To die,” Dean said. “He left Missouri a letter.”

Bobby paled. “Like that one?”

He pointed at the foot of the sofa where Dean had lain. There was a white envelope on it with his name printed in Sam’s handwriting. Dean picked it up but didn’t open it. He didn’t need to know what it said. Whatever Sam thought he needed to hear he could say himself when he’d found him.

He took a breath and wrangled his panicked thoughts. “We need to go to Detroit. It’s where Lucifer said it would happen.”

“It’s a damn big city, Dean,” Bobby said, his voice harsh. “How the hell are we supposed to find him?”

Dean raked a hand through his hair. “I don’t know, but we have to. Cas, is there something you can do?”

Castiel started to shake his head and then he froze. “I can sense him again. His sigils aren’t working.”

“You can sense Sam?” Bobby asked.

“Yes,” Castiel said. “He’s not in Detroit; he’s close.”

“Take me there!” Dean demanded.

He felt the disconcerting sensation of being moved and then they were at the gates of a cemetery. His eyes found Sam at once. He was standing with his arms spread at his sides and his eyes closed. Anna was facing him with the Lance in her hand, the tip pointed at Sam’s chest. Even as he took in the scene, she drew the Lance back, preparing to strike.

“Sam! No!” he shouted, already running forward.

Castiel was faster. He appeared beside Anna, his blade in his hand. Without a second’s hesitation, he thrust it into her back, making her arch away as white light blazed from her.

“No!” Sam shouted desperately. “Anna!”

Castiel pulled back his sword and Anna fell to the ground. Dark ashy wings appeared on the grass, stretching from her back, and Sam tangled his hands in his hair, looking desperate. “No,” he whispered.

Dean ran at him, passing Adam’s body with its own ashy wings spreading from it. The fact
Michael was dead didn’t register with him; he was consumed with Sam.

He wasn’t sure whether he wanted to hug him or punch him, but he skidded to a stop before he was within a dozen feet and froze as Sam’s eyes glowed with light and he laughed. When he spoke, his voice didn’t sound like his own. “Thanks for that, Castiel,” he said. “You did me a real solid there. I’m sorry I have to pay you back like this, but you’re too easily corruptible.”

He snapped his fingers and Castiel exploded in a mist of blood.

Dean cried out inarticulately and Bobby shouted, “No!”

Sam laughed harshly and then broke off as his eyes glowed again. His expression became stricken and he whispered, “Cas, no…”

“What the hell have you done, Sam?” Bobby asked.

Sam raised his eyes from the blood-spattered grass where Castiel had been and looked from Bobby to Dean. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Dean rushed at him—his anger at what had happened, what Sam had almost done, and his horror for Castiel rising in him—and punched Sam across the jaw. It was like hitting a brick wall. Sam’s head didn’t even move.

“Stop, Dean,” Bobby snapped, rushing to his side and forcing his fisted hand down. “Do you want to end up like Cas?”

“Don’t do that again, Dean,” Sam said. “I don’t know how much longer I can hold him back.”

“Lucifer?” Dean asked. He knew that was what had happened, he seen it, but he didn’t want to believe.

“He’s in here,” Sam said. “I said yes.”

“Why would you do that?” Bobby asked.

“Because it had to end,” Sam said. “I was the only one that could do it. Anna was supposed to kill him.”

Dean understood it all now. Sam hadn’t given in or been tricked; he’d intentionally let Lucifer in so he could be killed, himself along with the Devil.

“How could you do this?” he asked.

“You weren’t supposed to know,” Sam said. “Not until it was over.”

“This is why you hid from us,” Bobby said.

Sam nodded. “I was supposed to be gone before you found out what happened.”

He bent down over Anna and closed her staring eyes then picked up the Lance. Dean watched as he weighed it in his hands, and then tried to bring it to his chest.

Dean was frozen in place. He couldn’t believe what Sam was doing, and though he knew he needed to stop him, he couldn’t move. All he could do was croak, “No.”

Sam stared at him a moment, and then awkwardly jabbed the Lance at his chest. It was pushed
back as if it had hit a wall, and Dean’s paralysis broke. He rushed forward, but Bobby was quicker. He yanked the Lance out of Sam’s hand and threw it away.

“Stop!” Bobby snapped.

“I can’t do it,” Sam said miserably. “I can’t use it to hurt myself. It won’t let me.”

“Good,” Bobby said brutally.

Sam stared at him. “You can’t mean that! Don’t you see what I’m trying to do?”

“I see you trying to kill yourself,” Bobby snapped.

Sam’s eyes flashed with light again and he said in a mocking voice, “But, Bobby, it’s for a good reason. I’m not just suicidal; I’m trying to stop the big bad devil.”

His eyes flashed again and Sam sagged as if exhausted. “I don’t have long. We’ve got to do it now.”

“Do what?” Dean asked.

“You’ve got to kill me.”

“No, there has to be another way,” Dean said. “You’ve got him now. We’ll find a way to stop him.”

“I don’t have the strength to hold him,” Sam said. “Michael is dead now. There’s no one else that can end it.” He shook his head and picked up the Lance then held it out to Bobby. “You have to do it.”

Bobby stepped back, hands raised. “Get that thing away from me.”

“Please,” Sam said miserably. “Someone has to do it. I can’t do it to myself, and he has to be stopped.”

“You can’t ask me to do that,” Bobby said,

“I have to,” Sam said. “It’s the only way. You’re the only one that will.” He flinched and his eyes glowed again before Lucifer said mockingly, “I think Sammy’s got a point; Poppa Singer is the obvious choice. I think you’re already considering it, aren’t you, old man? Got to put a stop to that.”

He raised a hand slowly, his eyes fixed on Bobby, and then twisted it to the side. At the same moment there was a sick cracking sound and Bobby’s head snapped to the side as his neck broke.

Dean shouted, “Bobby,” and reached for him, but it was dead weight that he caught and lowered to the ground. Bobby was gone, too. He stared down at his old friend and felt the weight pressing down on his chest hard enough to choke him.

Sam sucked in a breath, and when he spoke, it was his own voice, choked with tears. “Make it stop, Dean. Please, stop him. I don’t want to see you die, too. I can’t hold him. I’m so tired.”

Dean looked at him, his eyes blurred with tears, and saw the absolute misery on Sam’s face that he himself felt.

Sam held out the Lance to him. “It’s me or the world now. Castiel is gone, Bobby, too. You’ll be
next if you don’t help me, and then there will be no one left on earth to stop him.”

“No, Sammy,” Dean breathed.

“It has to end this way. It always had to. It wasn’t Michael that trapped me in 1978; it was Fate. I was supposed to live those years, to form this plan, and Anna was supposed to find the weapon. It was always going to end this way. Michael must defeat the serpent. Remember? You are the Michael Sword. Lucifer is the Serpent. You have to.”

Dean stared into his eyes and saw the certainty there. Sam truly believed what he was saying. Maybe he was right that it had to end here, but not at Dean’s hand. He could not kill his brother.

“For Patience,” Sam said. “You’d love her, too, I know it. She’s everything good about the world. End this to protect her and everyone else.”

“I can’t kill you, Sam.”

“Not even to save the world?” He shook his head slightly. “I always thought it had to be me that would save the world, but it wasn’t. It has to be you.” He shuddered. “He’s fighting me again. You have to do it now. Do it for the world, for Patience, for me. Please.”

He held out the Lance again, and this time Dean took it. He wasn’t sure which of Sam’s pleas had reached him, perhaps them all, but he saw there was really no choice. It would destroy him to lose Sam, but he saw how he already had. Lucifer was never going to leave Sam. He would ride him for eternity, destroying the world as he went, and there really wouldn’t be anyone to stop him. This was the only way to end it.

“Thank you,” Sam said.

Dean closed his eyes and a tear slipped down his cheek. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stop this.”

“I’m sorry I started it,” Sam said in a choked voice.

Dean lifted the Lance, aiming it at Sam’s chest, and then an exhilarating thought came to him. Sam couldn’t die. This Lance was Michael’s, created to kill Lucifer, not Sam. The grace that Michael had given to Sam would heal the wound made by the Lance. If Dean did this right, he would kill Lucifer but save Sam. They would both win.

“It’s going to be okay, Sammy,” he said gently. “You’re going to be okay.”

Sam nodded and spread his arms as if welcoming the end.

Dean drew back his arm and plunged the tip of the blade into Sam’s chest. It went through him like a knife through butter, slicing easily through his flesh. He pulled it out and stepped back, waiting for the light show that would be the end of Lucifer.

It didn’t come.

Sam staggered back and fell, coming to rest leaning against a tall headstone. Blood spilled from the wound, soaking his shirt, but his eyes were still open. He was smiling.

Dean dropped to his knees beside him and gripped Sam’s shoulder. “Did it work?” he asked. “Is he gone?”

Sam shook his head. “No, but he’s beaten. He’s too weak to take control again.”
“Why isn’t he dead? Why aren’t you healing?”

Sam flinched and groaned. When he spoke, his voice was weak. “Michael wanted him to suffer. It will happen but not fast.”

“But you’re not healing,”

Sam smiled sadly and patted Dean’s hand where it lay on his shoulder. “I can’t heal from this.”

Dean jerked back, his hands falling useless at his sides. “It’s going to kill you? But you were supposed to be okay. I thought you would be!”

“I heal because of Michael’s grace,” Sam said. “The Lance destroys grace. We’re both dying now.”

Dean felt sick. He yanked off his coat and pressed it against Sam’s chest. He had thought he could live with it. The price of the world had been Sam’s life, and he’d been able to bear it, but now he realized he couldn’t. He could not lose Sam like that.

Sam pushed at him weakly, trying to stop him. “It has to happen, Dean. It has to end.”

“No,” Dean growled.

“Yes.” He licked his lips. “It’s coming now. I need to talk to you.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Dean snapped. He didn’t want a goodbye. He wanted Sam to fight.

“I love you,” Sam said.

Dean stared at him. Sam hadn’t said that in a long time. Not since he was small and he threw the words around like confetti. Life had beaten the innocence out of him and had stolen the words

“It took me thirty-two years to say it, and that was too damn long.” Sam went on. “When I was trapped, when I realized I couldn’t see you again, I knew that the worst part was that I could never say it to you. I’m sorry it had to happen like this, but I’m glad I had another chance. I love you, Dean.”

“I love you, too,” Dean said, the words sticking in his throat like fishhooks. Saying them felt like he was letting go of Sam and he couldn’t bear to.

Sam’s next breath came slow and was exhaled in a sigh.

“Hold on!” Dean commanded.

Sam patted his cheek. “Thank you, Dean.”

“No,” Dean said in a strangled voice. “Not yet.”

He didn’t think Sam could hear him anymore though. He was still breathing shallowly, but his eyes were distant. He was smiling as if seeing something good, and as Dean stared at him, watching the life leave him, he saw Sam’s last smile and the whispered word leave him on his last breath.

“George…”

Sam felt the life seeping out of him and, though he knew it was right, he wished it hadn’t happened like this. Fate should never have asked Dean to be the one to do it. Anna would have been the right
person. She would have done it with regret, but it wouldn’t have cost her the same way it would
Dean.

So much loss because of Lucifer: Anna, Castiel, Bobby… Too many people that Sam loved were
gone, and Dean had lost even more.

Sam hoped he would let Missouri near him after. She would be able to take care of him, to help
him cope with that had happened. They could lean on each other. He didn’t know whether Dean
would allow himself that comfort. Even if he did believe he had to do it to save the world, he
wouldn’t be able to forgive himself for not being fast enough to save Castiel and Bobby.

His breaths began to slow, and he could feel Dean close to him still, though he couldn’t see him.
He wondered how it would feel. Would he go to sleep or would there be something that came for
him? Would he see his reaper? Maybe Death would make the visit to close their deal.

Suddenly, a face filled Sam’s vision. It was James. He was young, smiling at Sam across the table
with a forkful of chocolate cake poised to eat. Sam smiled back at him. He saw Missouri’s face as
she laughed with him from across Sam’s half-painted living room, her eyes alight with happiness.

New faces came, and Sam welcomed them. Ray and Carl were standing at the bar of the Brew and
Cue, raising their beer bottles to him in a toast. They disappeared and Sam found himself in a room
cast with blue light. Diana, the woman that had wanted to be a dancer, was moving sinuously in
front of him, her eyes tempting him to join the dance. James was there again, tugging his sleeve to
hurry their path to the Ferris wheel. Sam turned back and saw Missouri laughing.

He saw his family as he’d known them, Dean was dressed as Dracula, so young, and his mother
stood beside him, her eyes alight with love as she looked down at her young son. In the
background was John with Sam as a baby in his arms.

He saw Susie dancing, her hair damp with sweat and her eyes fixed on the stage where Black
Sabbath were pounding their music to the crowd. He saw Dieter standing on the wall, jumping up
and down and shouting, “Tor auf! Tor auf!”

James was there again, almost a man now, standing with Chrissy as they made platters of
sandwiches in the hotel kitchen. He saw May cast him a reassuring smile across the bed where
Paul laid as Sam held the needle to his wounded arm; she was trusting him to know what to do. Bill
Harvelle was holding out his wallet to show Sam the photograph of his family, his face lit by the
campfire. James was riding a wave on his surfboard, his face full of exhilaration. Dean was looking
at him across the table on Sam’s porch, only twenty and no idea what life was planning for him,
but happy in that moment to hear the story of his time-travelling brother.

James and Tess danced at their wedding, and then Patience was in his arms, her tiny fingers tangled
in his beard. Nancy sat on the cushioned couch in the store in Vegas, trying on her insanely high
shoes, her excitement clear. John sat across from him in Missouri’s living room, his eyes serious as
Sam told him the story of the Demon. He saw Missouri holding out her hands to him, encouraging
him to dance to the jazz music.

Dean stood with Missouri in Sam’s own house, his eyes wide as he took Sam in, and Sam
remembered the joy of the moment that lasted only as long as it took regret to seep in. He saw
Bobby in his doorway, greeting Sam after a lifetime apart, and Castiel’s satisfaction as he arrived
and saw Sam there; the way he said his name with affection that meant so much to Sam.

He saw Dean again, he saw sitting on Sam’s couch, relaxed and looking like he had always
belonged there. In another life he would have.
The last face was the person Sam had been expecting at this moment of ending. George sat in his usual chair in their house, a glass of whiskey in his hand and a fond smile on his face, a greeting after another of Sam’s hunts. Sam felt himself smile in return, and he whispered his name, wondering if this was what he meant when he said he would be waiting.

Then the heat came, and Sam’s eyes and mouth flew open.

A voice cried, “No!” and Sam knew it was Lucifer’s last protest.

Sam felt last lingering fears as the light poured from him, filling his vision, and then he felt the irresistible lethargy and he relaxed.

Lucifer was dead. And now, after all the years of waiting, Sam was free of him at last.
Dean knelt at Sam’s side, staring at his brother’s face.

He looked peaceful, as if he was sleeping. Dean had lost everyone he cared about in the world, his whole family now, and he would never be peaceful again, but Sam was. He wasn’t sure if he hated him for it or not.

It would be easier to hate Sam for what he’d done, what he’d made him do; it might take away some of the terrible pain in his chest. He couldn’t though. Sam had been doing what he had to do, he’d made Dean do the same, all for the sake of the world.

Damn the world. Damn archangels and demons and everyone that had brought him to this point. Dean damned himself for what he had done in Hell, how he had broken the seal. He wanted to damn Sam for his part, too, but he found he couldn’t. All his anger and resentment for the demon blood and Ruby, the parts he hadn’t admitted he was feeling even to himself, had died with Sam. Now all he felt was desperate sadness and guilt.

It was easier for Sam, as for him it was over. Dean wanted it over for himself. There was a knife in his boot, ready and waiting for him. All it would take was a slice across the throat; he could cut his carotid and bleed out in seconds. It would end there. He would have the same peace as Sam.

But he couldn’t do it.

Sam would never forgive him if he did. He needed Dean to take care of the people left in the world that he loved: Missouri, James and his wife, his granddaughter Patience. Sam had obviously loved her so much, just as he said he loved Dean. To hear it from Sam had meant a lot to Dean, but he would remove the words from the whole world forever if it would bring Sam back. He would sacrifice anything he had left to give for that.

He raked a hand over his face, feeling Sam’s tacky blood on his palm from where he had tried to staunch his bleeding. His hands were coated in it. He needed to wash it off, he couldn’t bear the feeling of it any longer, but there were other things he needed to do first. Sam and Bobby needed to be taken care of. Castiel was already gone, there was no body to salt and burn for him, but there were for Sam and Bobby. He had to get them out of this place, take them back to Sam’s house where he could prepare them and build the pyres. He couldn’t do it alone though. He had no car there, no way to get them to Sam’s now Castiel was gone. He would have to call someone. The only person he could think of was Missouri, but the thought of bringing her here, to let her see Sam like this was abhorrent. What else could he do though?

“What do I do, Sammy?” he asked. “How am I supposed to do this now I’m alone? There’s no one else…” A sob bubbled up his throat.

He wished more than anything Sam would answer him. That he would tell Dean it was all a mistake, he was alive really, and Dean had dreamed all the horror. He wanted to hear that he’d never really killed Sam, that Bobby and Castiel were alive, and that they were going home to find a new way to deal with Lucifer.
Suddenly, a high-pitched whine cut through the air and Dean heard an indrawn breath. He started to turn slowly, scared of what had come for him—Michael alive, ready to kill Dean and to nullify his last job for Sam.

“Dean.”

Dean’s head snapped around and he saw Castiel standing behind him. He looked sad as his eyes found Bobby and Sam and then moved to the Lance at Dean’s side. Dean knew that he was calculating what had happened. He knew what Dean had done.

“He made me,” Dean said, his voice choked. “I had to stop it. I thought he would heal.”

“I know,” Castiel said gently. “It wasn’t your fault.”

“How are you here?” Dean asked.

“God brought me back.”

Dean lowered head to hide what he was sure was clear in his face. God had chosen Castiel to be returned. He was glad, he didn’t feel so alone anymore, and Castiel was his friend, but why was it only him? Why wasn’t Sam, the one that had saved the world, brought back as well? He deserved it, too.

Castiel moved to Bobby and bent down. Dean watched through his peripheral vision as Castiel pressed a hand to Bobby’s temple and light glowed. Bobby drew in a heaving breath and sat up. His wide eyes found Castiel and he breathed his name before turning to Dean and then Sam. As his eyes fell on Sam, he drew a shaky breath and said, “Oh, no. Sam…”

Dean barely heard his words. His mind was racing with possibilities. He was watching the angel, waiting for his next miracle, but Castiel didn’t act. He just looked at Sam with a look of sadness.

“Cas,” Dean prompted. “Sam.”

“I can’t,” Castiel said miserably. “I can’t save him.”

“Why not?” Dean demanded.

“Because that is a wound from the Lance,” Anna said behind him.

Dean started but he didn’t look at her. He didn’t want to see her; he didn’t want to hear her even. She was back, too, and he hated it. She and Sam had concocted this plan together. She had probably encouraged his plans for death.

“Why not?” Bobby asked. “He brought me back.”

“Because this is an injury borne of an archangel’s weapon. It’s a death we can’t undo. Only God can save him now.”

“Then why doesn’t He?” Dean snapped, getting to his feet and advancing on her. “Sam deserves to live more than you, but he brought you back, right?”

“He did. I don’t know why either, I wish I could help Sam, he was my friend, too, but I can’t.” She pushed back her hair. “He knew this was what was coming, Dean. He knew for a long time that this was how it would end. And he stayed strong. He lived. You need to do the same.”

“Shut your mouth!” Dean snarled. “You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know Sam.
You were just supposed to be his executioner. You’re were never anything more than that to him.”

Anna didn’t answer him. She just looked down at Sam with a furrowed brow.

“We should move him,” Bobby said. “It’s not right to leave him here like this. There’s things we need to do for him.”

“We should,” Castiel agreed. “The other angels will come for Michael soon. They will want his vessel returned to Heaven. We shouldn’t be there for that.”

“Take him home,” Anna said. “Missouri knows what to do next.”

Dean glared at her. “I know what to do. He’s my brother.”

Anna nodded. “He was. And he was Missouri’s family, too. You’re not the only that’s going to grieve, Dean. He didn’t just belong to you.”

Dean’s hands fisted and he took a step towards her, stopping when Bobby laid a hand on his shoulder and said, “Not now, Dean. Let’s take Sam home.”

Dean’s fists unclenched and he too a deep breath. “Yeah. Okay. Cas, can you help?”

“Of course.”

Dean got his arms under Sam and lifted him, holding held him close. There was a moment of silence, and then Dean felt the movement as Castiel took them to the house Sam had called home.

xXx

The first thing to register with Sam was the birdsong. It was louder than it should be, and he wondered if he’d left a window open. He opened his eyes and looked around his living room. He must have fallen asleep. It was unlike him, George had always been the one to nap in his chair in the afternoons, but there had been a lot happening lately and Sam supposed he’d been more tired than he’d realized.

He stretched his arms over his head, feeling the satisfying pops of his joints, and then stood. He noticed the birdsong again and checked the windows. They were closed, but as he walked toward the hall, he saw that the front door was open. He walked out of it, into a warm summer day and started as he heard a voice he hadn’t heard in years. “Hello, Sam.”

George was sitting by the table on the porch, a bottle of whiskey and two glasses ready for them.

“I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to wake up,” he said. “Come, sit down, have a drink.”

Sam sat down mutely, just staring at his friend and wondering how this was possible.

“I know I said beer, but I thought after the day you’ve had, you’d prefer whiskey.” George poured two generous measures and slid one across to Sam. He lifted his own in a toast and said, “To saving the world.”

A chill ran up Sam’s spine as he remembered, despite the warmth of the air, and he said, “It really happened then? Lucifer is dead.”

“He is,” George agreed.
“And so am I?”

“You are. Is that okay?”

“Yes,” Sam said honestly.

“You did it, Sam!” George said triumphantly. “You killed him. He’s really gone.” He was so obviously proud that it made Sam feel even worse for the circumstances. George didn’t understand that it hadn’t been Sam that had done it in the end.

“He is, but it wasn’t me that saved the world, George, it was Dean.”

George frowned. “Dean was there?”

“Yes. He found me. Or Anna and Missouri brought him to me.” He shook his head, sadness welling up in him. “We were about to do it, Michael was dead and Anna had the Lance, but they came and Castiel killed Anna.”

“Michael is dead?”

Sam nodded. “Anna killed him.”

“That’s… It’s wonderful, Sam! It’s really over.”

“It is,” Sam said smiling in spite of himself as the truth of the moment broke over him. They had won.

“How does it feel?”

“It feels amazing. I waited for it for so long, and I wanted it so much, but now I feel guilty.”

George frowned. “Why?”

“I really didn’t save the world, George, it was Dean. All I had to do was die. Dean was the one that had to kill me.”

“Oh… I’m sorry, Sam.”

“It was how it had to happen,” Sam said confidently. He knew it was the truth. “Nothing can be changed. Just because I didn’t know that was how it would happen, it doesn’t mean it wasn’t set in stone. Dean did what he had to do. He saved the world.”

“Then he is as great a man as his brother,” George said.

Sam smiled. George had always seen him as better than he was.

“I hate that it had to be him,” he said.

“But?” George asked.

“But I can’t regret that it’s done now. We waited so long for it. Now it’s over. I’m here; I’m done.” He sipped his drink. “I had a chance to say goodbye. I was able to tell him I loved him. I needed to say it.”

“And I’m sure he needed to hear it,” George said. “Make peace with it, Sam. You did what you had to do, and so did Dean. It’s not going to be easy for him, I’m sure, but one day he will see that it
was worth it. And you will be together again. Somewhere there is a heaven that is waiting for you both.”

“This isn’t my heaven?” Sam asked.

“No, this is mine. I just arranged for you to be diverted here when you arrived.”

“How?”

“I met a friend of yours,” George said, turning his glass of whiskey in his hand. “A rather unusual man called Ash. He essentially runs this place for hunters. He finds us when we arrive and helps us. I imagine it will be even easier for him now Michael is dead. We will all be free to find the people we want without him running the show.”

Sam smiled. It sounded like the perfect occupation for Ash in heaven, helping hunters, and he thought he would like to find him soon and say hello again. And if Ash was helping, he could find everyone even easier. He could see Ellen and Jo again, his parents, Bobby, Jessica even. He would be able to make things right for them after all he’d done.

“So this is your heaven,” Sam said. “Sitting on the porch drinking whiskey?”

“Only sometimes,” George said. “I have endless Mariners games to watch. I can read my books. Mostly I have just been waiting though.”

“For what?” Sam asked.

George rolled his eyes. “For you, Sam. I had a promise to keep.”

“Thank you for keeping it,” Sam said. “It helps.”

“As waiting helped me,” George said. “Eternity can be a long time.”

Sam leaned back in his chair and took a deep breath of the sweet scented air. He thought an eternity of this would be okay, endless time with George and the other people he loved. One day Dean would be there, and Sam could make it right for him, too.

“What would you like to do next?” George asked.

“I think I just want to rest first,” Sam said. “I don’t feel like I’ve really rested properly since college. After Jess died, it all became hard. Even living the life I did with you and Missouri, there was always Lucifer and Michael waiting for me. I want to just be me for a while.”

George nodded. “That sounds good. You can stay here as long as you like. Find your own Heaven when Dean comes.”

“Thanks, George,” Sam said, thinking that it sounded perfect to him. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. “Just a little rest and then I’ll find Ash.”

“That actually might be a problem,” George said, a smile in his voice.

Sam’s eyes snapped open and he saw the white light rushing at him. It halted at the foot of the stairs and pulsed.

“I have a feeling here is not where you will be resting after all,” George said.

Sam eyed the light nervously. “What is it?”
“I don’t know,” George said. “But I think it’s here for you.”

“What do I do?”

George smiled. “You could go with the cliché and trying going into the light.”

Sam looked at him, seeing George’s contentedness. “But I’m happy here,” he said.

“I think you will be happier there. Listen.”

Sam obeyed and he heard Dean’s voice. “I’ll take care of them all for you. I’ll make sure they know what you did for us. And I’ll see you soon, Sammy, I promise.”

“He sounds okay,” Sam said. “I don’t have to go.”

George smiled sadly. “If you really thought he was okay, you wouldn’t be crying.”

Sam wiped at his face and found wetness there from tears he hadn’t even been aware of shedding.

“Go, Sam,” George said. “The people that need you here can wait a little longer. Dean can’t.”

Sam knew he was right. He would come back here one day and be with the people he loved, but the people he’d left behind were waiting there for him, and he had to go to them. He wanted to.

He got to his feet and George did the same and came to him. Sam noticed that George’s limp was gone. He was moving as freely as he had before the accident. Heaven had cured his pains.

Sam embraced George, feeling the comfort of his friend’s presence for a moment, before pulling back.

George patted his shoulder and said, “Say hello to Missouri for me.”

“I will,” Sam said. “Thank you, George.”

George waved a hand. “Go on then. Find your family.”

Sam took one last look at him, saving the image until he would see him again, and walked down the steps. The light reached for him, welcoming him, and Sam took a breath before stepping into it.

xXx

Dean had cleaned Sam up and dressed him in clothes that weren’t stained with his own blood. He had done it alone, refusing Bobby’s offers of assistance, knowing it was his job as Sam’s brother to be the one to do it for him. It was one of the last things he could do for him. The only thing left was to wrap him in the blanket he lay upon and build a pyre. That was something else he wanted to do himself, but he wasn’t ready yet. He wanted just a little longer before he had to say goodbye.

The door creaked open and Anna came in.

“Get out,” Dean said dully.

Anna ignored him, coming further into the room, and said, “Missouri is almost here.”

Dean sighed. He’d known she would come eventually, that she couldn’t sit in her house waiting for news, but he didn’t want her there. He didn’t want her to see Sam like this.
“She needs to know what’s happened before she sees him,” Anna went on. “You should be the one to tell her.”

“Get out!” Dean said again, his voice rising to a shout.

“I can’t,” he said. “I made a promise to Sam I would do this for him, and I will not break it.”

“Do what? What did he want from you after you murdered him?”

“He wanted me to take care of you and the other people left behind.”

“There’s nothing we need that you can give. You can’t bring Sam back, so you’re useless. We don’t want you. You were going to kill him.”

“And I would have if Castiel hadn’t killed me,” she said. “Neither of us ever wanted you to see, let alone be the one forced to do it. Sam would never have wanted that for you. He tried to shield you from it. It was supposed to be over before you knew anything about it.”


“Do you regret finding him?” Anna asked.

“No,” Dean snarled.

It was worth every ounce of pain to see Sam again. If he’d died without Dean knowing, he would never have been able to understand what Sam did and saw. No matter who told him or how, he wouldn’t have been able to see what Sam had gained in those years he’d been trapped, nor what he’d lost. A vital part of his brother’s story would have been missing to him.

“I know you’re angry, Dean, but you have to let it go. You did what you had to do, just like Sam did.”

Dean shook his head. Maybe he had done what Sam needed, but he was the one left behind now. He was the one in pain.

He heard the front door fly open and Missouri’s voice calling for Sam. It made bile rise in his throat.

“Go help Missouri,” he said.

Anna walked away and he heard the door open and close again. There was silence for a moment and then a terrible scream. “No!”

Missouri’s heartbreak was clear in her voice. Dean wondered if it was easier to release it the way she was. His was all trapped in his chest, crushing his heart. If he could scream it out would he feel better?

The door flew open and Missouri rushed into the room. She uttered a second scream, muffled behind her hand, and swayed. Dean got up quickly and went to her side. He took her elbow and supported her towards the bed, guiding her to sit beside Sam.

“Oh, Sam…” she moaned. “No.”

Dean didn’t know what to say to her, as there was nothing anyone could say to him. He felt useless. Sam would expect him to help her, to comfort her like he’d needed him to, but he couldn’t. His own pain was already too much for him to bear; he couldn’t take on someone else’s. He went to
the other side of the bed and sat down again, looking at Sam.

Missouri took Sam’s hand and stroked her thumb over his palm. “Why would you do this, Sam?” she asked. “You should have told me what you were planning. I could have helped you.”

Dean wondered if she meant she would have done what he had, killed him, or if she would have just helped shoulder the burden for him through the years that he had borne it with Anna. Did she think that would have helped either of them?

Bobby cleared his throat at the door. “Missouri, I’m sorry, but the news… It says there was an earthquake in San Francisco. That’s where Sam said your son was.”

“He’s okay,” Missouri said. “They all are.” She softened her tone and stroked Sam’s cheek. “Do you hear that, Sam? They’re all okay. James and Tess and Patience, even Riley. There’s just damage to the house, and that can be fixed. You hear me? They’re fine.”

“Can he hear you?” Bobby asked.

Dean looked up, confused, and then he realized what Bobby was asking. Missouri was a psychic. She could sense spirits and talk to them. Was it possible that she was speaking to him like that because he was really there to listen? His gaze snapped to Missouri. “Can he?” he asked hopefully. “Is he still here?”

Missouri’s lip trembled and she shook her head. “He’s nowhere I can sense.

“He’s gone,” Anna said, behind Bobby.

“Just leave already!” Dean snapped at her. “Go away!”

“Hold on, Dean,” Bobby said. “What do you know, Anna?”

“Sam wouldn’t stay,” she said. “He knew where he was going and he was ready.”

Dean felt nausea rise in his throat and he swallowed it down. Was Sam in Hell? Did he earn a ticket there for what he’d done when he’d freed Lucifer?

“Where is he?” he rasped.

“Heaven,” Anna said. “When Sam died for the world, he canceled out what had happened before. Even if he wasn’t dead already, Michael couldn’t have kept him from his rightful rest.”

“And Sam knew that?” Bobby asked.

“Yes, he knew for a long time. Like I say, he was ready. He had someone waiting for him there. And Sam will be waiting for you, Dean.”

“He will?” Dean asked, hoping in spite of himself.

She nodded. “You and Sam share a Heaven. When it’s time, you will be together. Sam knew that, too.”

Did that mean Dean could see him now? He wanted to be with Sam so much it was painful. He wasn’t really needed here. Missouri had her son and his family. Bobby and Castiel had each other. There was no one else for Dean to stay alive for. They could all take care of each other without him.
“No, Dean!” Missouri said harshly.

Dean looked at her defiantly. “Stop reading my mind.”

“No, Dean! Stop shouting into mine,” she said in return then spoke gently, her eyes on Sam, though she was speaking to Dean. “I understand you’re in pain, so am I, but this is not the right time for you. There is still work for you to do, things Sam needs from you.”

Dean knew that Missouri felt the same way he did, that was obvious in the way she was looking at Sam, but she still had people that needed her. He didn’t. He had nothing to fight for. The most important person in his life was dead. What was he supposed to do now if not join him?

“We need to make arrangements,” Missouri said, her hand stroking Sam’s cheek. “He needs to be taken care of.”

“No yet,” Dean said. “I’m not ready to do that to him.” He wasn’t ready to burn Sam.

“He doesn’t want a pyre,” Missouri said.

“What?” Bobby asked.

“Sam wanted a service Patience, James and Tess could come to,” she replied. “And the rest of his friends. It was in his letter. He wants to be cremated like we did George, and his ashes to be scattered here at the house.”

“But he was a hunter,” Bobby said.

“He was,” Missouri agreed. “But he was a friend, father and grandfather, too. They deserve a chance to say goodbye to him.”

Dean closed his eyes. Sam had it all planned out. He’d known what he wanted, and he’d put it in their hands. Anna had been charged with his death, and when that plan had failed, he’d turned to Dean. Now he’d charged Missouri with giving him the funeral he’d wanted. Dean wondered what else Sam wanted from him now. Were his instructions in the letter Dean hadn’t been able to bring himself to read yet?

“Can I have a little time?” he asked them. “I’ll do what has to be done, I promise, but I need just a little longer alone with him.”

Missouri nodded. “Okay.” She leaned over Sam and kissed his cheek then stood up and walked to the door. Bobby let her pass and Anna followed, and Dean was left with Bobby and Sam.

“What has to be done?” he asked cautiously, and Dean knew he’d understood what he and Missouri weren’t saying aloud before. He knew what Dean had been thinking about joining Sam, and he was worried.

“For Sam,” Dean said, “Only what he needs.”

Bobby stared at him a moment, assessing him, then nodded and left the room, clicking the door closed behind him.

Dean took a breath and looked down at his clasped hands. “Well, you really did have it all planned out then, Sammy,” he said. “A civilian funeral and all. I get it; they should have a chance to say goodbye to you, too. I guess I’ll have a chance to meet them after all. I’ll take care of it; I’ll take care of them all for you. I’ll make sure they know what you did for us. And I’ll see you soon,
Sammy. I promise.”

Maybe not straight away, and maybe not at his own hand, but sooner or later Dean was going to be lucky; a vampire or werewolf or some other kind of fugly would have a good day, and he would be with Sam again.

He looked up at Sam and said, “It’s going to be…” He trailed off as he saw what was wrong. There was wetness on Sam’s face. Streaking down the sides of his face were tears that crept from his closed eyes. Sam was crying.

“Bobby!” he shouted, lurching to his feet.

The door flew open and Bobby rushed in, followed closely by Castiel.

“What?” Bobby asked,

“That’s crying!” Dean said, pointing. “Look!”

Bobby moved closer and said apologetically, “I see it, but, Dean, this isn’t what you think. Sam’s gone now. This is just his body, and bodies do weird things, It’s nature.”

“No,” Dean said, filled with surety. “It’s Sammy.”

He knew it in his heart. Sam was still there somehow. He could almost feel him there. The pain in his chest was evaporating, and that could only happen because of Sam.

He leaned close to Sam and whispered to him, “Come on, Sammy, You can do it. I know you can.”

“Dean…” Bobby said sadly.

“I’m right, I know I am,” Dean said defiantly. “Come on, Sam!”

Suddenly someone grabbed Dean’s shoulders and yanked him backwards as a high-pitched whine cut through the air. White light flooded through the shaded window and reached for Sam. Dean’s heart raced, echoing in his ears, and he held his breath.

The light rested over Sam, blocking Dean’s view of his brother, and then there was a miraculous sound.

A long, indrawn breath from the man on the bed,

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Sam felt the air rushing into his lungs, and he drew it in gratefully as his mind cleared and sense returned to him. He could hear his heart beating hard in his chest, thrumming against his ribs, and his whole body seemed alive with electricity. He opened his eyes, and the light filled his vision. He sat up quickly, expecting his head to swim, but it was clear. The light faded, withdrawing out of the window, and Sam looked around.

Dean was standing away from the bed, Castiel behind him with his hands on his shoulders, and Bobby was beside him. Sam couldn’t understand how they could be there, he had seen them die, but the question didn’t seem to matter much compared to the fact that they were alive. They were looking at him with stunned eyes, and Sam thought they were feeling the same wonder as him.

He swung his legs off of the bed and rose easily to his feet. He ran a hand down his chest, feeling the perfectly smooth skin beneath, and smiled. However it had happened, he was back and healed.
Dean reached out a hand to him, but he didn’t seem able to move his feet. Sam walked to him and took Dean’s outstretched hand. He pressed it against his chest so that Dean could feel the beating heart there and watched his eyes for the moment of acceptance. It came with widening and a tear gathering at the corner of his eye. Sam released his hand and it fell back to Dean’s side.

“I’m here, Dean,” he said gently.

Dean blinked and the tear rolled down his cheek, and then he was coming forward. His arms flew around Sam and he gripped him so tightly Sam could feel Dean’s heartbeat, too. Sam embraced him in return, feeling the joy of his brother’s presence when he thought he had to wait another lifetime for it.

After a long time, he pulled back and gripped the back of Dean’s neck and ducked his head to look into his eyes as he wiped at them, smearing the tears on his face.

“You okay?” he asked.

Dean nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said seriously.

Dean looked at him, and Sam saw something spark in his eye. “I forgive you.”

Sam closed his eyes, feeling the absolution washing over him, and then released Dean to embrace Bobby. Bobby gripped him hard and then pulled back and asked, “How?”

“God,” Castiel answered him. “He brought me back. Why wouldn’t he bring Sam back, too?”

“Took his damn time,” Bobby said bitterly.

Sam didn’t mind that it had taken time, though it had obviously been hard for them, as it had given him time with George.

“Sam?”

The quiet voice came from the doorway, and Castiel stepped aside. Missouri walked towards Sam like a woman in a dream, her hands reaching for him. Sam caught her hands, held them tight, and then put his arms around her and squeezed her to him.

“Sam!” she cried, elation in her voice.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

She pulled back and cupped his cheeks in her hands. “I want to be angry,” she said fiercely. “I want to shout at you and make you swear never to do that to me again, but you wouldn’t be the man I loved if you didn’t.”

“I love you, Missouri,” he said. “And I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you. I didn’t want you to be counting down the time, too.”

She pulled his face forward and kissed him. “Thank you.”

“James!” Sam gasped, a sudden memory returning to him. “Lucifer said there had been an earthquake.”

“They’re okay,” Missouri soothed. “Cole Valley wasn’t hit too hard. There’s damage to the house,
but that can be fixed.”

Sam breathed a sigh of relief.

“You should call them,” she said.

“I will,” Sam said. “I just need a little time first.” He wanted to hear their voices again, but he wanted his own to be steady when he did.

He looked from face to face and thought of George. If only he could be there, too. He seemed settled in Heaven, but Sam was going to miss him until it was time to see him again.

“You saw George?” Missouri asked, her hand on her chest.

“You’re reading my mind, Missouri,” he said.

“I am, and after what you did, you’re going to have to get used to it since I am going to continue to do so until I am sure you won’t try to leave me like that again.”

Sam smiled at her. “Seems fair.”

She beamed. “I’ll get us a drink.”

“That sounds like a damn good idea,” Bobby said.

They filed out of the bedroom and into the living room where Sam saw someone else unexpected waiting for him. “Anna!” he said, awed. “How?”

“God,” she said simply.

Sam laughed. “He’s been working overtime today.”

“He has,” she agreed.

“Here,” Missouri said, pressing a glass into Sam’s hand and pouring him a measure of whiskey. She gave glasses to each of them, including the angels, and served each of them the whiskey.

“I don’t actually…” Castiel started awkwardly

“Just go with it, Cas,” Sam said.

“But I am an angel of the Lord.”

“And Missouri is a force of nature,” Anna said. “It’s easier just to drink it.”

When they each had a drink, Missouri came to stand beside Sam and lifted her glass. “To winning.” she said. “To the world. To life.”

They toasted and each sipped their drinks, Castiel looking curious as he tasted the whiskey and then disappointed.

Sam smiled and then fixed his eyes on his brother and raised his glass again. “To Dean, the man that saved the world.”

Dean ducked his head and didn’t drink. Sam supposed it was too soon for him to take pride in the truth what he had done.
“To the Winchesters,” Bobby said. “The *men* that saved the world.”

They all drank this time, Dean included, and Sam smiled.

This was good, he thought. There was someone missing, but it wouldn’t be forever. He was happy to be back with the people he loved again, and he thought he could rest here just as well as he could in Heaven. They had won.

He felt at peace.
“This is weird,” Dean said. “Shouldn’t I just meet you back at your place later?” He raised his eyebrows hopefully.

“No,” Sam said seriously. “You belong here as much as they do. Bobby isn’t making a fuss, so you shouldn’t either.”

Dean glanced at Bobby and saw him tugging the collar of his shirt. He looked just as uncomfortable as Dean felt. “Bobby’s making a fuss,” he said. “He’s just quieter about it.”

Sam sighed and Dean could see they were really bothering him. “You don’t have to stay,” he said. “Neither of you, if it really bothers you that much.”

“We’ll be fine,” Bobby said, picking up his beer and taking a swig. “We’re here to celebrate your birthday, and we’re going to have a good time.”

“My fifty-ninth birthday,” Sam said brightening.

Dean grimaced and Bobby shook his head. “Doesn’t matter how many times you say it; it doesn’t get any less weird that you’re fifty-nine.”

Sam shrugged. “You’ll get used to it by next year, when I’ll be sixty…”

Dean balled up a napkin and threw it at Sam. “We get the point. You’re an old man. But if you think that makes you the big brother, you’re dead wrong.”

Sam laughed. “I’m the little brother still. Gotcha.”

Besides, Dean thought, Sam’s source in the fountain of eternal youth seemed to be gone now. He’d cut himself for a spell a few weeks ago, and it hadn’t healed straight away. God had brought him back as he was. Michael’s grace was gone. They would age naturally together, as they should have done all along.

Sam checked his watch and looked excited. “They should be here soon.”

Dean, Bobby and Sam were in Missouri’s backyard, sitting at a table decorated with colorful napkins, balloons and noisemakers. It seemed a more appropriate setting for a child’s birthday party, not a fifty-nine-year-old man’s, but Missouri had organized it, and Sam hadn’t complained.

Dean was on edge, anxious because Missouri had gone to the airport to pick up her son and his family, Sam’s family. Dean and Bobby were going to meet them for the first time, and Dean had no idea what to expect. He almost wished Castiel was there to take the position of most-out-of-place-guest at the party. He’d had things to do in Heaven though, and Sam hadn’t pushed him. Perhaps he was thinking Castiel standing sentinel at a birthday party was a bad idea, too, especially with Patience there.
Dean heard the bang of a door and Missouri called, “We’re here!”

Sam leapt to his feet, grinning from ear to ear. The back door flew open and a little girl ran out. Her long hair bounced on her back as she ran at Sam, and when he caught her and spun her in a circle, her bright laughter filled the air.

“Uncle Sam!”

“Patience!” Sam said rapturously. “My favorite girl is here!” He set her down and kissed her cheek.

“Where did your beard go?” Patience asked.

“I shaved it,” Sam said, rubbing his chin. “It was time for it to go. What do you think?”

“I like it much better,” she said seriously. “You’re much less scratchy now.”

Sam laughed. “I’ll have to grow it back. I don’t want to lose my scratchiness.”

“No!” Patience wailed with mock horror.

Sam hugged her again and then held her at arm’s length and smiled at her. “Then I will keep shaving, just for you.”

Patience grinned and then looked back as the people that had to be her parents—the resemblance was clear—came down the steps into the yard.

“Tess,” Sam said, hugging the pretty woman. “How was the flight?”

“It was fine,” Tess said. “Though Patience and James had to toss a coin for the window seat.”

“I won,” Patience said with supreme satisfaction.

“Good for you,” Sam said, then embraced the man. “Hey, James.”

“Hey, Dad,” James said. “Happy birthday.”

Dean’s heart skipped at the word. Sam was someone’s dad. He’d been told, but seeing the proof, the way Sam and James looked at each other, made his mind reel. This was the world Sam lived in without him.

James’ eyes moved past Sam to where Dean and Bobby sat, fiddling awkwardly with their beer bottles. “Hello.”

Patience turned to look at them, too, and she gave them a look that made Dean feel like she was appraising them. “Hi,” she said brightly.

“Sorry,” Sam said, running a hand through his hair. “Dean, Bobby, this is James and Tess. Dean’s my brother,” he explained. “And Bobby is one of my oldest friends.”

“It’s good to meet you, Dean,” James said, reaching out a hand to Dean.

Dean shook it and said, “I’ve heard a lot about you all.”

“You’re Uncle Sam’s brother?” Patience said as James greeted Bobby.
“I am.”

Patience looked back at Sam who nodded. “You don’t look old enough,” she said.

Sam laughed and winked at Dean. “Dean’s my younger brother, Patience.”

Dean resisted the urge to roll his eyes. She noticed that Dean looked too young, but Sam, who was technically four years younger, got a pass. He guessed she was just used to the way he looked.


James, Tess and Missouri took their seats, and Missouri handed James a beer and poured Tess a glass of wine from the bottle in the ice bucket. Dean had seen bottles of champagne in the kitchen, too, and he was hoping he’d be able to stick to his beer when those were opened.

“Uncle Sam is really my grandpa,” Patience said to Dean. “Even though my daddy had another father, too. So does that make us related?”

“Oh…” Dean looked to Sam for help.

Sam grinned. “You can be related if you like, Patience. Dean won’t mind.”

Patience shrugged. “Okay.”

She pulled up a chair next to Sam and he ran a hand over her hair. Dean noticed how his brother was perfectly comfortable with her, with them all. He belonged here with them as much as he did in the Impala with Dean.

“So, what do you do, Bobby?” Tess asked.

“Oh, I own a salvage yard,” Bobby said. “Do some occasional repairs, too.”

“Sounds interesting,” James said. “You get many classics?”

“Yeah, some,” Bobby said.

“James and Tess are lawyers,” Sam said.

His pride in his son and daughter-in-law was obvious, and Dean listened as Bobby asked them questions about their work, relaxing into the conversation. It felt like a normal conversation that would happen with any civilians meeting each other for the first time. The fact Sam, Dean and Bobby were really hunters of supernatural monsters didn’t seem to matter. They weren’t playing a role; they were just living a different kind of life for a while.

This was what Sam’s life had been, Dean realized. He’d hunted for the years he’d been trapped, but it hadn’t defined him. He’d had this whole other life that was normal with these people that he loved.

He’d always wanted that. While Dean had been learning the world of the hunting life with his father, Sam had been dreaming of normal. Now he had it. He had this life that coexisted with his hunting.

There was a lot Dean blamed Michael for, taking Sam away from their family for one, but there was stuff he’d given him along with that time. Sam had experienced the real world that most of the world lived in, just as he’d always wanted. He’d formed these relationships that he obviously cherished. He had a son and granddaughter. He’d seen and done things he said were incredible.
While there was plenty of blame to be laid on the archangel, Dean thought there should be a little thanks, too. Because of him, Sam had experienced the things Dean had always wanted for him.

He had a home.

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Tess and Patience were in bed, and Sam was sitting with Dean, Bobby, James, and Missouri around the fire pit they’d lit to offset the cool May night.

As the evening had worn on, Dean and Bobby had relaxed, and now that Patience and Tess were gone, there was a new freedom to discuss the truth with the people that knew Sam’s real story of the time he’d lived through. To Sam’s discomfort, that meant Dean was free to ask his questions about what Sam’s life in the past had been like.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ve got a new one. Did you wear flares, Sammy?”

Sam took a swig of his beer and tried to pretend he hadn’t heard the question.

“I can answer this one,” Missouri said happily. “He did! He wore big flares.”

“They weren’t big!” Sam protested while Dean dissolved into laughter.

Sam scowled at her. He’d worn them as she’d given them to him. He’d only had one pair of his own pants to wear in the early days, and the things of Richard’s she’d given him had been dated.

“Missouri had an avocado bathroom suite,” he said vengefully.

Missouri shrugged as Dean laughed again. “It was the height of fashion at the time. You’ve got no appreciation for the history of interior design, Sam.”

“They were fashionable,” Bobby said knowledgably. “Lots of homes had them.”

Dean coughed to calm and asked, “Did you disco, Sam?”

“I went to a disco once or twice,” Sam said.

“Once or twice?” Missouri said, raising an eyebrow.

Sam scowled at her. “Okay, fine, yeah. I did. I went there to have fun.”

Dean smiled wolfishly. “Did you do the Running Man?”

“No, but I did dance. I’d look pretty weird if I didn’t.”

“He swing danced once,” Missouri said.

Bobby choked on his beer. “He did what?”

Sam glared at Missouri. “Whose idea was it?”

“Mine,” she said happily. “But you were very good at it.” She addressed Dean who looked elated at this new ammunition for teasing Sam. “We went to a jazz club for Sam’s fiftieth birthday, and he really got into it. I’ve got a photograph of us dancing together that George took somewhere.”

“You’ve got a photo!” Dean said. “Why didn’t that make it into the scrapbook?”
“It didn’t make it into that particular book. I have other photo albums full of more personal pictures though.”

Sam groaned. If Missouri started flashing photos of Sam in the nineties, he wasn’t going to be happy. He’d avoided the biggest clichés, but he still had to fit in with the times.

“What about that time you bought Patience a Pogo Ball?” James asked.

“What was wrong with that?” Sam asked.

“Nothing until you demonstrated how to use it,” James explained.

Dean beamed at him. “Come on, spill the beans, what happened?”

Sam tried to warn James to keep quite with a look alone, but James either missed it or ignored it.

“They were the toy to have in the eighties,” James said. “I missed out on them as I was too old to go bouncing around when they came out, but they came into fashion again a few years ago, and Sam went all retro for Patience’s birthday.” He chuckled. “I’m pretty sure she did it on purpose, but Patience couldn’t seem get the hang of it, so Sam showed her how it worked. He Pogoed his way right into the flowerbed, crushed Tess’ chrysanthemums to pulp.”

Dean cackled. Sam was glad to see him laughing and relaxed with James, but he wished it came at someone else’s expense.

“What about the paper route?” Missouri asked.

James laughed. “I’d forgotten about that. I broke my arm when I was fourteen so couldn’t do my route. Sam volunteered to do it for me.”

“Did you have the paperboy sack?” Bobby asked, his eyes twinkling.

“Yes,” Sam said defiantly. “And I rode James’ bike to do it.”

Dean roared with laughter and Sam shook his head, smiling fondly. As embarrassing as this walk down memory lane was for him, it was good to see Dean and Bobby so happy.

“I’ve got another one,” Dean said. “Most embarrassing thing you wore.”

“I can’t think of anything,” Sam lied.

“Come on, you lived through the eighties,” Bobby said. “You must have worn some horrors.”

“You lived through the eighties, too,” Sam pointed out.

“I was too busy for fads,” Bobby said. “Trucker caps are timeless.”

“I’ve got something,” James said. “I’ve even got photographic proof at Mom’s.”

“Yeah?” Dean asked.

“Pink,” James said with satisfaction. “

Dean’s mouth dropped open. “You wore pink!”

“That was your fault, James!” Sam said, pointing an accusatory finger at him. “And you wore it,
too.”

“I did, but I was the groom, and it was Tess’ color scheme, not mine.”

Sam joined their laughter, not caring that it was at his expense now. He was happy to be there with the people he loved enjoying themselves. He’d never imagined he would have this.

He was supposed to be dead now. He was never supposed to see this birthday. God had brought him back though, and he was grateful for it. He had been prepared to die for the world, and it had seemed a fair price, but he’d never been able to prepare himself to lose these people, no matter how hard he’d tried to. The fact that he had them, that they were together now, the two parts of his life coming together at last, made him happier than he could say.

“I’ve got one,” Bobby said. “Best moment since 1978.”

Sam considered. There had been some great ones, a lifetime of them, and most involving someone he loved: finding Missouri, meeting James, Live Aid and Berlin, simple moments with George, his first call with Bobby and seeing his father, holding Patience for the first time, seeing Dean standing in his house after all those years apart. But he thought this moment was the very best. He was with all of his family, and they were happy together. The two pieces of his life were merging.

“Did you?” Missouri asked.

“I think right now,” he said. “This minute.”

Missouri smiled and Sam knew she had been reading his mind again. “I think that’s a good choice,” she said.

Sam’s life had been a long one, and there had been good and bad during that time, but the world was safe now. He and Dean were going to keep on saving lives together, and Sam would be able to grow old with him as he should.

All in all, Sam was happy with his life. He had experienced things that had changed him, both for the good and the bad, but the future looked brighter than it ever had before.

After thirty-two years apart, Sam had Dean back, and they would face whatever came next together.

He had his brother, he had his family, and his had his time.

It was everything he needed.

~ The End ~

Chapter End Notes

So… That’s where it ends.
This story has been an amazing experience to write and share with you all. I never expected it to be popular as Dean was absent for most of it and the process of Sam living through all those years could easily become boring. I have been amazed by how many of you were willing to come on this journey with Sam and the lovely things you have said. You connected with this world and these characters—especially George—in
a way I couldn’t have imagined. I will never write another story quite like this. It’s been my longest single piece and one of the most challenging, but I learned a lot and tested myself in ways I couldn’t have anticipated. I love that the idea came and that I had come wonderful people in my life to encourage me to write it—Jenjoremy and Gredelina1. Thank you all for reading. Thank you especially those of you that shared your thoughts and feelings for the story. You made all the work worth it and gave me the motivation to keep writing each new story that’s come since. Until the next story… Clowns or Midgets xxx

End Notes

Welcome to my new story.

I am terrible at tagging. I never know what to include. If you see something in the story that you think needs to be tagged (or just should be for navigation purposes) please let me know. I’d be very grateful.

See you soon with the next chapter x

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!