The Bright Lights of Disturbia
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The Bright Lights of Disturbia
by leonidaslion

Summary

Not all of our scars are worn on the outside ...

Disturbia Art by secretlytodream

Notes

This is a VERY DARK FIC, and if you are sensitive to issues of consent or to the psychological repercussions of rape and other sexual trauma, please hit the back button now. There IS a happy ending, but it is at the other end of a very long, very dark tunnel. Please be sure you want to make the journey before clicking ahead.
In retrospect, what Sam should have done when he heard the moaning coming from downstairs was go back to bed. But it’s his place too, and he can tell from the quality of the noise that he isn’t going to be interrupting anything more embarrassing than his roommate jerking off in front of the TV. After living with Dean for so many years and walking in on his older brother with his head between some girl’s legs God only knew how many times, a little masturbation isn’t enough to deter him from seeking out his much needed morning cup of coffee.

So instead of doing the smart thing, he staggers down the last few stairs and into the living room. Jack is sitting on the couch wearing nothing more than a pair of boxers. He hasn’t actually taken his dick out yet: he’s just cupping himself and rubbing lightly through the cotton.

“Hey,” he mutters without looking at Sam. His eyes are all but glued to the screen in front of him: hand still moving absentely against his dick.

Sam is still defenseless enough with sleep that it makes him think of Dean, shameless with their cramped quarters and utter lack of social graces. His chest aches with the memory and he rubs his eyes, frowning, like that’s going to silence any of the tangled emotions that thoughts of his brother brings. Offering his roommate a grunt in greeting—Jack’s the sort of guy who takes offense if he thinks you’re ignoring him—he shuffles through the living room and into the kitchen.

The movie is still on when Sam comes back out with his coffee and, after a moment of hesitation, he heads over to the couch and drops down on the other end. They’ve been roommates for over a year now, after all, and it isn’t like Jack is doing anything Sam hasn’t done himself. Also, he’s curious about the movie. Jack’s collection is pretty fucking sparse, and this doesn’t sound like anything Sam has had the dubious pleasure of seeing before.

“Rise and shine, huh?” he says, watching as some porn star’s dick is suckled in extreme close up by one of the nicest-looking mouths he’s ever seen. He can tell from the corner of his eye that Jack has moved on to the main event, but is careful not to look over. There’s protocol for this sort of thing, after all, and he managed to learn the basics despite his brother’s exhibitionist streak.

“Fuck off, Winchester,” Jack pants without meaning it.

“Isn’t it a little early for porn?” Sam prods, taking a sip from his mug.

“Obviously not.”

They’re quiet for a while, watching the blow job up close and personal, and as pretty as that mouth is, Sam’s starting to get bored with the view when the camera cuts wide and he almost chokes on his coffee. Because those lips may be girly as hell, but they aren’t attached to any kind of girl Sam has ever seen.

“Fuck,” Jack says, low and punched, and comes with a groan.

It wasn’t awkward before, but now it is. Now it’s extremely awkward, and Sam sits there with all of his muscles clenched and a mug of coffee in one hand and stares studiously at the TV. He watches as Lips gets a face full of come—it splatters out across the half-face panther mask he’s wearing and onto his perfect mouth—and listens to the meaningless, lame dialogue as the scene continues to play out.

“Pretty kitty like your milk?” Cock asks, sliding his spent dick across Lips’ jaw and smearing come.
Sam would probably be rolling his eyes if he wasn’t feeling so embarrassed (and yeah, okay, a little turned on: Lips’ mouth is ridiculous). Lips’ response is a husky request for more—just the right amount of embarrassed arousal in the whisper to send a little pulse of heat through Sam’s groin—and then he’s being bent over the arm of a couch and—

“Is this gonna be a problem?” Jack asks finally from beside him.

For a moment, Sam hesitates. He’s just about the last person who can throw stones about whether his roommate likes a little cock in between bouts of pussy, but now that his shock is wearing off, he’s also a little annoyed that Jack picked gay porn as an acceptable method of outing himself. It’s safe to glance over now—Jack has cleaned up and tucked away and is now watching Sam with obvious nerves—and Sam does so.

“Your complete lack of taste in pornos?” he says blandly. “Yeah. Definitely. I was whacking off to better stuff than this when I was ten.”

Jack just looks at Sam for a few seconds and then his face splits in a wide grin and he tosses a pillow at him. Sam gets his arm up to block in time to avoid a lapful of coffee and laughs.

“Prick,” Jack mutters. “I’ll have you know this is high quality stuff.” He leans forward and grabs the remote. “Check this shit out.”

Two chapter skips later and Sam is watching Lips move on top of Cock: muscles flexing as he works himself on Cock’s dick. It can’t be comfortable—Sam has seen enough porn to know that tops are generally chosen according to size, and Cock is definitely not an exception to that rule—but Lips is making a good show of liking it anyway: breathy moans and surprised gasps like it’s the first time he’s has his prostate pounded. Lips’ own cock is red and swollen (not too shabby, for a porno bottom, size-wise) and liberally leaking precome. Even through the pixilated image of their crappy TV set, Sam can tell that he’s more than ready to come, and wonders what the hell is stopping him until the camera angle shifts and he sees the black band of a cock ring restraining Lips’ balls and cock.

“So fucking hot,” Jack says as Lips tosses his head back with a groan. And yeah, okay, Sam wouldn’t kick the guy out of bed if he had a chance—compact body, slender hips, that goddamned mouth—but he doesn’t see what’s so …

Oh.

Oh.

There’s another man on the bed now, pushing Lips down against Cock’s chest and dragging his own cock across Lips’ taut, well-muscled ass, and Sam doesn’t need to be a psychic to know where this is going.

“You gotta be shitting me,” he says because he’s heard of this but he’s never actually seen it. Never actually tried to wrap his head around the logistics of cramming that much into such a small opening. All the prep in the world wouldn’t be enough not to make this hurt, and the close-ups of Cock Number One’s dick still pumping in and out of Lips show a hole that already looks red and sore.

“Dude, he takes it all,” Jack says in a respectfully awe-filled voice.

On the TV, Cock Number Two’s dick is nudging up against that too-filled hole, teasing, and a rough voice is growling, “You want it? One cock’s not enough, is it, little kitty? Gonna stuff you so full … gonna make you scream … but you gotta ask for it first.”
It’s just bad porn dialogue, just the same as a hundred other lines Sam has heard, but there’s a pit forming in his stomach all the same. For no reason at all, his whole body is suddenly tingling in warning.

“Please,” Lips whimpers, and Sam’s stomach twists with something awkward and nervous that he can’t identify.

Lips is begging, but Sam isn’t sure what for because he sounds turned on, sort of, but he also sounds really fucking frightened, and—and then Cock Number Two is working his way inside and Lips is writhing and whimpering and whining and making these half-greedy, half-hurt noises that are making Sam both want to be somewhere else and want to be sitting here alone so that he can reach into his sweats and pull his own dick out.

“What I wouldn’t give to nail that,” Jack breathes.

Sam starts to nod and then the camera cuts again to Cock Number Two’s hand on Lips’ hip and the world stutters to a stop. He stares numbly at the screen as Cock Number Two finally sinks home and immediately starts moving—Cock Number One holding Lips’ wrists to keep him still as he’s fucked—and it isn’t true. It can’t be.

But now that he’s seen it, he keeps seeing it everywhere—the curve of Lips’ mouth, the clench of his jaw, the tapered hips and broad shoulders. The scar on his hip just above where Cock Number Two is holding on: three thin, parallel lines like a claw mark. Then Cock Number One is turning Lips’ head to the side—toward the camera—and Lips opens his eyes and they’re fogged and dazed and greengreengreen, and holy fucking shit it’s Dean.

Sam jerks his head away from the screen so that he doesn’t have to see anymore. Wishes he could block his ears as well as the grunts and “mm, yeah, take it, baby, such a tight little ass”s continue to assault him.

“Where did you get this?” he croaks through a throat that feels five sizes too small.

“All Boy Video down on Jackson,” Jack answers lazily, like he didn’t just get off on watching Sam’s brother—his Dean, his—servicing another guy. Like he doesn’t look like he’s thinking about pulling it out again for another go. “It’s the new Hunters in Heat film: Pussycat Fever. Just came out last week and it’s already on the bestseller list.”

It can’t be Dean. Can’t be. Dean might be carnal, but he isn’t—he doesn’t do stuff like this. He doesn’t perform for other people. And he sure as hell isn’t gay. He isn’t even bi!

This has to be some kind of mistake.

“The guy—with the mask—he’s. He’s been around for a while?”

“First movie,” Jack answers. “It’s actually pretty cute. They’ve got his audition interview on the extras and he tries to make like he’s an old hat at it. Like they wouldn’t have given him the job anyway, way he looks.” His voice has gone soft and fond, and more than anything else that makes Sam’s chest tighten. Objectifying his brother (if it’s him, which it isn’t, can’t be) is one thing: developing some kind of crush on him is another matter altogether.

Sam looks back at the TV with reluctant fascination. Dean—no, Lips—is shuddering and panting, “fuck me, fuck me, fuck me,” (Christ he sounds like Dean, now that Sam is listening for it) while two cocks slide in and out of him. The movie cuts to a close up of his hole, bright red and painful-looking and glistening with lube as it’s fucked. Then Cock Number Two is pulling out and fisting his
dick and come is splattering out across Lips’ lower back and ass. Lips moans, hips twitching at the sensation, and Cock Number One rolls him over onto his back, pulls out, and shoots on his stomach and chest.

That was the money shot, it has to be over now, except for how it isn’t.

“Lap up your milk like a good kitty,” Cock Number Two says, “and maybe we’ll let you come.”

Sam’s stomach burns with shame and embarrassment as Lips manages to get himself up on one elbow and takes Cock Number Two’s dick in his mouth. His legs are splayed wide—thoughtlessly, Sam thinks—and while he licks Cock Number Two clean, Cock Number One pulls them wider so that the camera can get a good close up of his gaping, fucked-out ass. Sam’s own ass aches in sympathy and he winces: guy’s gonna be feeling that for a week at least. He’s still hard, though, dick curving up full and needy toward his stomach, and Sam can’t fucking watch this anymore. He can’t.

But he doesn’t take his eyes from the screen until Lips has finished cleaning both dicks and finally (after the cock ring has been removed with teasing slowness) come all over himself, adding to the mess already there. The last shot of the film is of Lips alone on the bed: skin covered in come and sweat and legs splayed wide. The camera zooms in on his face—on that come-smeared mouth—and then fades to black.

“God, I hope he makes more films,” Jack says as the credits start to roll.

Sam sort of wants to punch his roommate, but then again he’s sitting there with an erection the size of Cleveland tenting his sweats. Which leaves him wanting to punch himself even more.

“You want me to leave you two alone?” Jack asks, raising one eyebrow.

Sam shifts and very carefully doesn’t adjust himself. “Nah, man,” he says as he gets up. “Got class in half an hour. I should get dressed.”

“Suit yourself.” Jack gives him a grin and then nudges a DVD case that’s sitting on the coffee table with his foot. “You know where my collection is if you’re ever in the mood.”

Sam spends a miserable, frustrated day in class and at work—making sandwiches has never felt like such a waste of time—and then rushes home in an attempt to score some alone time with the DVD player before Jack gets back. Turns out he didn’t need to bother: there’s a note from Jack on the kitchen table letting Sam know that he’s going to Theta Delt’s annual Cave Party and doesn’t expect to be back tonight. Sam puts the note back down, feeling suddenly awkward, and spends the next hour making dinner for himself. He sits in the kitchen, eating and staring blankly at his psychology textbook and watching a rerun of this morning’s movie in his mind.

Fuck, he’s hard.

The phone rings just as he’s finishing up and he answers it without thinking. “Hi.”

“Hey, Sam,” Jess’ voice greets him warmly. “How’re you doing?”

“Uh.” Sam grimaces. He didn’t think he could feel more uncomfortable about this whole situation, but talking on the phone with his sort of, hopefully girlfriend while he’s sporting an erection from thoughts about a gay porno that may or may not have starred his brother is bringing him to new lows.

Damn it, Dean.
“Sam?”

“No, sorry, I’m good. Just tired.”

“Oh,” Jess says, sounding disappointed. “I hope you didn’t get that bug that’s been going around.”

“I don’t think so. I was just up late last night studying for Finchberg’s test.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” The silence stretches out until it threatens to become really awkward and then Sam clears his throat and asks, “So what’s up?”

“I was sort of hoping you might be up for a movie tonight.”

Sam has actually spent all day working himself up for a movie tonight, but it isn’t anything he wants to watch with Jess. Pretty, normal Jess who wants to date him, and with whom Sam thinks he could easily fall in love.

“Man, I wish I was, but I’m really beat,” he lies, feeling like three kinds of an asshole. “How about a rain check?”

“Sure. I mean, it was really last minute anyway, so—” Great, now she thinks he’s not interested.

“Tell you what,” Sam interrupts before she can finish rambling and hang up. “Tomorrow night. I’ll take you out to dinner, then we can either catch that movie or—” Or I can tell you how good my brother looks getting fucked, his mind supplies, and for a moment he can’t come up with anything else. Then, in an awkward rush, he finishes, “—or we could go bowling.”

“Bowling?” Jess says. She sounds doubtful, and he can almost see her nose wrinkling in confusion. Too bad the image is spoiled by the memory of plump lips dripping come.

Sam is going to fucking murder his brother.

“Yeah,” he says, and if his voice sounds a little too hoarse, well, Jess doesn’t know him well enough yet to notice it. “I hear it’s the great American pastime.”

It’s normal, is what he thinks. Safe. Sane.

Jess laughs. “I think you have it confused with baseball,” she tells him, “But I’m game if you are. I’ll beat you, too.”

“Oh, you think so?”

“Sure. I bowled in elementary school. Won the Barbie Cup.”

Sam is startled into a laugh. “You’re making that up,” he accuses.

“Are you accusing me of lying?” Jess asks archly.

“Let’s just say I’m calling Barbie’s bluff.”

Jess snorts into the phone, and Sam goes momentarily cold. It’s the same noise Dean makes when Sam says something he finds funny but, for whatever reason, doesn’t want to actually laugh at. And hey, now that Sam is thinking about it, Jess and his brother have the same birthday, and Jess loves mullet rock, and her lips are, quite possibly, the closest thing Sam will ever find to Dean’s mouth.
Jesus Christ, he’s dating his brother. Or trying to, anyway.

The conversation goes on for a few more minutes, with Sam stumbling through it as best as he can, and then he hangs up and puts his head down on the table. His hair is getting in the leftover spaghetti sauce on his plate, but he can’t find it in himself to care.

How long has this been going on, anyway?

Closing his eyes, he runs through his memories—Dean feeding him cheerios with a mound of sugar melting into the milk, Dean handing him his ass in round after round of sparring, Dean sticking his feet in Sam’s face when Sam was sitting on the couch trying to do homework. None of that feels any different than before, but when he thinks about Dean strolling out after a shower, his chest wet and gleaming, he remembers his stomach giving a little flop. He remembers lying in motel room beds next to his brother, and Dean shifting in his sleep, and their legs brushing together, and his breath catching in his throat. He remembers walking in on Dean having sex, and he thinks now that he maybe heard what was going on sometimes before he opened the door. He thinks maybe those moments left him shaking and hard.

Oh God, he’s been like this for years.

“Damn it, Dean,” he mumbles into the table, and then, after a good ten minutes of wallowing in shock and self-pity, prods himself into action.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Sam reads the back of the DVD case first. The plot (insofar as these things have a plot) revolves around a series of savage, animalistic murders in a small town. Two brave hunters arrive to save the day and discover that the murderer is actually the timid and beautiful town librarian, who turns into a savage ‘werecat’ by the light of the full moon. Instead of killing the beast, the hunters keep the town safe by ‘taming’ the ‘kitty’. It’s such a ludicrously bad plot—and yet so close to real life, to the family business—that Sam wonders for a moment whether Dean had any hand in writing the script.

And it is Dean.

From the moment he turns on the DVD Extra ‘Kasting of a Kitty’, there’s no doubt about that much because Dean is there, sitting in a folding chair in some depressing, off-white room wearing Dad’s leather jacket and the amulet Sam gave him when they were kids and a wide, shit-eating grin that Sam supposes is supposed to look seductive. He could turn the DVD off now—his morbid curiosity has been satisfied—but he doesn’t. He just sits there and watches as his brother sits there and interviews for a chance to get his ass pounded.

“Why don’t we start with your stage name?” a male voice asks off camera.

“Stallion,” Dean answers immediately, and Sam chokes on an incredulous laugh. It’s an absurd response, and yet so very, very Dean, and his brother’s voice is filled with the amused smugness that used to get underneath Sam’s skin and lodge there for days. He’s just self-confident enough that he might pull it off.

Then Dean’s smile twitches a little wider and he adds, “Sam Stallion.”

Any vague amusement Sam might have been feeling rips away from him as his stomach twists in obscene ways. He doesn’t know what it means that Dean is using his name. Doesn’t know if Dean is trying to be funny, or if it’s meant as some kind of backhanded compliment, or if it’s just Dean being Dean and doesn’t mean anything at all. All he knows is that the name, ridiculous as it is, has settled
in his gut with a leaden weight.

He needs to turn this off now before it gets any worse. His fingers tighten around the remote and then relax again.

“And how old are you?”

“Twenty three.” Still lazy. Cocky and confidant.

Sam sort of wants to punch him, or maybe kiss the smirk right off those full, girly lips.

“Date of birth?”

“January 24, 1979.”

“What sort of previous experience do you have in the industry, Mr. Stallion?” a low, female voice asks. Dean’s gaze flickers to the opposite side of the screen and Sam can tell from the way his brother’s mouth quirks that the woman asking the question is attractive.

“Well,” Dean drawls, and Sam winces. He knows that dragging, slow tone. Recognizes it from the hundred times he’s heard it before—usually right before Dean tells some outlandish, unbelievable story, like the time he told Maggie Fitzsimmons that he was actually an undercover C.I.A. agent sent to infiltrate Regent High and foil a foreign plot against the government. Or the time he told Dad that they smelled like pot because they were hunting a teenage spirit and it had hurled flaming bags of dope at them.

“Most recently, I worked with B. B. Licious on A Tale of Two Titties,” Dean announces. “But I got my start when I did Asslee Bendover for Jurassic Prick. And, uh, I had a supporting role in Evil Head. I’m pretty proud of that one.”

“I’m not familiar with B. B. Licious,” the woman says, and Sam can hear the laughter in her voice: the knowledge that Dean is pulling this crap out of his ass.

“Oh, uh,” Dean says, floundering the way he always does when one of his lies is challenged. Also as usual, he recovers his footing almost immediately and pushes onward, relying on sheer bravado to carry the day. “She’s Dutch, actually. Foreign film. She’s a classy chick—real professional. You should check out some of her stuff sometime.”

“I’ll do that,” the woman agrees, but it’s obvious that she knows as well as Sam that ‘B. B. Licious’ doesn’t actually exist outside of Dean’s warped imagination.

This is when they should have kicked Dean out on his ass for lying during his interview, but they’re not kicking him out, and it doesn’t take a genius to figure out why. All Sam needs to do is look at his brother’s face: at the too-tight t-shirt and ripped jeans and easy sprawl of his body. The mysterious people behind the camera were probably thinking up scenarios to get Dean naked and fucking (or, as it turned out, being fucked) the second he walked through the door.

A third voice—another male, closer to the camera—breaks the brief silence by announcing, “Now we’re going to ask you some questions about what you feel comfortable doing in front of the camera.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Would you be willing to do boy/girl scenes?”
Dean’s eyes flick from Interviewer Number Three back to the woman and his mouth widens in what Sam can only classify as a leer. “Anytime,” he says, and Sam can’t help rolling his eyes. Only Dean would try to pick someone up during a porn audition.

“How about boy/boy scenes?” Interviewer Number Three asks, drawing Dean’s attention back to center.

“Sure,” Dean agrees, like he does it all the time. Sam supposes he shouldn’t be all that surprised by the answer—he saw the movie, Dean obviously said yes. And Dean knows how he looks: he’s been told about his cocksucking lips often enough in bars (once, memorably, within Dad’s hearing). He probably also knows that gay porn pays better. So yeah, Sam isn’t actually surprised, but the thought of his brother selling himself like this in order to earn a quick buck burns in his throat.

What happened, Dean? he thinks as his brother is asked how he feels about threesomes (the more the merrier, that’s my motto). And why the hell didn’t you call me?

“Would you be comfortable receiving a blow job?” It’s the woman again, and Dean’s smile widens like a shark’s.

“Why, you offering?” he smarms.

Sam wants to roll his eyes again, but he can tell from the self-satisfied gleam in his brother’s eyes that the woman is blushing, and he thinks of Dean bringing the unseen interviewer out back afterwards—fucking her mouth, her pussy—and glowers instead.

“How about giving one?” Interviewer Number One asks. It’s probably a legitimate question, and he doesn’t sound like he’s propositioning anything for himself, but Sam catches the minute clench of his brother’s jaw as Dean turns his head.

“Sure,” Dean says. His tone is carefully cheerful.

“Would you be willing to perform anal sex?” the man continues.

“Sure.”

“Topping a girl?”

“Course.”

“Topping a boy?”

“No problem.”

“Bottoming for a girl?”

Dean hesitates for a moment—too brief to catch unless you’re looking for it, unless you’re familiar with the rhythms of his speech—and then says, “Long as the strap on isn’t pink, we’re good.”

“How about bottoming for a boy?” Interviewer Number Three asks, and as far as Sam is concerned he sounds far too invested in the question.

The pause is longer this time, and accompanied by a flicker of nerves in Dean’s eyes, but his answer comes out clear and easy: “Yes.”

“Would you be willing to use toys?” the female interviewer asks.
Sam has seen his brother shore up his walls too many times to count, and Dean does it again now as he turns his attention to the woman. His posture straightens, and the tension that has been building in his shoulders dissipates, and his smile looks a little less plastic and a little more genuine.

“Sure.”

They start listing toys then, starting with cock rings and vibrators and moving on from there. Although Sam can tell his brother doesn’t know what half of the stuff is, Dean says yes to everything. Sam can’t decide whether to be angry or hurt or sad or just plain horrified. The brief spate of humor he felt when Dean introduced himself at the beginning of the interview has been completely forgotten in the face of this humiliating barrage of questions.

He thinks again about turning the movie off but doesn’t move.

“How do you feel about wax play?” Interviewer Number One asks once they’ve gone through what feels like the entire inventory of Sex-Toys-R-Us.

“Fine by me.”

“Would you be willing to perform in a spanking, flogging, whipping or caning scenario?”

The ease with which Dean shrugs and agrees sends a rush of conflicting emotions through Sam’s body. On the one hand, Dean shouldn’t be so blasé about the suggestion that he let someone beat him in order to get their rocks off. On the other hand, his mind is now presenting him with an image of his brother’s ass, reddened and covered with handprints. Dean’s skin would be flushed and hot, and he would squirm away from even the lightest caress, and—

“Are you willing to perform as a dom in a bondage scene?”

Sam snaps out of his fantasy with dizzying speed. His head feels light as he watches Dean agree before the question is really out of the interviewer’s mouth. Dean’s brow furrows almost immediately, and Sam sees his brother belatedly take in the word ‘bondage’. For the first time, Dean’s mask slips far enough for Sam to see the nerves behind it.

For all his tall tales and machismo, Dean’s surprisingly vanilla when it comes to sex. Sam knows this from all the times he accidentally (and not so accidentally) walked in on his brother, and from the way that Dean always missed the kinkier innuendos he tossed out, and from just knowing Dean to be a man of simple pleasures. The upshot of all that is that Dean doesn’t know what ‘dom’ means. He recognizes ‘bondage’ well enough, though: knows that it means ropes and restraints and being held down, helpless, in the middle of a bunch of strangers. Dean’s rising panic, evident in his pallor and the glassy green of his eyes, is subtle enough right now that anyone who didn’t know Dean wouldn’t be able to see it, but if this conversation doesn’t change tracks soon, it’s gonna get obvious in a hurry.

Sam shifts on the couch. Fuck, he shouldn’t be watching this. Shouldn’t be seeing Dean so vulnerable and exposed.

Then again, Dean should never have made the fucking film in the first place.

“As a sub?” Interviewer Number One continues.

“No,” Dean says, voice hoarse. Sam can read the desire to take back his previous yes in the tension lines around Dean’s mouth, but Dean doesn’t say anything. He just sits there waiting for his next question and doing his best to look relaxed.
“Would you be willing to be fisted?” Interviewer Number Three again, and Dean either knows that term or can figure it out for himself because he gives a tiny twitch and shakes his head.

“No.”

“What about DP?” the female interviewer wants to know.

Sam winces as Dean glances at her because Dean has no fucking clue what that means—it’s obvious as day from the hesitation in his eyes, and the way his fingers are drumming against his leg—but he’s going to say yes anyway. He’s going to say yes because she’s pretty and he wants her to like him, wants to make her smile. He’s going to say yes because he needs the money, and he just said no twice, he has never been as confident as he seems.

He’s going to say yes because he’s afraid they’ll turn him down if he doesn’t.

“Jesus Christ, Dean,” Sam whispers, ill with the memory of his brother’s swollen, gaping hole.

“Sure,” Dean says.

“Fuck,” Sam mutters, leaning forward and putting his face in his hands.

On the TV, Interviewer Number Three wants to know if Dean would be willing to perform in a watersports scenario, and Sam chokes on a laugh at his brother’s perplexed, “Sure, why not?”

He’s angry suddenly, enraged as always by the lack of care that Dean takes of himself, and by his brother’s pig-headed stupidity, and by the fact that he’s selling himself like this, like it’s nothing, like he doesn’t fucking matter, and where the fuck was Dad when Dean was doing this?

“Pissing, Dean, not fucking hot tubs and water-skis!” he yells, throwing the remote at the TV. Luckily for his anemic bank account, he misses and the remote thunks dully into the wall instead.

Sam sits on the couch, muscles quaking and rage hot in his throat, as Interviewer Number One asks about ‘pony play’. Dean says no pretty quickly this time—has either actually heard of that fetish or can figure it out well enough to know he doesn’t want to be involved—and Sam lifts his head again, running a hand harshly through his hair.

“We’re almost done, Sam,” the female interviewer says, and Sam twitches at the sound of his name. “But I wanted to give you the opportunity to let us know if you have any specialties. Any acts you can do better than anyone else?”

Between one blink and the next, any trace of unease is gone. Dean is wearing one of his many masks: the one he uses in bars when he’s looking for a girl to drown himself in for a while. The one that always made Sam feel awkward and uncomfortable in his own skin for reasons he never examined too closely. The one with the heated eyes and the slow smile and the deep, rough voice.

“Sweetheart,” Dean purrs, fondling his vowels like he’s thinking about fucking them. “I can do things with my mouth that I’m pretty sure are illegal in all fifty states.”

His tongue darts out, sliding across his lips, and just like that Sam is hard again, and fucking miserable with guilt about it, and Jesus fucking Christ how can Dean mess him up like this without even being here?

How is that fair?

There’s a rustling of papers from somewhere by the camera, and Sam is pretty sure it’s caused by
Interviewers One and Three trying to look busy to draw attention away from the erections they’re doubtlessly sporting. Then Interviewer Three clears his throat and says, “Just one last question. Obviously this isn’t theater, but how’s your acting?”

Dean’s smile slips into something a little cooler—back to that superior, mocking expression he was wearing at the start of the interview—and he turns his head so that he’s looking directly into the camera. “Just peachy,” he answers.

He isn’t looking at Sam—can’t be, this happened almost a year ago according to the timestamp on the bottom of the screen—but it feels like he is. It feels like Dean is sitting in that off-white room and looking through the camera lens into Sam’s eyes and heart and Sam has never felt so dirty and exposed. Never felt so turned on before either.

The interview ends with a photo op, of course. The interviewers ask Dean to strip and pose and he does, and the come-hither look on his face should be silly but isn’t. It isn’t because Dean knows that he’s good looking—he isn’t blind or a moron—but he doesn’t know that he’s beautiful. He doesn’t know that people look at him and want, even if they shouldn’t, even if they have no business even thinking about it, even if they’re his kid brother.

When the extra ends and the main menu starts back up, Sam looks down at his hands and the hard outline of his cock against his pant leg. He thinks about calling Jess and taking her out for a late show, and then he thinks about putting the movie on and jerking off, and then he thinks of running into the upstairs bathroom and puking up everything he ate for dinner. In the end, though, there’s only one thing he really can do.

Shutting off the DVD player and the TV, Sam wanders out into the kitchen to get drunk.
Chapter 2

Dean picks up on the second ring. “What’s wrong?” he asks immediately, and Sam can’t quite keep back his bitter laugh.

“What,” he slurs. “No ‘hi, hello, howareya, miss you Sammy’? No ‘howdefuckingdo?’” His right hand slips and slides around the neck of the bottle of whiskey he’s been hard at work at for the past two hours. On the TV screen in front of him, his brother is on his knees with a cock in his mouth. The sound is high enough for Sam to hear it, but low enough not to filter through the phone.

Dean’s silent for a moment, and then he says, “Are you drunk?”

“No,” Sam answers. “I’m fuckin plastered.”

Dean sighs heavily. “I’ve gotta go, man. Call me tomorrow when you sober up. Y’know, if you still want to.”

“Fuck you, Dean!” Sam snaps, but the line is already dead.

He peers at the TV for a few minutes as Dean’s mouth gets coated with come and as Dean gets led over to the couch and pushed down and opened up. The other actor keeps on laughing and talking about how skittish ‘kitty’ is, and asks if ‘kitty’ is a virgin and says he’ll take good care of ‘kitty’ and of fucking course Dean was a virgin. He was a virgin as far as having a cock shoved up his ass, anyway, and he let this stranger first finger and then fuck him, let another stranger join in, let a bunch of other strangers get it on tape. He sold his virginity for, what, five hundred dollars? Six hundred? Seven? Certainly no more than a thousand, anyway, and what gave him the fucking right to do that when Sam was—when he—

Sam shuts his eyes and presses his hand to his forehead. Movie-Dean makes a low, panting whine and Sam peers up to see Cockzilla slowly forcing its way inside of his brother’s body. Movie-Dean is on the bed now: on his stomach with his legs spread wide as he grips the pillow on front of him with white-knuckled fingers. He’s shaking all over, naked and exposed in every way possible, and Sam’s vision blurs with tears. He fumbles with the remote, finally manages to find the mute button, and then lifts his cell phone again.

“Go sleep it off, Sammy,” Dean says when he picks up this time.

“Why?” Sam demands. Between the booze and the crying, his voice is pretty indecipherable, even to him. “Why did you—I was right here, Dean, I—”

“Hey,” Dean interrupts. There’s a different note in his voice now: concern. He sounds warm and present again. “Hey, man, it’s okay. I gotcha.”

Absurdly, Sam feels himself calming. Infuriating as Dean can be, he has this power too: knows how to sweeten his voice to honey and soothe when he wants to. When Sam needs him to. Sam starts to sag back into the couch and then … then he looks back at the screen.

Movie-Dean winces behind the panther mask as Cock Number One pulls out of him. There’s a bit of dialogue that Sam can’t hear and Cock Number One lies down beside Movie-Dean on the bed, one hand behind his head and the other stroking his oversized dick. Movie-Dean pushes up onto his hands and knees and crawls into position with a graceful, fluid bunch and flex of his muscles. Cock Number One says something again—muted filth—and then Movie-Dean lowers himself down onto the man’s dick with a soundless, shuddering cry.
Sam’s saliva has gone metallic and bitter and now he opens his mouth and says, “I hope they paid you enough, you fucking whore. I hope. I was here, Dean, if you wanted that, I could have. I could.”

But Sam doesn’t know what he could have done—or if he does, he doesn’t want to think about it. He doesn’t really know what he’s doing right now: drunk off his ass and talking to Dean on the phone while he watches his brother get fucked in some cheap, supernatural porn movie. His hand creeps into his lap without his permission and rubs against his cock.

“Sammy, slow down, man. I can’t understand you when you talk that fast.”

_Good_, Sam thinks, rubbing harder. Aloud, he says, “You left first, Dean, you—you were never there, you—all the girls, and the hunts, and you didn’t. You didn’t see me anymore, you didn’t. I saw _you_, Dean. I couldn’t see anything else but you, and you just. You.”

“Dude, I have no fucking clue what you’re talking about.”

God, Sam doesn’t either. His breath hitches as he thrusts up against his hand.

“Just. Take a deep breath and calm down, okay?”

Dean sounds good. Sounds steady and strong. It’s a lie, of course, Sam knows it is, but he shuts his eyes on the Dean in the movie and concentrates on his brother’s voice.

“Talk to me,” he demands.

Dean doesn’t laugh at him. Dean never laughs at him when it matters. “What do you want me to say?”

“Don’t fucking care,” Sam grunts, and oh he’s going to Hell but he’s unzipping with his left hand and pulling his cock out with his right.

“How’re you doing?” Dean asks after a brief pause. “You taking care of yourself, Sammy? Meet any girls?”

Yes, but Sam doesn’t want to think about Jess right now.

“No,” he says. “No, I want.” He grunts as his cock slip-slides in his hand: hopes it can be mistaken for a drunken sound. “No questions, just talk to me.”

“Sure, Sammy, okay,” Dean answers easily, and starts talking. He talks about the Impala, and about this bar he and Dad visited last week, and about Bobby’s new dog. Sam listens to his brother’s voice and fucks into his fist and imagines those plump, girly lips wrapped around his cock. He finally comes while Dean is going on about this cherry pie he had in Wisconsin a few months back.

Dropping the phone, Sam bites down on his hand to muffle his moans. After it’s over, he sits there for a moment, breathless, while the room spins around him. Dean is still talking when he picks the phone back up.

It takes him a few tries, but Sam finally manages to say, “Dean.”


Sam looks down at his slick hand and sticky cock and doesn’t know how to answer that. “Where are you?” he finally asks instead, dropping his head back to stare at the ceiling.
“Connecticut,” Dean says, too quick and too smooth. Practiced.

“Liar,” Sam mutters, and Dean doesn’t deny it.

Instead, he says, “So, you gonna tell me why you called?”

For a moment, it trembles on his lips. *I saw the movie, the porno, I saw what they did, how could they, how could they do that, how could you let them.* Then his alcoholic daze lifts enough for him to get a clearer picture of himself sitting here with a bottle of whiskey beside him and come smeared on his gaping pants and he laughs. He laughs because he’s never going to escape his family, never going to escape *Dean*, and he has to laugh before he screams.

“Sammy?” Dean says.

“I hate you,” Sam chokes out. Like the laughing thing, it’s coming out backwards, but he can’t bear to say what he means. “I hate you so fucking much, Dean, God, why the fuck didn’t you come with me, you could have come with me, you could have.”

Sam shuts up at the sound of Dean’s voice, but Dean isn’t talking to him. His words are muffled, and Sam only catches a few of them: Dean asking for a few more minutes, and his own name, and something that sounds horribly like ‘Dad’.

“Sorry about that—” Dean starts, and Sam blurts, “I miss you.”

He can almost hear Dean’s brain trying to change gears in the silence that follows his statement. He wants to wait for Dean to respond—hear what he has to say—but he can sense the anger and the confusion bubbling up again and he needs to be off the phone before he says something hurtful that Dean actually catches.

“Take care of yourself, okay?” he mumbles, and then ends the call. On the TV, Movie-Dean is busy getting double his pleasure, but Sam doesn’t pay any attention to that. Instead, he pushes to his feet and stumbles as fast as he can for the bathroom.

If his phone rings, he can’t hear it over the vomiting.

Sam groans loudly in protest as something yanks him up into a sitting position. His head is pounding, and being upright isn’t doing anything good for his stomach, either. If he hadn’t already puked everything there was to puke, he’d be puking again right now.

“Jesus Christ, Sammy,” a gruff voice mutters into his hair. “What the fuck were you trying to do, kill yourself?”

Sam’s pretty sure he’s hallucinating, but he opens his eyes anyway. As far as hallucinations go, this one sorta sucks because Dean has a black eye and a line of butterfly stitches keeping his cheek closed. Also, Sam figures if he’s going to hallucinate his brother, he might as well hallucinate a few less layers of clothing while he’s at it.

Okay, he’s maybe still slightly drunk.

“Dean?” he tries.

“Guess your brain can’t be too fried if you remember who I am,” Dean says. There’s enough sourness in the words that Sam cringes a little, but his brother’s voice is gentler as he asks, “You
think you can stand up?"

Sam considers it—thinks that the answer is probably no—and then gets distracted by Dean’s face again. “You’re hurt,” he says, reaching up to touch one of the butterfly stitches with one finger. Of course, his depth perception is a little off right now, so he ends up poking the gash instead.

Hissing, Dean jerks his head back. “Damn it, Sam!”

“Sorry, sorry,” Sam mumbles. So, Dean’s face is off limits. He looks lower, over his brother’s broad chest, and settles his hand there instead. “Warm.”

“How much did you have to drink, anyway?” Dean asks, peering at him. His eyes are so green, almost mesmerizing, and Sam thinks he could get lost there if he weren’t already so involved in staring at his brother’s lips.

“I think I’m gay,” he announces. It’s not exactly true—he’s an equal opportunity guy and Dean’s known it for years—but ‘gay’ sounds better than ‘bi’ when you’re about to make your move. Sam doesn’t want to sound wishy-washy, after all.

“Does that mean I get to call you Samantha?” Dean asks.

Sam’s pretty sure Dean can call him whatever he wants with those lips as long as he does other things with them as well. “Can you—” Blow me, is what Sam wants to ask, but even in his current state he realizes that asking for a blow job right off the bat is probably a big no-no, so he shuts his mouth again. They need to ease into this. Kissing first. Then blowjobs.

“But can I kiss you?” he asks.

Dean just looks at him for a few seconds, nonplussed, and then he scowls and says, “Fucking lightweight, man,” and hauls Sam to his feet.

Sam forgets all about kissing anything while he clings to Dean and tries not to puke or fall over or pass out or all three. Luckily, when the world finally stops spinning (it’s like a merry-go-round and a rollercoaster and a Ferris wheel all at once) and he opens his eyes again, Dean’s mouth—those fucking lips—are right there. All Sam has to do is turn his head and tilt forward a little, and so he does.

Dean’s got the reflexes of a cat (here kitty, kitty), and Sam only has time for a faint impression of softness before he’s shoved away. He takes a step back, arms pin wheeling, and falls against what he recognizes—after a few bleary blinks—as the kitchen counter.

He isn’t quite sure how he got in here.

“You pushed me!” he yells, confused and belligerent about it.

“You fucking kissed me, dickweed!” Dean shouts back.

“You didn’t say no!” Sam points out. He gestures wildly with one arm, emphasizing his point, and almost falls over.

“No!” Dean spits. “No, okay, Sammy? Jesus Christ! What the fuck is wrong with you?”

That’s an excellent question. One Sam has an answer to. He just … has to think about it for a moment. While he ponders, Dean moves in again and slides an arm around his waist. He smells good: like leather and sweat and something deep and masculine that’s all Dean. Sam considers
licking his brother’s neck and then decides that if Dean isn’t interested in the kissing thing, he probably won’t go for neck licking either.

They’re actually in the living room when Sam remembers exactly what’s been eating at him all night, and he immediately flips out. Dean cannot know that Sam has been watching his not-so-secret porn debut. It’d kill him. Not to mention it would lead to horrible conversations about Sam’s newfound incestuous feelings. He’s been doing a pretty good job of keeping them hidden so far, but if he has to talk to Dean about Sam Stallion’s portrayal of Tony ‘the kitty’, he’s going to do something wildly inappropriate; like start stripping or asking if he can suck his brother’s cock. Or possibly asking if Dean will suck his.

Which, come to think of it, he almost asked a few minutes ago.

Crap.

There isn’t time to think up a subtle excuse to get them both out of the living room, and Sam’s brain isn’t working that well right now anyway, so he settles for flailing in the direction of the kitchen.

“Woah!” Dean says, gripping him tighter. “Sam. Hold on there, man. Gotta get you to bed, okay?”

Sam’s dick perks up at the thought of Dean and his bed being in the same place at the same time, but the rest of Sam is still dedicated to fixing the Sam Stallion problem. “No! No, Dean, you have to go, you have to—”

“Sam—”

“Not supposed to be here!” Sam yells, desperate. “Get out, get out, I don’t fucking want you here!”

Dean lets go of him finally and takes a step backwards. “You called me, asshat! You fucking drunk dialed me and then you said. You.”

He shuts his mouth suddenly and firmly into a thin line (or as thin as it can get with lips like those, anyway) and lifts his right hand up to rub at his temple. When Sam squints, he catches the faint, white ridge of a scar between the circular strokes of his brother's fingers. It's almost enough to distract him, but his fear remains stronger than his curiosity and he opens his mouth to tell Dean to leave again.

Before he can get the words out, Dean says, “Fine. You want me gone: I’m gone. Just don’t blame me if you wake up dead in a pool of your own vomit.”

He turns, heading for the front door, and Sam realizes that his brother is going to walk right past the TV, and then he realizes that the TV is off, and he remembers putting the DVD back in its case, and he remembers tossing the whole kit and caboodle out the kitchen window.

“Oh thank god,” he says, and that’s when he falls over and passes out.

When Sam wakes up again, his head is splitting and his mouth tastes like Groucho Marx has been using it as an ashtray. Possibly a toilet, too.

He opens his eyes and finds himself staring at his pillow. Huh. Somehow, he seems to have made it back to his bed and onto his stomach. He pushes himself up onto his hands and knees slowly and blinks down at himself.
Somehow he also got stripped of all his clothing.

“What the fuck did I do last night?” he groans.

“Awesome question,” Dean says, and thrusts a glass of something foul smelling and congealing under his nose. “Here.”

“Oh my god,” Sam groans, turning his face away and covering his mouth with one hand.

Dean rolls his eyes. “Don’t be such a fucking pussy, man,” he mutters, grabbing Sam by the hair and yanking his head back.

Sam opens his mouth to tell Dean to let go already and his brother upends the glass, pouring the concoction into his open mouth. Sam can either spit it up all over his sheets (which he just washed two days ago, thanks) or he can suck it up and swallow, and after a few seconds of arguing with his throat, Sam opts for swallowing.

“Atta boy,” Dean says, patting Sam’s back as he coughs and gags on the aftertaste.

“Asshole,” Sam pants.

“You deserve it,” Dean tells him. “Hell, you’re lucky I didn’t shave your head and glue your hand to your dick while you were out.” Setting the glass down on the nightstand, he turns around and leans against the edge. “What do you remember?”

Your ass getting fucked by two enormous cocks at once, Sam thinks, and then everything comes rushing in—want him, want Dean, want my brother—and he has to put his hand over his mouth again to keep from puking Dean’s hangover cure right back up.

“Far as I can tell,” Dean speaks into the silence, “You drank a little over half a bottle of Johnny Walker and then passed out. Oh, but not until you called yours truly to come take care of you. Always thought that was more Dad’s thing than yours, but …”

“I had a bad day,” Sam says. It comes out just as brittle and hurt as he feels beneath the hangover, but Dean’s still pissed about something—about last night, oh god I tried to kiss him—and all it gets him is a quirk of his brother’s lips and a “Yeah, those’re going around.”

Sam sits down on the edge of the bed so he can drape the sheet over his crotch. His dick is behaving right now, but who knows how long that’ll last with Dean leaning there looking so fuckable? With his hair all soft and mussed, like he spent last night running his hands through it, and his lips, those goddamned girly lips, practically begging for some attention.

Fuck, he’s beautiful. Sam doesn’t know how he could have overlooked that knowledge for so long.

The morning sunshine streaming in through his window is splashing across his brother’s face and painting his skin with light. The contrast between the sunset of a shiner on Dean’s left eye and the green burn of his iris is breathtaking. He has a bruise on his jaw that Sam didn’t notice in his drunken stupor: another memento from whatever monster blackened his eye and put that reddened, irritated cut on his check.

It doesn’t make him look tough: despite his endless boasting, Dean’s wounds never do. He only looks vulnerable when he’s hurt—something about his lashes, maybe, or the puckered bow of his mouth, or the pallor of his skin. Or maybe the careful way he carries himself.

Sam wonders if the cut on his brother’s cheek will scar the way whatever injury left the tiny
imperfection at his right temple did. Wondering about the half-glimpsed scar leads to looking at it—hook-shaped and all but hidden by his brother's hairline—and looking at it makes Sam think of the claw marks on Dean's hip, which leads to thoughts of his brother being ridden like a pro, which is a concept light-years beyond his ability to handle right now.

Flushing and lowering his eyes, he shifts on the bed and rubs the bottom of his left foot against his right shin. His stomach sloshes with the vile hangover remedy that Dean just poured down his throat, and with the lingering traces of last night's festivities, and with the first, faint bloom of arousal, and he grimaces, biting the inside of his cheek. The pain does the trick—or maybe Dean's concoction is starting to do its job—and after a couple of seconds Sam's stomach settles again.

Looking up at his brother through his bangs, he asks, “What happened to your face?”

“Got into a bar fight,” Dean answers flatly. “What’s your excuse?”

“Bar fight my ass,” Sam shoots back, ignoring the insult. “What really happened?”

Dean regards him for a moment and then shrugs. “Nothing I couldn’t handle.”

As he looks at his brother, it occurs to Sam that Dean would say the same thing if he asked about the movie: nothing he couldn’t handle, nothing, it was nothing really. Not that Sam is actually eager to bring Sam Stallion up, but … God, he wishes he could say something to Dean to make him understand that he’s worth more than that.

Sam’s throat constricts and he nods, dropping his eyes.

“What about you?” Dean asks. “You wanna tell me why you finally remembered my number? Or did you just need someone to clean up your vomit?”

Sam winces—it’s a fair accusation, if inaccurate—and then shakes his head. “I called you because I missed you.”

He doesn’t look at his brother. He can’t look at Dean when he’s feeling so raw and desperate inside. He’s too afraid of what Dean might see. But he can feel his brother looking at him, and he knows what expression he’d find on Dean’s face.

The silence stretches out between them, painful, and then Dean clears his throat and says in a carefully neutral voice, “Car’s outside.”

Sam’s head gives a particularly strong pulse of agony that isn’t anything compared to how shredded his chest feels. Shutting his eyes, he pinches the bridge of his nose. “Ah,” he says, and then clears his throat. “Dean, I. I’m not leaving.”

“Yeah, I didn’t think you were,” Dean says, but it’s a shade too fast: too deliberately flippant. “Just thought you wanted to maybe go for a drive. Fresh air’ll clear the rest of that hangover right up.”

The offer in his words is clear. It’s nothing perfect, nothing like what they were, but it’s more than what they have right now. It’s visits to Stanford between hunts, drinks out at bars, real smiles instead of the plastic one Dean would be wearing if Sam could bear to lift his head. It’s a chance to be brothers again: awkward and a little estranged, maybe, but in time they would find their feet. They’d make a new beginning.

Only Sam doesn’t want that anymore. He wants more. And he doesn’t know whether he’s more frightened of Dean finding out and turning him down, or of Dean finding out and agreeing because he doesn’t value himself enough to say no.
Even if he manages to hide his feelings, if Dean keeps hanging around then Sam is never going to get over him. He’s never going to learn to look past his brother’s blinding, burning light and see the lesser lights that he can have. Not so beautiful, maybe, and not so warm, but safer.

Lights like Jess.

“I shouldn’t have called you,” Sam says. “It was a mistake.” That lie alone is enough to send Dean away for good, but Sam has always been an overachiever, so he adds, “I don’t need you anymore, Dean. You’re only holding me back. I don’t—I don’t want you around.”

The words sound hollow in his own ears: false. He never could lie for shit, but he doesn’t think that he has ever been more painfully obvious. Dean isn’t going to buy it, not in a million years.

Except he does.

“Yeah, okay.” Dean’s voice is toneless. Empty. There’s a creak of leather as he straightens.

Despite the agonizing constriction in his chest—God, how unfair is it that he has to lose Dean twice, that he has to hurt his brother like this for a second time?—Sam realizes that this is his last chance to say anything to Dean about the movie. It’s his last chance to try and straighten out at least some of what’s twisted up inside of his brother. Dean probably isn’t going to listen to him, but he at least has to try.

“Dean,” he rasps, and hears his brother pause in the doorway. “Dean, you. You’re a good guy, okay? Don’t. Don’t sell yourself short. You’re worth more than that.”

Dean lets out a cold, jagged laugh, but doesn’t say anything. When Sam looks up a moment later, the doorway is empty. He sits in bed until he hears the familiar rumble of an engine start up and move away, and then puts his head in his hands and lets the tears come.

Dean, he thinks. God, Dean, I’m so sorry.

Sam doesn’t see his brother again for two years, and within three days of Dean’s return, everything he has built for himself lies in smoking, charred rubble. Jess included.

She didn’t deserve it, but Sam’s pretty sure he did.

There are things they don’t talk about. Sam puts Jess on the list. Dean puts Mom there. They both agree not to discuss Sam’s phone call, or his drunken ramblings, or their conversation the next morning.

They don’t talk about their feelings, which Dean probably thinks is a concession Sam’s making for him but is really a self-defense mechanism on Sam’s part.

They don’t talk about the hunts Dean went on while Sam was gone, which is a concession because Sam finds himself greedy for the information—for the truth of those missing days, for the stories behind the unfamiliar scars on his brother’s body. Dean has a new burn mark on his forearm, what looks like a knife slash curves down his left side, and there’s that hooked scar at his right temple. Dean rubs at it when he’s tired, and Sam wants to ask, he wants to know, he wants to drink down all of that lost history so that Dean is his again, owned and cherished and kept.
But Sam left. He left and he pushed Dean away and he knows that he isn’t entitled to that anymore, so the questions melt unasked in his throat.

They also don’t talk about the fact that Dean goes home with girls while Sam sometimes steps out back with men. Dean has known that Sam is bisexual for years, and if these days his tastes are a little more heavily slanted toward broad-shouldered, dark-haired men with ready smiles and hard bodies, well, Sam’s just trying to get over Jess is all. He’s avoiding memories, not looking for substitutes for the one thing he wants, desperately, and can’t have.

They don’t talk about the way that men sometimes stand too close to Dean, or put their hands on his wrist, or rub up against him. There’s nothing to talk about because it’s just another bar fight, just a couple more bloodied knuckles, and if Dean lets his stubble grow out a little further before shaving, or highlights his hair and takes to wearing shades even on the most overcast of days, then it’s easy for Sam to pretend he doesn’t notice.

They talk about the hunt, and about the Impala, and about their differing tastes in music, and about finding Dad, and about the weather, and about their weapons, and about the best places to stay for the night, and about what they want to eat, and about how fucking stupid some people are, Christ, why do they bother, and about how best to evade the cops, and about how much money is left on their credit cards, and about anything under the sun, and nothing at all.

They talk so much, sometimes, that Sam wonders what’s lurking in the silence that they’re so afraid of.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

In Lake Manitoc, Wisconsin, Dean talks to a mute, frightened boy about the mother Sam can’t remember.

Twelve thousand miles up, Dean is terrified of being stuck in an airborne tin can but shoulders through anyway.

In Toledo, Ohio, Dean weeps blood onto a floor of mirrored shards. Sam’s busy weeping blood himself, of course, but he can hear his brother puking somewhere near him, and when he blinks the red away he sees Dean bent in half with his hand pressed to his temple. He’s worried for a moment that Dean might be having a stroke—Mary had Sam longer, but Dean was closer when she came out of the mirror—but then Dean takes a deep, shuddering breath, shakes his head, and pushes to his feet.

Then he all but carries Sam out to the car and spends the rest of the night standing guard over him in the hospital emergency room while strangers in white coats scan his brain (Sam’s, that is: Dean’s fine, doesn’t need a check up, won’t let anyone examine him) for signs of hemorrhaging. Dean keeps touching him—his forearm, his shoulder, the back of his neck—but Sam is sure that his brother isn’t aware of it.

It shouldn’t be possible to fall in love with the same person twice, but somehow Sam is managing just fine.
Chapter 3

Everything starts to fall apart in Philadelphia. They’re walking down the street discussing their latest case—something has been killing pregnant teens and slurping the unborn fetuses from their bodies, and so far they’ve both come up with bupkis—when someone calls, “Sam!”

Sam pauses and turns around. Dean keeps going for a few more steps and then stops himself.

There are two men coming toward them, and Sam only has to take one look to know that he wasn’t the one they were calling. The guy on the right is wearing a tight, pink t-shirt and a white scarf around his neck. The other is wearing a grey t-shirt with a rainbow shooting from the left shoulder down to the right hip.

Dean has gone very, very still.

“Oh man, it is him!” the man in the pink shirt—kid, really: neither of them looks a day over twenty—exclaims. “I mean. It’s you! Wow. This is, like, such an honor, Mr. Stallion.”

It’s so horrifying that Sam wants to laugh.

“You’ve got the wrong guy,” Dean says, and when Sam glances at his brother, the back of Dean’s neck and the tips of his ears have gone an alarming shade of red.

“No, I’m sure it’s you. I’d recognize those lips anywhere.”

Dean’s posture is stiffer than Sam has ever seen it, and Sam is torn between the urge to touch his brother’s shoulder in an effort to reassure him and the knowledge that the best thing he could probably do right now is to walk away so that Dean can maintain an air of plausible deniability. Instead, he stands frozen in the middle of the sidewalk like the asshole he is.

Pink’s friend—his boyfriend, maybe—senses that this is maybe not the best time or place and reaches out to take Pink’s arm. “Sorry, he’s on a sugar rush,” he tries. “We’ll just—”

“I’ve watched Pussycat Fever, like, a zillion times,” Pink gushes, brightly oblivious. “It’s seriously the best movie in the entire Hunters oeuvre! And you—man, you were fantastic! I can’t believe you managed to take both Aaron Rockhard and Harry the Hammer at once! That’s hardcore, man. Oh, hey! Can I get your autograph?”

Dean continues to stare at Pink blankly and, after almost a minute of strained silence, Pink takes a shuffling step back. Looks like he finally woke up and smelled the awkward. Then the kid’s gaze slips over to Sam and he brightens again.

“Hey, is this your boyfriend?” he asks, then, to Sam, he says, “You’re really lucky, man.”

Oh God, Sam’s gonna laugh. Or possibly puke.

“C’mon, Russ, I think you’ve got the wrong guy,” Rainbow Shirt says.

Pink blinks and then shakes his head. “No. No way, man.”

Rainbow Shirt nudges his (boy)friend’s shoulder and says, “He’s too tall. Also, this dude’s got freckles. The Stallion’s skin was flawless, remember?”

“Oh,” Pink says, face falling. In a last ditch attempt, he offers, “Make up?”
Rainbow Shirt shakes his head. “Honey, you need to snap out of the fantasy and live in the real world for a moment. Also, you need to apologize to the nice men for the mix up.”

Pink doesn’t seem to be the brightest crayon in the box, but he’s finally—*thank God*—catching on, and now he nods, eyes flickering back and forth between Dean and Sam. “Um. Right. Sorry. My mistake.”

“We’re *really* sorry,” Rainbow Shirt echoes, and then he’s dragging Pink away and leaving Sam in the middle of the street with an effectively outed Dean in the city of brotherly love.

Sam’s heart is beating rapidly enough that he’s a little concerned it’ll pop out of his chest. After all these months—after *years* of wanting to talk about it—this is his chance. He doesn’t have to admit he’s seen the movie. He just needs to nag his brother about this encounter until Dean breaks down and tells him.

*And then what?* he asks himself.

When the first answer his brain sends back is ‘then you can find out whether he’s up for a repeat performance’, Sam knows he isn’t ready. He isn’t strong enough to drudge all of this up without his own feelings coating everything like radioactive glitter.

“So,” he says finally. “Guess you’ve got a doppelganger.”

Dean looks at him for a moment—his eyes hidden behind his sunglasses, his mouth unsmiling and still—and then he nods. “Yeah, guess so.”

Dean doesn’t usually drink in the middle of cases—not heavily, anyway—but as Sam sits at the bar that night, going over their notes, Dean knocks back shot after shot until he’s pliant with drink: eyes heavy-lidded and mouth lax. He rubs at the scar on his forehead with manic frequency, like if he does it hard enough and long enough he can erase it. Meanwhile, his left hand plays with the empty shot glasses that he won’t let their waitress clear. He lines them up and shifts them around the table like soldiers on a battlefield, fighting a war against some imaginary enemy in his mind.

Sam can’t be sure, but he thinks Dean’s shot glass soldiers are losing.

Tightening his grip on his notebook, he bumps his brother’s knee with his own under the table and asks, “You ready to head out?”

Dean blinks up at him, fingers stilling on his forehead. He looks almost drugged and more vulnerable than he would probably like, and Sam’s mind helpfully reminds him that this isn’t too far from how his brother looked when he was freshly fucked and dripping come. He shoves the thought away immediately and busies himself with packing up. His heart is beating too quickly: mouth bitter with mingled guilt and want. At the jangle of metal sliding across wood, he lets himself look up again.

“Think y’should drive,” Dean slurs, taking his hand back and leaving the keys where they are. “Sure,” Sam agrees. “Do you think you can make it out to the car at least?”

It’s just a question—not meant as rebuke or scorn or disdain—but Dean’s brow furrows and he pushes away from the table with something approaching violence. “Can handle m’own liquor,” he spits, staggering toward the door. Sam swears under his breath, gathering the rest of his stuff in a hurry and jogging after his brother. He finds Dean trying to pick himself up from the bottom of the front steps and, catching his elbow, hauls him up.
“’M fine,” Dean insists, anger heavy in his voice, but he’s too drunk to figure out how to dislodge Sam’s hand. Sam runs his eyes over his brother’s body quickly—no obvious signs that he hurt himself when he fell over—and then sighs.

“Come on, Dean. Let’s get you back to the motel.”

“Don’t need your help,” Dean growls. “Can take care of myself.”

“I know you can. Just humor me, okay?”

“Don’t need,” Dean mutters to himself as Sam draws him toward the car, “Don’t need anybody. Fuck it.”

Sam leans his brother up against the side of the Impala while he gets the door open, and when he turns around, Dean has his head tilted back and is staring up at the sky. The moonlight flows over him with a gentle glow, softening his edges and making the outline of his lips shine. The scar on his temple is so white it looks silver, and Dean is beautiful, so very beautiful. Sam reaches without thinking, fingers brushing the exposed line of his brother’s throat, and Dean startles, jerking away and almost falling. He catches himself on the car and blinks at Sam, expression hovering between uncertain and angry.

“Did you just—”

“No,” Sam says, way too quickly to be believed, and curls his traitorous fingers into a fist.

Luckily, Dean’s alcohol-soused brain has already moved on from the brief caress, and instead of pursuing it he rolls forward and rests his forehead against the roof of the car. “M so fuckin drunk,” he mumbles.

“Car, Dean,” Sam tells him, taking him by the arm and drawing him toward the open door.

“Car, Sam,” Dean mocks. “Coat, Sam. Door, Sam. Seat, Sam. Dashboard, Sam. Hair, Sam. Window, Sam.”

“Dean, I swear to god, if you don’t shut up I will tape your mouth shut,” Sam mutters, fighting to get his brother’s seatbelt closed while doing his best to ignore the way that Dean is slumped forward against his side and back.

“Go ahead,” Dean answers immediately, voice thick with self-loathing. “Cover up my fuckin mouth. Fuckin—fuckin lips.”

Sam’s sweating suddenly, and his hands tremble on the buckle. Dean rests his head on Sam’s shoulder. His laugh huffs out warm and wet against Sam’s neck and hair.

“S’what they all want. S’what they. Fuckin’ cocksucker lips. Wanna fuck my mouth like’m some kinda fuckin’ girl.”

“Yeah, well, you’re not a girl, Dean,” Sam says. It’s lame and awkward and in no way an adequate response, but between Dean’s wet breath panting out across the nape of his neck, and Dean going on about his mouth like that, and Sam remembering what Dean’s mouth looked like filled with cock, Sam is lucky he’s capable of coherent speech at all.

Then Dean asks, “You think I’d be—be good at it, Sammy?”

Jesus Christ.
He pats drunkenly at Sam’s head. “You ever think maybe I’d be—be a natural, some shit like that? Think I could open my mouth, let some guy stuff his fat cock down my throat? Think I could milk his dick with my cocksucking lips?”

Okay, that’s it.

Dropping the belt buckle—he’s just gonna have to be careful not to crash—Sam straightens quickly enough that he knocks his brother’s head back against the side of the door.

“Ow!” Dean complains, rubbing his jaw.

“Sorry,” Sam says insincerely as he closes the door and hurries around to the driver’s side.

Luckily for him, Dean is either sulking or sunk into his thoughts on the drive back to the motel: he’s not saying anything, let alone asking Sam to think about his pretty, obscene mouth stuffed with cock. Dean stays silent as Sam parks, and as Sam hauls him out of the car, and as Sam manhandles him inside and into the bed. He lets Sam strip off his boots and then rolls onto his side and stares at the wall.

Running a hand through his hair, Sam starts for the bathroom only to be stopped by the sound of his brother’s voice.

“Why’re you here?”

Slowly, Sam turns around. Dean’s still watching the wall: back to him. “Because this is our motel room?” he tries.

“No,” Dean says, struggling to roll over so that he can peer up at Sam. “Why’re you here?”

Sam looks back at his brother’s face, which is painfully, miserably open with all the alcohol Dean has consumed, and is too stunned by the stupidity of that question to come up with an answer. Before his mind has even begun functioning again, his brother shuts his eyes and sinks back against the pillow.

“S what I thought.”

Sam doesn’t know what answer Dean read in his silence, but it can’t have been anything good. If Sam were a stronger man—if he were less afraid of his own emotions, and of Dean’s reaction to them—then this is when he would have said, “I’m here because I need you. Because you’re my brother and I love you and I’m never going to stop needing you.”

But all he can manage is, “It’s not like that, Dean.”

“Whatever,” Dean mutters, disbelieving, and he’s out before Sam can say another word.

In the morning, Sam wants to bring it up again—fix things—but Dean is hung over and pissed off about it, and it’s safer to keep his mouth shut. He wants to talk later that afternoon, too; only by then they’ve figured out that they’re hunting an Aswang, and all Dean wants to do is bitch about the complete and utter lack of a Supernatural Customs Bureau to keep shit like this from getting into the country in the first place. Then they have to locate a silver weapon big enough to kill the thing, steal said weapon—a huge, ceremonial sword—from a local collector’s house, track the Aswang down, and dispatch it.
For his part, Dean seems to have no memory of the night before. Sometimes, though, Sam catches his brother looking at him with this odd, still expression that makes his chest ache. Lying in bed at night with Dean’s steady breathing the only noise in the room, he tries to figure out what it is about that look that bothers him so much. He thinks it might be something about the tension lines around Dean’s mouth, or maybe the clouded, forest green of his eyes.

Something is going on inside his brother’s head, that’s for sure. Sam just has no idea what.

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He doesn’t find out until two weeks later, and then he’s lying bound on the floor of Becky’s family room with something that looks like his brother but really, really isn’t, standing over him.

“You know, this is some really pretty packaging,” the shifter says.

It’s examining itself—examining Dean—in the mirror hanging on the wall. Tilting Dean’s face from side to side and chewing on Dean’s pouty bottom lip. As Sam watches, it gives the scar on Dean’s temple a single, lingering prod before dropping its hand and turning around to grin at him.

“Too bad he’s too fucked in the head to put it to good use, huh?”

Sam twists his hands against the ropes binding him—useless: for all intents and purposes, these are Dean’s knots—and says, “Don’t talk about him like that.” He knows that he’s only playing into the thing’s hands by responding, but he can’t help himself: can’t bring himself to lie quietly while this son of a bitch insults his brother.

“Just making conversation,” it tells him and then, with an amused smirk, reaches down to cup its crotch.

Sam shifts his eyes away, disgusted by the heat that fills his own groin at the sight. He feels dirty and uncomfortable: Dean isn’t here to see what the shifter is doing to his body (and it isn’t even Dean’s body anyway, it’s just a replica, a copy) but Sam knows how his brother would feel if he were here. Knows that Dean would be shamed and violated and really fucking pissed off. Sam wishes, violently, that he were free and had a silver-coated knife he could use to pin the damned thing to the wall.

The shifter lets out a low groan that doesn’t do anything for Sam’s peace of mind—it’s the same hoarse, reluctant noise Dean was making in the movie—and then breathes, “Oh yeah. Real pretty packaging.” Its voice is taunting. Baiting him.

Sam clenches his jaw and says nothing.

“Goddamned crime, actually,” the shifter continues. “You got a body like this, you enjoy it. Dean? Dean’s too busy hating himself. I’m surprised he can even get it up without a little pharmaceutical help, if you know what I mean.”

Sam’s gut twists and this time he can’t help himself. “You don’t know shit about him,” he spits, turning his head around to glare at the shifter.

It’s still massaging its crotch, but at his words it laughs and drops its hand. “You know, you’re awfully sensitive about your brother’s sex life.”

Strolling closer, the shifter nudges Sam’s side with one foot and he strikes clumsily at its leg with his bound hands. He connects solidly a couple of times before it drops to a crouch, putting one knee on the carpet, and catches his flailing hands.
Sam fights, but the thing is incredibly strong, and he’s still a little woozy from being knocked out before. A moment later its other knee is trapping his bound arms against his stomach.

“I’m gonna slice you up from the outside in,” the shifter promises. Now that it doesn’t need its hand to hold Sam’s arms still, it reaches up to grip his hair instead, yanking his head back and baring his throat. “But I’m wondering if you wouldn’t like a little taste of something else first.”

Its eyes flicker—Dean’s green irises obscured with something slick and pale and iridescent—and Sam feels something fumbling across his thoughts. He thinks he can smell, faintly, the reek of the shifter’s discarded skins from the sewers. Above him, the shifter’s face has collapsed in something riding the fine line between pain and agony. It jerks its head to the side, a quick spasm, and lets out a hiss. Then the invasive sensation of having the layers of his mind peeled back and examined fades and the tension in the shifter’s face eases. A moment later it’s laughing: wide and genuine, like Dean hardly ever does.

“Oh, that’s priceless! You actually saw it? That’s probably big brother’s worst nightmare, you know. The worst one he remembers, anyway. And you actually got off on it. You got off on watching big brother take it up the ass for money.”

The sensation of having his mind felt up may be gone, but Sam’s insides are still crawling with it, and the guilt added by the shifter’s words makes the nausea nearly unbearable. There’s a difference between knowing, objectively, how betrayed Dean will feel if he ever finds out that Sam watched the movie and hearing it as a fact from something with a direct pipeline to his brother’s brain. Sam flounders for a moment, trying to deal with the alternating waves of guilt and disgust running through him, and then shoves them aside instead. There are times to deal with how fucked up he is, but tied up and at the mercy of a psychopathic serial killer isn’t one of them.

Gritting his teeth, he spits out, “Fuck you.”

“I may have to rethink this whole killing you thing,” the shifter muses, releasing his hair. “Might be more fun to slip into something a little younger—” It trails its hand suggestively down his chest. “—and pay Dean a visit.”

Sam’s breathing speeds at the suggestion. “You touch him and I’ll kill you,” he says, trying to put all of his determination into his voice.

The shifter smirks at him, unfazed. “Oh, I won’t have to touch him. All I have to do is give him the answer he’s waiting for. All I have to do is tell him why a smart, college boy like you is hanging around someone as pathetic as him.” Licking its lips, it leans closer. “All I have to do is tell him that baby brother’s only along for the ride because he wants ‘kitty’ to get down on his knees and wrap those pretty, cocksucking lips around his cock—”

“Shut up!”

“—or would you rather have his ass?” Its smile goes sharp. “I never broke someone without cutting into them before. I wonder if he’ll cry as pretty as the others did when I tell him that he’s nothing more than a tight ass and a hot pair of lips to you.”

“If you can read my mind, then you know it isn’t like that,” Sam says. He doesn’t know if he’s furious or panicked, but he feels flushed all over—nauseous. He twists his hands futilely beneath the shifter’s knee.

“Oh? So all those filthy, dirty thoughts aren’t yours? You don’t daydream about opening up that mouth of his and pushing your cock inside? You don’t want to bend him over and fuck him: see if
being stuffed full of his baby brother’s cock can get him off as hard as taking two strangers?”

Sam’s stomach gives a violent twist. He can’t deny that he’s thought of it. He’s wondered whether he could fuck Dean as raw and red as those porn stars did: if he could drag those same, broken, toofulltoomuch noises from his brother’s throat. He’s watched Dean stuff burgers into his mouth and imagined his cock stretching those lips instead, the tight channel of Dean’s throat around him.

But that isn’t the whole story. It isn’t even half of it.

Because he also watches Dean sleeping in the morning when he wakes up first, and he laughs at his cheesy jokes, and the childlike joy on his brother’s face (over the simplest things, like finding cherry pie in a diner or a classic horror movie on TV) brings an answering glow in his own chest. Sam may want to fuck his brother, but he also wants to hold him, and make him smile, and chase away the shadows from his eyes. He wants to make Dean see himself the way that Sam sees him: the way that anyone who takes the time to push past Dean’s masks would see him. He wants to teach Dean to give a damn about himself.

“I love him,” Sam growls. “Not that I’d expect a psychopathic murderer like you to understand what that means.”

“Oh, but I do know what that means, Sammy,” the shifter responds, and Sam can tell from the softness in its voice that it has gone back to playing Dean instead of just talking about him. “Love’s what other people give you as long as you give them what they want. Love is what you get until people wise up enough to take a good look at you and realize what a complete waste of time you are.”

Sam’s gut aches with the knowledge that it’s pulling the words from his brother’s head. This isn’t the shifter messing with his mind: it’s true, Dean actually feels like that. As tears burn his eyes, he starts struggling again in an effort to dislodge the thing’s knee. It rides the attempt easily, chucking as it lets Dean’s personality fall away.

“You’re special, though, aren’t you, Sam? You get underneath his skin: you nestle right up close inside his ribcage. Dean doesn’t want you there—it fucking petrifies him—but he doesn’t know how to shut you out and he’s been starting to hope that you might be different. He’s starting to hope that there’s another definition for love: something he can have. Something that stays.”

Its grin widens.

“Imagine how he’s gonna feel when he finds out you just want the same thing as everyone else.”

“No!” Sam shouts. His struggles redouble again, and the shifter rocks back a little before dropping forward and driving the breath from his chest. It wraps its fingers around his neck—delicately, one at a time—and then tightens its grip, cutting off Sam’s air.

“I’m really hoping he’ll be broken enough when I’m done with him to give me a ride,” it says as it chokes him. “Be nice to take this pretty package out for a spin.”

“Ngh!” Sam grunts in protest, struggling to get his hands out from beneath the shifter’s weight so that he can at least try to fight.

“It chuckles, beaming down at Sam as his vision starts to grey. “Dean and I are gonna take a little walk down memory lane. Gonna take a look in the mirror, so to speak.” Sam can’t really see anymore, but he can still feel as the shifter leans close, breath moist on his ear. “You don’t mind
sloppy fifths, right?"

“Hey, asshole!”

The pressure on Sam’s throat loosens immediately. Before he can take his first gasp of air, though, the shifter digs its knee into his stomach as it pushes itself to his feet. Sam coughs, gags, and then finally gets a sliver of air as he rolls onto his side and curls in on himself, hands cradling his aching gut. Beneath the roar of the blood rushing through his head, the gunshots that come a moment later sound distant and soft: like corks popping. Then Dean is there, hands moving rapidly over Sam’s chest and brushing his neck and cheeks.


“Dean,” Sam gasps, relieved, and Dean hauls him up against his chest. Despite the continuing, deep-seated ache in his stomach, Sam lifts his bound hands and hooks his fingers in his brother’s shirt. “Dean,” he says again.

One of Dean’s arms goes around Sam’s shoulders. His other hand buries itself in Sam’s hair, stroking. “Right here, man. I gotcha, Sammy. I gotcha.”

Sam turns his face into his brother’s chest and breathes in deeply—scent of gunpowder and sweat—and then lets the encroaching darkness have him.

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After St. Louis, Dean handles Sam like he’s made of glass, and gives him sad, concerned looks when he thinks that Sam isn’t looking. It’s grating—it was grating by the end of the first hour—but Sam doesn’t have the heart to call his brother on it. The hunt shook Dean more than it should have, and Sam can’t figure out why. He doesn’t understand why Dean has changed the rules on him and keeps going on about Stanford, and law school, and California. It’s almost like Dean wants him to leave, but every time Sam tries to talk to him about it, Dean shuts down on him. He touches the scar on his forehead more than he used to, which is troubling for reasons Sam can’t define.

Even worse, though, is Sam’s newfound, leaden understanding that he can never tell Dean how he feels. He hadn’t been aware that he was actually considering it until the shifter gave him a peek into his brother’s mind and took the possibility away from him. Now the loss has left him hurting fierce and deep, like he has a sprung rib in his chest. It hurts because the shifter was right: Sam can speak as eloquently as he wants about his heart and how much he needs and loves his brother, but Dean is only going to hear yet another person putting limits and requirements on their love for him.

Sam isn’t sure that his brother would be wrong, either.

After all, he already has Dean’s fixed and unswerving attention. He goes to sleep in the same room with his brother, and eats every meal with Dean, and goes out to bars with him when they’re bored or need to blow off some steam. Dean rests his hand on the small of Sam’s back when he’s overly nervous or depressed, and he brings Sam cool, wet cloths to drape over his forehead in the wake of nightmares that leave him sweating and achy. The only thing missing from their relationship is sex, actually, which means that the only motivation Sam has to tell Dean how he feels is the hope of physical compensation.

Which would make him guilty of everything the shifter accused.

Sam understands that; he does, but it doesn’t stop him from hurting. It doesn’t stop the secret he’s carrying around from lodging just underneath his ribcage: hot and pulsing like an open sore. It
doesn’t stop him from longing for the right to put his arms around his brother and kiss those maddening, perfect lips until he gets it through Dean’s thick skull that Sam loves him and is never going to leave.

But Dean is damaged enough already, and Sam isn’t going to be the one who finishes breaking his brother, and so he keeps his mouth shut.

Dean loads their crap into the Impala, slips behind the wheel while Sam climbs in on the other side, and they drive.
When his phone rings, it’s a week later and Dean is in the midst of another pointless (as far as Sam can tell, anyway) ramble about what a nice state California is, while driving them aimlessly South along I-25 in Colorado. Sam checks the caller ID before answering, but it’s just a formality. At this point, he’d answer if it were an evangelist telemarketer calling to try to sell him a one-hundred-percent-guaranteed splinter of the True Cross. Anything to save him from his brother’s awkward monologue and his own brooding thoughts.

It isn’t an evangelist telemarketer, of course, and when Sam sees the name on the screen he grins, feeling his spirits lift a little for the first time since they left Becky’s.

“Hey, asshole,” he says as he picks up.

“Motard,” Jack returns immediately. “You get that job working at a donkey show yet?”

“Fuck you,” Sam grins, and Jack laughs.

“Man, it’s good to hear your voice.”

“Yeah, you too,” Sam agrees. “How’ve you been?”

“I think Allison Jeffries gave me herpes last Saturday, but aside from that I can’t complain.”

Sam snorts. “Okay, one, I thought you were dating Ian; two, knowing the number of people you’ve slept with, your herpes probably have herpes by now; and three, Allison Jeffries wouldn’t touch you if you paid her.”

“Fuck you very much, asshole. Alli may have spent the last three years pining after you, but since you left she’s finally opened her eyes and realized that the true prize is yours truly. And, uh, I broke up with Ian.”

Sam considers telling Jack how sorry he is to hear that and then opts against it. His ex-roommate wouldn’t welcome the sympathy, and Ian was a dick anyway, so Sam would be lying. Instead, he keeps his voice light and says, “Really? That’s what you’re going with? You’re not gonna deny the herpes thing?”

Jack laughs softly on the other end of the phone. “You’re still a wiseass, Winchester.”

“Learned from the best,” Sam answers, and Jack can take that any way he wants, but Sam’s talking about the silent man sitting beside him. He wonders what Dean is making of his side of the conversation.

“Yeah, you did.” There’s a slight pause and then Jack says, “So, how’re you doing?”

Sam hesitates. It isn’t that he thinks Jack would hear the lie in his voice—Jack’s a good guy, but he never learned to read Sam’s tells in the two years they were roommates. He isn’t going to figure the trick out now. No, Sam hesitates because he has belatedly picked up on the slightly subdued tone of Jack’s voice: the words that come a beat too early or too late. That laugh, a few decibels off.

“I’m good,” he says finally. He could say more, could trot out the old party line of ‘road trip with my brother, blah blah blah’, but until he knows what’s going on, it’s best to keep things simple.
Jack lets the silence linger between them until Sam is beginning to wonder if he should have let the call go to voicemail and then clears his throat and says, “So I, uh, talked to Becky.”

“Oh. Uh. Okay?”

“I just—I wanted to say I was sorry about your brother.”

Oh. Well, fuck. Sam had forgotten that Dean was officially dead as far as everyone except for the two of them and Becky (and Dad, if he ever actually checks his voicemail) are concerned. Good thing Sam didn’t start in about the road trip. Jack probably would’ve thought he’d completely lost it.

“Thanks,” he says, glancing toward the driver’s seat. Dean is driving with his elbow out the window and feigned disinterest plastered on his face as he strains to figure out what’s going on over the phone.

On the other end of the line, Jack continues, “I mean, he was a psycho, but he was still your bro, right? So, uh, I thought maybe I should call.”

“I’m doing fine. We, uh, we weren’t really close, so—”

“Yeah, yeah. I remember you telling me. Or, uh, not so much telling as not talking about it. Figured something was off there, but not, y’know, Hannibal Lector stuff. Why the hell’d you leave with him, anyway?” There’s a beat and then, “Fuck, man, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t’ve said—I’m crap at this.”

“No,” Sam says with a slight smile. “It’s okay. I appreciate you calling.”

“Well, I, uh, I felt bad I guess. That I wasn’t here when Jess, y’know.”

Sam’s smile falters. The wound of Jess’ death—her murder, really—has finally scabbed over, but he doesn’t think it’s ever going to heal. Not fully. Tilting his body a little further away from his brother—it’s a toss up whether Sam’s inability to stop mourning Jess is more hurtful to himself or to Dean—he says, “Because you knew she was going to die when you signed up for a semester abroad.”

“I was gonna come back,” Jack tells him, “But Becky told me you were already gone with your psycho—uh, with your brother.”

For Jack, it’s a smooth cover-up.

“It’s okay, Jack. Really.”

“Jack, first roommate Jack?” Dean puts in. There’s a strange note in his voice. Sam offers his brother more of his back and doesn’t answer him.

“So look, I figure since I’m actually in the country this time I should do something. I thought, y’know, you could use someone to take your mind off things.”

Which means, in Jack-Speak, that his ex-roommate thinks Sam could use someone to pump him full of weed and alcohol and take him somewhere there are plenty of naked breasts and asses.

“Surprisingly, I’m not in the mood to go strip-club hopping right now,” he says dryly. “But thanks for the offer.”

“No strip clubs,” Jack promises with a swiftness that makes Sam think he’s telling the truth. Of course, that only makes him more nervous about whatever the guy’s planning. “Come on, man: my roommie’s gonna be out this weekend, so there’s a bed for you to crash on. We’ll hit up some of the
usual spots, have a few beers, hang out with some fun people …”

“I appreciate the offer, really, but I’m in Colorado right now, and—”

And that’s when Dean takes the phone out of his hand.

“Dean,” Sam hisses, grabbing for it, and gets an elbow in the chest for his trouble. The car swerves slightly on the highway before Dean steadies his hand on the wheel.

“Hey there,” he says into the phone. “Jack, right? Yeah, this is Sam’s bro—” Sam gestures wildly and Dean, catching the movement from the corner of his eye, corrects, “—boyfriend.”

Sam bites his cheek and thumps his head against the window. He didn’t think he could have his nose ground any deeper than it already was in just how much he can’t have what he wants, but Dean just found a way. Sam really should have expected as much. He briefly contemplates fighting for the phone, but he’d rather not end up wrapped around the guardrail, so instead he stares out the window at the non-scenery as his brother talks with Jack (now there’s a frightening combination).

There’s a pathetic, lingering flutter of happiness in Sam’s chest at hearing Dean refer to himself as Sam’s boyfriend. His brother didn’t mean anything by it, Sam knows he didn’t, but his heart is either stupidly optimistic or just plain retarded because the warm tingle doesn’t go away until Dean swerves the car to the left without warning and drives them across the median dividing the southbound and northbound lanes of the highway.

“Jesus Christ!” Sam blurts, clinging to the door with one hand and the dash with the other, his heart pounding in his throat. The Impala jounces around a little on the dirt and then there’s a squeal of tires and they’re on pavement again heading north. “What the fuck, Dean?”

“Sounds good,” Dean says into the phone, ignoring him. “See you in a couple days.” Then, ending the call and tossing the phone back into Sam’s lap, he guns the Impala’s engine and brings them up to cruising speed.

Sam waits for his heart to drop back to where it belongs and his pulse to slow to a less alarming pace before announcing, “Just so you know, I’m not thrilled with this plan.”

Because it’s patently obvious what Dean is doing here. The only unclear element of the situation is the ‘why’, but Sam could ask until his voice gave out and Dean would just keep stonewalling him.

“Thought you were all about keeping in touch with your college buddies,” Dean says without taking his eyes off the road.

“I thought you said that was a stupid idea,” Sam shoots back.

Dean hitches his shoulders in a shrug and doesn’t say anything, but a moment later he takes one hand off the wheel to rub at his forehead. Sam is starting to recognize that as a bad sign. It took him a while to catch on because he isn’t used to Dean having such blatant tells, but ever since St. Louis it’s gotten pretty difficult to ignore the fact that Dean only ever does that when he’s exhausted or upset. Dean has been upset enough lately without Sam pushing him, and it isn’t as though it would be terrible to see Jack. So Sam settles back in his seat, fully intending to let the subject drop.

It surprises him to hear himself demand, “And you couldn’t come up with anything better than ‘boyfriend’?”

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Dean immediately deadpans. “You ashamed of our big gay love?”
Actually, if there were any sign of a big gay love Sam would be the first one shouting it from the rooftops. He can’t say that, though, so instead he says, “You’re an asshole, you know that?”

“Thought that was your favorite part,” Dean responds, and Sam blinks at his brother’s profile for a few seconds, not sure he heard correctly.

Dean might not be homophobic, but he hasn’t ever been comfortable joking about that kind of thing either—not on anything beyond a superficial, PG level, anyway—and Sam is pretty sure that what just came out of his brother’s mouth was a weird cross between a come-on and a taunt. He takes too long thinking about it and when the silence starts to get uncomfortable Dean gives an awkward cough and adds, “Anyway, Jack didn’t seem to have a problem.”

*Say something before he realizes you’re freaking out for no apparent reason,* Sam tells himself, and promptly obeys by blurtng, “Yeah, cause Jack doesn’t think we’re related. Damn it, Dean, Jack’s gonna expect—he knows me, okay, and I’m.” His cheeks heat. He can’t believe he’s having this conversation with his brother—wants more than anything to call do over and back up a few minutes—but he’s in it now and there’s no other option but to push on and say, “I’m physically affectionate with the people I date, okay?”

“We talking handholding here? A little over the shirt action? Coupla kisses?” Dean asks, like he’s actually considering it, and Sam’s whole body goes tight with want.

“Dean,” he chokes out, and isn’t sure how it sounds. He can’t really hear his own voice over the pounding of his heart.

“What?” Dean says, scowling a little. “It’s not like I’m suggesting we sleep together or anything.”

Oh God. Sam can’t _do_ this. He can’t agree to fake feel up his brother while secretly getting off on the arrangement. He can’t do that to Dean.

Putting what he hopes is just the right amount of disgust and scorn into his voice to be believable, he says, “You can’t honestly be suggesting this.”

“Why not? Am I not up to your standards or something?”

_Above them, actually,* Sam thinks, but what he says is: “You’re my _brother._ You and my standards aren’t even in the same time zone. Jesus Christ, Dean, what’s wrong with you?”

Backed by his own guilt and self-censure, it comes out more violently than he intends. Dean flinches—minutely enough that Sam wouldn’t have seen it if he hadn’t been completely focused on his brother to the exclusion of all else, but he _does._ He flinches like Sam slapped him, and before Sam can apologize he’s grinning and snorting laughter. When Dean glances over, there’s no sign of anything but amusement in his eyes.

“Dude, you are so fucking _easy._”

Sam doesn’t buy it. Dean wasn’t joking, not really. There’s something else going on here—something Sam can sense lurking at the edges of his vision like an optical illusion that he can’t quite pin down. He can’t call Dean on it, though. He’s too afraid of what that lurking creature would turn out to be.

“Ha ha. Very funny,” he says stiffly.

“I thought so,” Dean says, still grinning.
“When you’re finished patting yourself on the back, we still need a solution to this problem.” Sam sits up straighter as another idea occurs to him. “Or you could always call Jack back and tell him we changed our minds.” Sam could do that on his own, of course, but without Dean’s cooperation they’re just going to show up on Jack’s doorstep in a few days anyway.

His brother shrugs. “Dude, relax. There isn’t gonna be a problem. I’ll drop you off and head over to a motel. You can tell your buddy we had a fight: have a girl’s night in and pig out on cookie dough while you complain about what assholes men are, or whatever you college queens do. I’ll pick you up when you’re ready to leave.”

“I’m bi, Dean, not gay, and so’s Jack.”

“Hey, any way you wanna slice it, you still take it up the ass.”

No, actually, I’m a top, Dean: you’re the one who takes it up the ass like a goddamned pro.

For a few seconds, the words are so vivid in Sam’s mind that he’s certain he said them aloud. Everything is tinged with red and there’s a bitter, metallic taste in his mouth; and he realizes that he’s pissed. Dean doesn’t have the right to talk to him like that: to be so fucking dismissive when Sam knows what he did: when he saw Dean twist and shudder and moan as two strangers stuffed him full of cock for a couple hundred bucks.

Then the shifter’s voice whispers through his memory—You actually saw it? That’s probably big brother’s worst nightmare … I wonder if he’ll cry as pretty as the others did when I tell him that he’s nothing more than a tight ass and a hot pair of lips to you—and Sam’s rage snuffs out, leaving him numb inside.

Leaning his forehead against the window, he watches his brother’s reflection in the windshield. Dean gives away more than he knows when he drives, when he thinks no one is looking. Some of those high, impenetrable walls come down—not far enough to leave him vulnerable for attack, but far enough for decent reconnaissance, at least.

Sam watches his brother’s face now as the miles fly past and doesn’t like what he sees. What the hell is going on in there, Dean? he thinks as stress lines form around his brother’s mouth and eyes. As Dean reaches up to rub at his scar again. The reflection of his brother’s irises darkens until they look black: shadowed. What’s wrong?

But of course he can’t say that—can’t ask straight out because they’re Winchesters, or because they’re men, or maybe just because they’re Sam and Dean and this is the way it is. Things fracture in the quiet: they splinter apart in the dark where no one can see them. They break and then they rust over in bent, shattered positions because no one is ever brave enough to ask for help. No one is brave enough to offer it.

Sam, cowardly, shuts his eyes against his brother’s reflection and mimes sleep as the Impala carries him back toward the closest thing to a home he has ever known.

Sam should have run the minute he got a good look at his ex-roommate’s grinning face. He should have pulled his phone out and called Dean and told him to turn around right fucking now to come get him. And if Jack’s face wasn’t a good enough warning on its own, then the two guys in Theta Delt t-shirts setting up speakers all over the living room should have tipped him off.

Unfortunately, being around his ex-roommate appears to induce some kind of chronic stupidly in
Sam—or maybe he just really, really needed a break from the complicated situation with Dean—because he’s still there at nine o’clock with a plastic cup clutched in one hand and a baseline throbbing in his bones.

Only Jack would think that throwing a raucous kegger is an appropriate way to cheer up someone whose only brother was supposedly just shot and killed for being a psychopathic serial killer.

Only Sam, whose brother is decidedly fucked up but is in no way anyone these people think he is, would stay for it.

The place is just starting to fill, but Sam is already pretty fucked up (Jack can be very persuasive when it comes to the merits of pregaming). He knows most of the people here, and once all of the initial awkward fumbles at conversation—sorry about Jess and the whole psychopathic brother thing, yeah hey thanks so are you still dating Kaeli—it’s pretty okay catching up with his old friends. A surprising amount of girls (and a few guys, Sam didn’t exactly make his lack of preference a secret when he was here) make it a point to stand too close to him, putting a hand on Sam’s arm or his waist or once, awkwardly, his ass. The offers are obvious, and flattering, and in a few cases very, very tempting. A handful of fast and dirty fucks behind rundown bars aren’t enough to make up for the incredible cock tease of being stuck so very close to Dean all the time, and the drunker he gets the more Sam thinks that letting off some steam would be a good idea.

But something’s wrong.

His skin feels itchy, and he can’t seem to settle down for an extended conversation with anyone. He’s like a ball bearing stuck in one of those handheld games, only all of the holes have been blocked up with cement and he can’t come to rest: can’t snap into place and be still. When Jack insists on trying to shotgun a beer and ends up drenched, Sam laughs along with everyone else, but at the same time he’s thinking, I killed an Aswang three weeks ago. Dean held it down while I shoved a silver sword through its chest because I’m better with blades than he is and I’m better with needles because I have more practice, because I learned on my brother’s skin and Dean is like some kind of magnet when it comes to claws and knives and teeth, Dean is, Dean is—

He stumbles into the kitchen, where it’s quiet and cool, and leans against the counter. This is where Dean found him when he called that night; when Dean came for him and then left because Sam pushed him away so hard he’s surprised Dean isn’t still running. Then again, maybe he is. Maybe that’s what these past few weeks have been about. Sam’s need for his brother unfolds in his stomach like a hunger, and he squeezes his eyes shut against a sudden swell of laughter from the other room.

He has his cell out before he knows it, punching Dean on speed dial and biting on his lower lip as he waits for his brother to answer.

“Hey, Sam,” Dean says after the third ring, the low sound of Metallica playing in the background. He must have commandeered the jukebox of whatever bar he’s in.

“Dean,” Sam says, and then stops, uncertain what he wants to say. Something along the lines of ‘I think I’m addicted to you, because we haven’t been apart for more than a couple of hours and I miss you, I need you, you’ve fucking ruined me for anyone else, come get me, come bring me home.’

And Dean is home, Sam realizes. He’s twenty-two years old and drunk and standing alone in a kitchen where he once fucked his murdered girlfriend and he’s having what is probably the most important epiphany of his life.

Dean is home.
Home is Dean.

“That was quicker than I expected,” Dean says. His voice sounds dull, but Sam’s too stunned to pay much attention.

“Come get me,” he says.

The extended silence on his brother’s end is obvious enough that Sam, even in his current state, gets that this phone call isn’t actually at all what Dean expected. It makes him wonder a little what Dean thought he was calling for—what was ‘quicker than he expected’—but Sam has a feeling that the answer to that question isn’t something he wants to get into over the phone.

“Dean,” he repeats, trying to sound as sober and sincere as possible. “Come get me.”

“What, now?” Dean says finally.

Sam imagines his brother’s face scrunched in confusion, those plump lips pursed, and his face flushes. His groin goes hot and hard. Wandering over to the refrigerator, he opens the freezer door and sticks his head in.

“Sam?”

Basking in the cold air, Sam answers, “Yeah. Now.”

There’s another pause from his brother’s end—Sam uses the moment to dig some ice out of the bin on the inside of the door—and then Dean says, ‘It’s, uh. It’s gonna be a while.’

“How long can it take? Just pay your tab and get your ass over here.” Shutting the door, Sam leans against it and trails the cubes over his forehead and cheeks. He needs Dean right now, damn it. As Dean starts to stammer out some sort of excuse, he straightens abruptly and tosses the ice into the sink. “Never mind. Just tell me where you are and I’ll catch a cab. Take like, ten minutes tops.”

But his brother sighs and says, “I’ll be there as soon as I can,” and hangs up and Sam is left with a dial tone and a sink full of melting ice.

Three hours later, Dean still hasn’t shown and Sam doesn’t know whether to be panicked or pissed. He’s lost track of how many times he’s called his brother, but remembers clearly that his calls only connected twice before they started flipping straight to voicemail. Which means that either the batteries died (unlikely: Dean’s a fanatic about keeping the damn thing charged) or Dean turned it off deliberately.

And seriously, what the fuck? Is he stopping to screw every drunken barfly he can find on his way here? Because no way in hell does it take longer than thirty minutes to get anywhere in Palo Alto, even at the height of the rush hour they’re not having at the moment. Sam would think that his brother was blowing him off, except that it’s Dean, and Dean would castrate himself before refusing to do what Sam asked of him, and oh God, what if he did—not castrate himself, of course, but what if he got hurt because he was tipsy and in too much of a hurry to get here—fuck, what if Dean is unconscious and bleeding in a ditch somewhere, what if he got carjacked and shot, what if what if what if?

It’s possible that Sam should stop drinking and sober up a little bit.

Then again, he has no idea where Dean is and has no way of finding his brother when his phone is
turned off. Therefore, being sober would only leave him more upset than he already is. Clearly, the logical thing to do is to stay here and keep downing Jack’s beer while he waits for his brother to show up smelling like sex and perfume. When he does get here, of course, Sam is gonna chew him out in front of everyone and fuck Dean’s pride. Or possibly fuck Dean. It’s a toss up. Ooh, if Dean comes here he’s gonna have to play Sam’s boyfriend, isn’t he?

The idea seems to have more merit than it did a couple of hours ago.

Sam is about to head over to the keg for his tenth (eleventh?) refill when an absence of motion catches his eye. The living room is packed to the gills with college students frenetically grinding to the techno that pumps out through the speakers, but there’s a jarring still spot over by the wall. A broad-shouldered, dark-haired guy wearing a leather jacket.

Dean.

Sam’s pretty sure he tramples a few people on his way over to his brother, but he just mumbles apologies and keeps going. They wouldn’t mind anyway, not if they knew he was trying to get back home. Plus, Sam is the dude of honor, or whatever: he can trample whomever he wants to.

Although his brother’s face keeps going in and out of focus, Sam can tell Dean is wearing one of his best non-expressions as he leans against the wall. The relief and joy shivering through his limbs start to stick and congeal into righteous anger. He was going out of his mind with worry, and Dean is lounging around like he was out for a stroll.

By the time he reaches his brother’s side, Sam is seething.

“Three fucking hours!” he accuses, yelling not just to be heard over the music but because he feels like it.

Dean leans in, getting his mouth by Sam’s ear and giving Sam a heady whiff of the leather jacket he’s wearing, and answers, “I told you it’d be a while.”

Dean starts to shift back again, but Sam isn’t done smelling his brother, and he wraps a hand around the back of Dean’s neck and holds him there. He’s still pissed, no doubt about it, but it isn’t anger squirming around in his groin and making his cock twitch. Easing closer, he turns his face to the side and takes a deep breath: filling his mouth and lungs with his brother’s intoxicating scent.

Fuck, Dean smells good. And, because compliments are good things and he sees no reason not to, Sam tells him so.

Dean laughs, a shaky breath against the side of Sam’s neck, and then pries Sam’s hand away and steps back. “You get trashed before or after you called me?” he asks.

Sam doesn’t know what difference that makes, but the question reminds him that he’s been waiting here, imagining God knows what, for three fucking hours. Jutting his jaw out, he demands, “Where the fuck have you been?”

“Driving,” Dean answers, bland and cool as ever. He turns and starts for the front door, but Sam catches his brother’s wrist before he can go anywhere. Sam is a ninja like that.

“Nowhere’s that far away,” he argues. “What were you, like, driving in circles? You think that’s funny? Makin’ me wait. Makin’ we worry?”

“I got here as fast as I could, Sam,” Dean repeats flatly, pulling his wrist back. But Sam’s not so drunk that he doesn’t notice the way his brother isn’t looking at him. He watches Dean hitch his
shoulders, shrugging his leather jacket closer, and jerk his head at the door. “You coming or what?”

Sam doesn’t move, too busy hunting after the nagging suspicion arising in his mind. It’s a little
difficult to think right now, but after a moment he manages to ask, “Where were you? When I called
where were you?”

“What the fuck does it matter where I was?” Dean snaps. He’s looking at Sam now: looking pale
and so angry that Sam knows it isn’t anger making his brother sharp, but fear. Dean’s hand twitches
like it wants to go up to the scar on his forehead and then shoves into his front jean pocket instead.
“I’m here now. And on my way out the door. You can either come with me or you can stay here, but
you stay and I don’t want any more of these goddamned drunken phone calls because I can’t fucking
handle you jerking me around like this.”

And something in Dean’s voice or in his eyes or maybe in Sam’s own brain, where the alcohol
muddles everything but also prevents Sam’s fears from tripping him up the way they normally do,
falls into place and he understands. He understands why his brother has been acting so goddamned
weird, and why he decided that Sam needed to visit his old college buddies. He understands why it
took Dean so long to get here when he called: understands that when his brother says ‘stay’ he
doesn’t just mean for tonight.

There’s no question as to whether or not they’re having this conversation. Sam says they are and
that’s the end of it. He doesn’t want to talk to Dean out here in front of everyone, though: can’t say
half the shit he’d like to, and anyway Dean would clam up worse than usual if they had an audience.
His brother isn’t going to come along willingly, of course, so Sam makes an executive decision and
grabs Dean’s right arm so he can yank him toward the stairs.

Dean immediately tries to pull free, complaining about grabby drunks, and Sam almost loses him
before he remembers that he may be drunk, but he’s still taller and stronger than his brother.
Focusing on keeping his hand closed around Dean’s arm means that he stumbles a couple of times
on the stairs on the way up, but Sam is willing to put up with a couple of bruises if it means they can
finally get this out into the open where it belongs.

The upstairs is officially off-limits to the party-goers, nice and quiet and private, and Sam moves
straight for his old room. There’s a sock on the doorknob, which is cute and a little nostalgic but
really pointless for whoever’s inside. Sam obviously needs the room more than they do, after all.
Besides, for all intents and purposes it’s his until Jack’s new roommate comes back on Monday.
Turning the knob and knocking his shoulder against the frame (the locks in here are crap), Sam
throws the door open. It’s dark and foreign inside—full of humped objects in the wrong places,
with the wrong shapes—but Sam remembers where the light switch is and he hits it before the couple on
the bed has even realized the door is open.

They break apart instantly and the girl—Kelly White, Sam would recognize that shock platinum hair
anywhere—grabs her shirt and holds it against her chest. Sam doesn’t know the guy, but Romeo’s
dick is still tucked into his unbuttoned jeans, so they haven’t gotten far enough that he’ll put up a
fight about moving. Initially, of course, the yells are pretty unanimous on the subject of Sam leaving
Kelly and Romeo alone to do their thing (Dean’s voice in his ear keeps going on about the sanctity
of the sock and demanding to know what the fuck is wrong with Sam, anyway), but Sam already
knows how this one is going to go.

“Get out,” he says. “Now.”

Behind him, Dean makes another bid for freedom: feeling with his left hand for the pressure points
that will release Sam’s grip. Sam slides his own hand down to his brother’s wrist before Dean can
manage it and digs his thumb and forefinger in to the bundle of nerves he knows is there. Dean’s
breath immediately hisses out and he mutters, “Fuck, okay, okay,” and stops struggling.

Sam isn’t sure whether it’s that or the ‘don’t fuck with me’ tone of voice or the ‘we all know how this is gonna end’ expression in his eyes, but when he turns his attention back to the bed, Romeo is getting to his feet and Kelly is hurriedly putting herself back together.

Now that he’s sure there aren’t going to be any more problems, Sam gives his brother’s arm a yank and sends Dean into the room at a stumbling run. Dean brings himself up short after only a few steps and turns back, anger and indignation and fear warring on his face. He cuts a glance toward the two co-eds and his jaw twitches with all the words he wants to say but can’t in front of strangers.

Sam, on the other hand, has no trouble starting now.

“You were gonna leave me here,” he says, striding forward and making Dean take a few awkward, instinctive steps back.

“No!” Dean starts, glancing at the couple again.

“Look at me,” Sam shouts, furious, and Kelly gives up trying to get her shirt back on and dives for the safety of the hall. “Shut the door behind you,” Sam tells Romeo as the guy follows and then, snapping his attention back to his brother, continues, “You just dropped me here like a piece of fucking luggage and ran!”

The door clicks shut behind Sam, leaving them alone, and Dean opens his mouth—presumably to defend himself. Before he can speak, Sam adds, “I’m surprised it only took you three hours to get back here. What’d you do, floor it the entire way?” Dean would have had to, if he had started driving as soon as he left Sam on Jack’s doorstep the way Sam suspects he did. “Christ, Dean, why the fuck did you even bother coming?”

“If I’d known you were just tanked again, I wouldn’t have,” Dean spits.

And while Sam believed his realization downstairs, it doesn’t really hit home until now: until Dean isn’t even trying to defend himself against the charge. His rage and hurt mix together, turning into some new, dangerous beast that tightens his chest and leaves his head spinning. He doesn’t feel all that drunk anymore.

“You were,” he breathes, fighting not to cry or throw up or both. “You were just gonna ditch me.”

“Why the fuck not, Sam?” Dean demands. “It was only a matter of time before you gave up on finding Dad and came back here anyway. All I did was save myself a couple of months of having to put up with your whiny, emo, college boy crap.”

Sam knows that Dean has a problem with the whole Stanford thing—if ‘problem’ is a strong enough word for how Dean feels about the irrefutable proof that Sam once wanted something other than the open road and the hunt and his brother’s company—but it still hurts to hear the words from his brother’s mouth. Hurts him and angers him. Dean doesn’t get to spin his own fucked up neurosis around and put it on Sam.

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“Yeah, ‘nowhere’, right. Like I wasn’t supposed to notice how you acted with Becky?”

Sam blinks, completely derailed, and sways a little on his feet. “What the hell are you talking about?”
“You remember, Sam: blonde hair, great body, chick in peril. The chick you could actually bear to smile around, and talk to, and look at.” Dean is bristling all over, so self-defensive it hurts to look at him, which Sam does, by the way. He looks at his brother way more than he actually should.

“I look at you,” he protests.

“Yeah,” Dean laughs, bitter and unbelieving, and rubs at his scar. “Sure you do.”

It’s maybe not the best time for this, not when he’s too messed up by alcohol and emotion to think clearly, but Sam can’t keep his mouth shut. Not when Dean looks so fucking wounded.

“I look at you, Dean,” he repeats, moving even closer.

Dean takes another step back and startles as his back hits the edge of a rickety dresser. Sam thinks he should maybe move away, or possibly leave the room, but Dean is just so goddamned beautiful with his eyes so wide and his skin pale. Emotions flicker across his face like light on water.

“Sammy, what—”

“I look at you,” Sam says for the third, magic time, and takes Dean’s face between his hands and kisses him.

It isn’t anything like it is in Sam’s fantasies. Dean’s lips are just as soft as he always knew they’d be, but when he tries to get his brother to open for his tongue, Dean refuses to budge. There’s no give and take here: just Sam’s need and devotion lapping up against the brick wall that is his brother. It’s wretched, it’s horrible, and Sam’s chest feels sprung and bloodied. He doesn’t know (maybe doesn’t want to know) whether Dean isn’t responding because he isn’t interested or if he’s just too shocked to reciprocate.

Sam wants, desperately, for it to be the second possibility, but he can’t bear to keep doing this either way. He pulls off long enough to whisper, “Please, Dean. I need this. I need you. Please,” and then tries again.

It’s a little better this time. Dean’s lips are still soft and full, but now they’re also pliant against his. Sam opens his brother’s mouth wide for him and Dean lets it happen, Dean lets Sam’s tongue ease into his mouth, he lets Sam catch hold of his lower lip and suck on it, he lets Sam’s fingers dance over his cheekbones. But he still isn’t kissing back, not the way Sam knows he’s capable of, and Sam isn’t quite drunk enough to believe that Dean is still in shock.

If I kiss him better, he thinks desperately. If I make him see …

With his chest stinging and bruised, Sam deepens the kiss. He tilts his brother’s head back and crowds in so that their bodies are touching in a long, hard line, except that Dean isn’t hard, not at fucking all, not even when Sam rubs against him a little and gives a moan.

Sam is a few seconds from crying (but he doesn’t think he can stop this, stop kissing Dean, not unless Dean makes him) when the door is unexpectedly thrown open and they’re ambushed by a shutter flash of light. Sam lifts his head, startled, and blinks toward the door.

“Ha!” Jack says, lowering the camera. “Got your good side, Win—Holy fuck.” Sam’s brain is still fighting to catch up to the fact that he just kissed his brother, and he has no clue why Jack has that flummoxed, awed look on his face until he says, “You’ve been holding out on me, asshole! You never told me you were dating Sam Stallion!”

Oh. God.
Sam didn’t think that his brother could get any tenser, but Dean does. Dean goes so tense and still that Sam isn’t sure he’s even breathing anymore.

“I—” Sam’s voice sticks in his throat and he has to swallow before continuing, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You fucking liar,” Jack says cheerfully. He seems to have recovered from his surprise and is busy leering at Dean, which, despite everything else, makes Sam want to cover his brother up: shield him somehow. “Like you didn’t spend an entire semester getting your rocks off on Pussycat Fever.”

Dean flinches.

When Sam looks back at his brother, Dean’s face is covered with a dawning, reluctant horror. His eyes are so very, very green: translucent and betrayed. “You saw it,” he whispers. “All this time, you—”

“It’s not what you think,” Sam tries.

“No?” Dean says. His voice is quiet, almost tentative, as though he’s worried that if he speaks too loudly he’ll break apart. Break down, maybe. “So you don’t want to fuck me?”

And of course Sam has nothing to say to that: not after he just outed himself so spectacularly by molesting Dean up against this rickety dresser.

“You—when you called that time, when I came here and you were drunk and you—you meant it, didn’t you? When you tried to kiss me.”

“I was drunk, Dean, I—”

“What, like you’re drunk now?” Dean asks, and there’s finally an edge to his voice. Something hard and gathering force.

“Yes. No. I mean, yeah, I’m drunk, but you need to let me explain, okay? It isn’t about the sex, it—”

Dean’s expression finally cracks—rage instead of sorrow or shame—and his hands come up and start to push at Sam’s chest. In an effort to hold him still, Sam catches his brother’s wrists and grips them tightly. Dean’s pulse thunders against his fingers: rabbit-rapid and erratic. When Dean tries to heave Sam off with his upper body, Sam instinctively hooks one ankle around his brother’s and pulls him off balance.

“Dean!” he says urgently. “Dean, wait, you have to listen to me, you—”

“Let go,” Dean spits. He twists between Sam and the dresser like a dying eel: breath coming hard and eyes lowered to the floor.

“No, Dean, wait, I can explain, I—”

“Get off!” Dean insists, fighting harder, and in a few more seconds Sam is either going to have to let go or risk breaking his brother’s wrists.

He lets go.

Dean shoves him, hard, and blows past him out of the room. He isn’t running, not quite, but Sam’s pretty sure that as soon as he gets out the front door he will be. He tries to will himself to follow and can’t get his legs to work.
Jack stands in the doorway, open-mouthed and blinking. He peers down the hall after Dean and then swings around to look at Sam again.

“So,” he says, fiddling with his camera strap. “Bad timing?”

And there’s nothing left for Sam to do but let out a wild laugh and cling to the edge of the dresser while he does his best not to burst into tears.
Chapter 5

The next day, Sam makes a list of every scumbag motel within a fifty-mile radius. Then, with a fresh pot of coffee by his elbow and the list in front of him, he calls each number: asking if they have a ‘Jim Rockford’ staying there, are they sure, can they check once more, no he doesn’t want a room, thanks, goodbye.

He spends days two through four making the rounds again—in person this time, and armed with a list of about fifty-two names that he remembers Dean ever using as an alias. If his brother is still in the area, though (Sam doesn’t think he is, not after what happened at the party, but he finds himself hoping anyway), then he definitely doesn’t want to be found.

On the fifth day, the phone number that Sam has repeatedly called between his conversations with harassed-looking desk clerks clicks over onto an automated recording that tells him that this cellular customer is no longer with AT&T. He hangs up and immediately dials Dad, slick dread in his mouth, and the message has changed. John Winchester is no longer urging people to call his son, Dean. Instead, he’s offering Bobby Singer as a reliable source of help.

Sam thinks about leaving a message begging for his brother’s new number (Dean would have given it to Dad, of course he would have), but Dad isn’t going to call him back. And if he did, for some reason, pick now to break his long silence, then his first question would be why Dean hadn’t given the number to Sam in the first place.

And Sam can’t lie to his father. He never picked up the knack for it. Which was, of course, half the reason their fights were so bad before Stanford.

He does call Bobby.

“Singer Salvage,” Bobby says when he picks up.

“Bobby, hey. It’s Sam Winchester.”

Bobby’s breath huffs out wryly. “Wish I could say it’s good to hear your voice, Sam, but I’m guessing this ain’t a social call.”

Sam wants to deny that, play this casual, but when he tries to pass the words through the painful blockage in his throat they come out distorted. “Do you know where he is?”

“Which one?” Bobby says dryly, and suddenly Sam’s ribs feel like they’ve been cracked open. He hasn’t let himself acknowledge it before, but it’s true: Sam’s been cut off by both family members now. He wonders if this is how Dean felt: like something hollowed out and wasted and ice-flecked. Worthless. Discarded.

But Sam deserves to feel this way. Dean didn’t. Never has.

“My—” he starts, and his voice cracks. He pauses, clearing his throat, and then says, “Dean. Do you know where he is?”

“No,” Bobby says, but he hesitated and like magic Sam can suddenly see it in his head: Bobby sitting on his couch talking to Sam on the phone and watching as Dean cleans guns on the floor.

“I just want to talk to him,” Sam breathes, vision blurring. “I want to—he didn’t give me a chance to explain, he—”
“Sam,” Bobby interrupts him. The man’s voice is firm but gentle. “Sam, I’m not lying to you, son. He ain’t here.”

But he is. Sam can feel it in his chest. “Can you—” He chokes a little, wipes the back of his hand across his nose, and then finishes, “Can you give him a message?”

“I’m telling you, he ain’t—”

“Please. Bobby, please, I fucked up bad, I know, I—I hurt him, but I didn’t mean to, and I can’t—just give me a chance to fix it. Please.”

There’s a long moment of silence and then Bobby sighs. “What’s the message.”

Sam is crying for real now, eyes hot and lips salted. “Tell him I’m sorry. Tell him—tell him it isn’t what he thinks. He—I want to talk to him. When he’s ready, okay? He can call, or he can. If he wants to find me, he knows what name to ask for. I’m still in Palo Alto. I’ll wait here.”

More silence, long enough that Sam is beginning to think that the call was dropped, and then Bobby grunts, “I’ll tell him. Can’t promise more.”

But Sam’s chest opens and relief floods in. As long as Bobby passes the message along, Dean will respond. The shifter taught Sam that much. No matter how badly Dean is hurting, he won’t be able to stop himself from responding if Sam reaches out. It’s hardwired into him. Sam should probably feel bad about manipulating his brother like this, but there’s no room left in him for any more regrets right now.

“Thank you,” he breathes.

“You thank me by fixing this, son,” Bobby answers, and then hangs up.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It takes Dean five days to fold, which is two less than Sam was expecting.

He wakes up one morning and Dean is there, sitting in a chair that he has pushed up against the far wall. He’s wearing Dad’s old leather jacket and a black t-shirt, jeans and a pair of clunky shoes that might as well be boots. There’s a bruise high on his cheek and his lower lip is split. It looks painful, but all Sam can wonder is whether it’s possible to fuck someone’s mouth roughly enough to do that. When he looks at the bruise again, it looks a little like a thumbprint.

He’s still foggy enough with sleep—and shocked enough by his brother’s sudden appearance—that he speaks without thinking.

“What happened to your face?”

“Nothing,” Dean says. It’s a blatant, bald-faced lie, but he looks like he expects Sam to swallow it.

Sam looks more carefully at his brother and reevaluates the situation. Dean is sitting stiffly in the chair, but Sam doesn’t think it’s from hostility. He thinks maybe Dean’s ribs are hurting him. This time, when he looks at Dean’s face, he thinks of his brother cursing his own lips, Dean hating the way he looks, and wonders whether Dean went looking for a fight in an attempt to hide behind some bruises and blood. If that was his intention, it didn’t work. In fact, the injuries only serve to call attention to him. To how fucking pretty he is.

Sam rubs his own face, which feels swollen and stiff from crying himself to sleep last night. “Okay,
can I … If I take a shower, will you still be here when I get out?"

“Probably not,” Dean replies blandly.

Of course. Sam feels a momentary pulse of anger—it’s unfair of Dean to expect him to have this conversation now: to have ambushed him like this. Then again, Dean is entitled to an ambush or two after what Sam did to him.

“Okay,” Sam says, sitting up and swinging his feet onto the floor. He rubs his eyes again, trying to remember what he wanted to say.

“You’ve got one minute to start talking and then I’m gone,” Dean announces into the silence.

Panicked by the unexpected deadline, Sam instantly blurts, “I’m in love with you,” and then winces because he knows how it sounds. He can’t take it back now, though, and anyway it’s true, so he sits there underneath his brother’s stare and waits for a response.

Finally, Dean says, “And that isn’t what I think how, exactly?”

“No, Dean, you don’t understand, you.” Sam exhales, frustrated, because how the hell is he supposed to explain something like this to Dean? Dean, who has no real grasp of what the word ‘love’ actually means. Except, Sam realizes abruptly, that he does. Dean knows exactly what it means because he loves Sam. The fact that he’s here at all right now proves that.

“I love you like you love me,” he tries.

Dean’s lips quirk mirthlessly. “Funny how I’ve never been tempted to kiss you.”

“Well,” Sam fumbles. Shit, this conversation isn’t going the way it’s supposed to. “Not. Not exactly like, but. It isn’t. It isn’t about kissing you, or fuh—uh, anything else. It’s not about how you look, it’s just. It’s who you are, Dean.”

“Who I am,” Dean repeats.

Sam ignores the scathing quality to his brother’s voice and says, “I fucked up, okay? I should have told you how I felt, I should have. I should have told you about the movie. That I saw it. But Jesus Christ, Dean, how the fuck was I supposed to bring something like that up? ‘Great to see you again, man, and oh, by the way, I watched you take it up the ass for money’?”

Dean flinches—a helpless motion Sam doesn’t think he’s aware of—but doesn’t say anything. Sam feels exhausted suddenly: worn out from the whole goddamned mess. He leans forward on his knees, rubs one hand through his hair. He’s tired of wondering. Tired of that tiny, buried spark of hope that has its barbs sunk deep into his chest and won’t let go.

“Dean, do you—I mean, have you ever thought about me? At all? Even for a second?”

Dean regards him long enough that Sam is beginning to think he won’t answer and then he sighs and says, “I don’t think about anyone like that.”

“You—wait, what? But you—all those girls, you—”

Dean rolls his shoulders in a shrug. “Passes the time.”

Sam struggles to process this new piece of information and fails utterly. On the one hand, it doesn’t take a fully licensed psychiatrist to understand that Dean’s foray into filmmaking would have been
more than a little traumatic. On the other hand, the image Sam has of Dean in his head is irrevocably wrapped up in his brother’s sexual prowess, in his constant flirting, in his leers and meaningful nudges and the revolving door of girls that he tumbles in and out of bed.

Dean stands up, moving toward the door, but Sam can tell he isn’t trying to leave. His brother’s movements are too edgy: full of the excess energy that forced him out of the chair. “It’s not a big deal,” he says, but the way he won’t look at Sam reveals the lie. So does the way his hand has crept up to rub at his temple again.

“Dean, you—you realize that’s not healthy, right?” Sam offers.

Dean laughs, overly loud and harsh. “Oh really,” he says, shooting a scathing glance in Sam’s direction and dropping his hand. “And this—” he gestures between them, somehow managing to encompass all of Sam’s fuck ups in the motion “—is?”

“No,” Sam admits. “No, but I wouldn’t—” He wants to say that he would never do anything to hurt Dean but has to stop because it’s already a lie, isn’t it? “I won’t touch you again. I promise, okay? Just don’t—Dean, I need you. Please, man. Don’t shut me out.”

Dean laughs again, shaking his head, but Sam can tell that all of that cutting humor is focused inward this time. He wants to go to his brother and shake his shoulders until his anger is pointed in the right direction, until Dean’s scathing anger is thrashing out instead of cutting him up inside.

Then Dean says, quietly and without looking at him, “I’m not going anywhere.” He perches on the edge of the table, knuckles white as they close on the wood.

“Thank y—”

“Shut up.” The words aren’t cutting—are dragging and exhausted—but Sam obeys anyway. Dean nods to himself and then lifts his head, meeting Sam’s eyes squarely. Sam doesn’t know whether his brother is aware of his expression, but the bleak hopelessness in Dean’s eyes is unhooded. His face is lined with exhaustion.

“You’re all I’ve got,” he says, and Sam is ashamed because it’s true. Dean deserves more, deserves everything, but their mom burned up on a ceiling and Dad disappeared and now he’s left with nothing but a weak, sick fuck of a brother.

“You’re all—” Dean tries to repeat, but the words catch in his throat. He closes his mouth on them, swallows, and then says, “So I’m staying. But I can’t be that for you, Sammy. I won’t. It’s not right and I’m not gonna fuck you up like that.”

The needy, grasping part of Sam wants to tell Dean that the chivalry isn’t necessary: he’s already fucked beyond redemption, and if that’s the only thing standing between them, then Dean needs to get naked already. But it isn’t the only thing standing between them.

Dean doesn’t want this, doesn’t want Sam, and Sam isn’t going to force him. He refuses to damage his brother any more than he already has.

“Okay,” he manages.

Dean nods again, cutting his eyes away. Sam can see him visibly rebuilding his walls: forcing his shoulders out of their defeated slump, firming his jaw.

“Okay. Get your ass in gear and your shit together, then. I’m not waiting around all day.”
When Sam emerges from the bathroom thirty minutes later, Dean is sprawled in a chair with his feet kicked up on the table drinking a coffee while he looks through the paper. There’s a second Styrofoam cup waiting for Sam, and Dean glances up and gives him a relaxed grin. Like nothing happened.

“Got a line on a job in Ankeny, Iowa,” he announces, and that’s that.

A week later, Sam is starting to wonder whether he imagined the whole thing. Dean still jostles their shoulders together when they walk, and teases him about his hair, and smiles at him, and uses his toothbrush because he can’t be bothered to dig his own out of his bag. He drags Sam out to bars to celebrate successful hunts, and sings while he drives, and strolls around the motel room half-naked in search of a clean shirt.

And he still tumbles women into bed at every opportunity. If anything, he’s actually less discrete than normal about it: twice Sam has to watch his brother all but fuck a woman up against the pool table of some hole in the wall bar. Both times, his chest twists at the sight, and his eyes burn, but he makes himself watch. Makes himself look for some sign of the disinterest his brother confessed to. Dean is good at lying, though—practiced—and as hard as Sam looks, Dean seems into it. Seems eager and hungry.

In the end, Sam is stuck measuring his sanity by his brother’s newfound desire to push Sam at any woman he so much as glances at. Dean never used to do that: used to respect the fact that Sam would be just as likely to go for a guy as a girl and let him do his own hunting. Something changed Dean’s mind on that score, something big, ergo the train wreck of a kiss and the following conversation actually happened.

Simple.

In Oasis Plains, Oklahoma, Sam sees reflections of the boy he was in Matt Pike and is too raw inside from Dean’s casual jokes (I’m gonna go talk to Larry, okay, honey?) to conceal it. Dean notices, of course, and responds by going into defensive mode. Suddenly, Sam is inundated with stories of how much Dad cared, and how hard he tried, and how ungrateful Sam is for everything John did for him. Dad loves you, Dad came to see you at Stanford, Dad’s a goddamned hero. Dealing with the curse helps Sam keep himself in line, but then the curse is over and Dean won’t stop.

When they pull into their first motel after leaving Oasis Plains and the Pikes behind, Sam is fed up from a full day of Dean’s ill-concealed lectures and doesn’t waste a moment in setting out for the nearest bar. As he throws back shot after shot, it occurs to him that he’s no better right now than the man he hates so much it makes his teeth hurt: no better than Dad, who drowned his sorrows often enough in a similar manner. The realization goads him, but only into ordering another round. By the time Dean shows up to drag his sorry ass home, the room is spinning and Sam’s stomach is sloshing alarmingly.

“C’mon, dude,” Dean says softly, putting a hand underneath Sam’s elbow and levering him up. Sam tries to help and ends up with an accidental mouthful of his brother’s skin. Luckily, he sways back again before his alcohol-drenched mind can figure out what’s going on and send the kind of command bound to fuck things up between them for good.

“How much has he had?”
It’s Dean’s voice, loved and familiar, but it isn’t directed at Sam. He clings to his brother’s broad shoulders as the bartender announces the damage and wow, Sam does not remember ordering more than five shots. Maybe the other six were gifts?

“And you served him? What are you, some kind of fucking moron?” Dean sounds angry, but Sam knows that it’s just concern making his brother belligerent. He gets his eyes open and finds Dean’s doubled faces (both of them beautiful, so beautiful) and reaches out. Oops. Looks like Right Side Dean is the fake one. Adjusting, Sam finally gets his hand on his brother’s cheek and runs his hand over stubbled skin.

“S’okay, ‘m good,” he assures him.

Sighing, Dean tosses his head and dislodges Sam’s hand. “You’re a fucking idiot too,” he mutters, pulling Sam’s arm around his shoulders. “Oughtta leave your ass.” But he’s leading Sam out of the bar and to the car anyway.

Sam lets his head loll onto his brother’s shoulder as they walk. It’s warm there, and comfortable, and he makes a grunt of protest when Dean shakes him off and loads him into the backseat of the car.

“You puke in there and I’ll kill you,” Dean warns, pushing him down on the seat.

“Dean,” Sam pants, throwing out one hand in aimless demand. “C’mere. Wanna—wanna make you feel good.”

It smells like Dean in here, he realizes, turning his face so that his nose is smushed up against the back of the seat. Smells like family. He inhales deeply as his legs are folded up inside the car and then jumps as the door slams.

Dean is muttering to himself as he gets behind the wheel: words that would probably make sense if Sam were sober. He doesn’t sound terribly happy, though.

“Dean,” Sam tries, and then clings to the edge of the seat as the car starts to move. There’s no response and so a moment later he tries again, louder. “Dean.”

“What?”

“Wha’s wrong?”

But Dean laughs in response. Huh. Looks like he’s okay after all.

“Just pass out already, will you?” Dean mutters a moment later.

“Kay,” Sam agrees, and snuggles his nose into the thick scent of leather and history and Dean. He must doze off for a while because it seems like only a moment passes before his brother is hauling him out again, grumbling and complaining that he’s ‘even heavier than Dad, Christ’.

The words remind Sam why he felt he needed to go out for a drink in the first place, but he’s too out of it to utter more than a slurred, “Fucker,” that doesn’t come out as anything resembling English. He does his best to work with Dean until he realizes that he’s hindering more than helping. Then, going limp, he lets himself be moved.

Dean drags him somewhere too bright and cool and then the world blurs away again.

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Sam wakes up sprawled in the motel bathtub. He’s still dressed, stinking of old sweat and alcohol, and when he moves his head spikes of pain shoot through his neck and down his back. His head is pounding so alarmingly that he’s a little worried his brain is going to slide out his ears at any moment, and his eyes feel sore and dry. And now, over the reek of his own body, he can smell vomit. The source of that enticing odor turns out to be on the floor outside the tub and not on Sam, but this is still going down as his worst morning ever.

Somehow, he manages to get up and stumble into the main room. Dean isn’t anywhere to be found, but his leather jacket it tossed over a chair and his bag is open on his bed, so he’s coming back. Sam’s still nervous, though, because he can’t remember whether he did anything unforgivable last night. He hopes not, but the whole bathroom thing isn’t a great sign. He got drunk a few times before he left for Stanford, and Dean was always careful to get him undressed and into bed. Come to think of it, Dean had done similar things for Dad whenever the bottle got the better of him.

Sam’s stomach clenches at the thought of his father and the pounding pulse in his head speeds with anger. Wincing, he fishes out some clean clothes from his own bag, downs a handful of aspirin, and then heads back into the bathroom to clean up.

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By the time Dean returns an hour later, Sam is showered and cleaned and well medicated. His head still feels a little tender and his neck is going to be sore for days, but he can live with that. Just as long as he didn’t fuck things up with Dean last night.

Sam watches the door swing open from his place on the bed. Sees Dean notice him and pause, expressionless.

“Hey,” he offers.

Dean gets himself moving again, stepping inside and shutting the door behind himself. He’s carrying a cardboard drink tray with two coffees and a wax-coated bag bulging with some kind of pastry.

“I see you managed not to drown in your own puke,” he says, heading over to the table to put everything down.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry about that.” Sam rubs at the back of his neck and then makes himself ask, “I didn’t, uh, do anything did I?”

“No.” But Dean isn’t looking at him.

Sam isn’t sure whether that means that his brother is lying or if Dean is just pissed about having to take care of him. He sits against the headboard awkwardly while his brother fishes an apple fritter out of the bag and then tosses it in Sam’s direction. Sam makes a belated attempt to catch it and fails. Luckily, Dean’s aim is good enough that the bag hits Sam in the chest and falls right into his lap.

“So, you gonna tell me why you thought it’d be a good idea to do your best impersonation of an MIT frat boy last night?” Dean asks, dropping down into a chair and finally looking at Sam. His mouth is pursed and tight, which means that yes, he is angry. Of course, looking at his brother’s mouth makes Sam think of the movie, of those lips reddened and stretched wide with cock, and he hastily looks away.

“Seemed like a good idea at the time.”

Dean utters a disbelieving laugh and thumbs back the tab on his coffee cover. “I got enough of that shit from Dad,” he says, taking a sip. “You decide to be a fucking dumbass like that again and you’re
on your own, you hear me?"

Sam, who was starting to look inside the pastry bag, freezes. His stomach twists guiltily and his head gives a single, painful throb. He wasn’t going to bring it up, he honestly wasn’t, but now that Dean has reminded him again he can’t seem to help himself.

“Dad’s a bastard.”

He doesn’t have to be looking at his brother to know that Dean’s expression has gone shocked and hurt. He can see it in his head: the same look Dean always got when Sam used to take potshots at their father before Stanford. No matter how many holes Sam poked in the mythic figure Dean built up in his head, though, his brother’s hero worship always remained undiminished.

Nothing seems to have changed. When Sam looks up, he catches the tail end of that same expression: Dean’s eyes wide, his mouth open, his skin pale.

Then anger flushes him and his mouth quirks bitterly. “Looks like it runs in the family.”

Dean’s baiting him with the jibe, but now that Sam has started he isn’t going to let his brother distract him. “He never should have asked you to do that,” he says.

Confusion flickers over Dean’s face, which only feeds the righteous anger tightening Sam’s chest.

“He shouldn’t have asked you to make that movie,” Sam clarifies, jutting his jaw out.

The confusion vanishes immediately, replaced by a hard and hostile mask. “This the bug that’s been up your ass, Sammy? Huh? You been worried about my ‘virtue’? I’m touched, really.”

“I’m serious, Dean. Dad had no fucking right to make you sell yourself like that.”

“Oh, for fuck’s—” Tossing his uneaten fritter down onto the table beside his coffee, Dean stands up and starts to pace. “It was a goddamned porno, Sam! It isn’t like I was whoring myself out on the street.”

“That’s exactly what it’s like,” Sam returns, pushing to his own feet and moving toward his brother. “I watched your ‘audition interview’, man. You think I don’t know that you would have told them to go fuck themselves in a heartbeat if Dad hadn’t told you to bend over and take it like a good soldier?”

Dean rounds on him without warning, grabbing Sam by the shirt and using the momentum to swing him around and slam him against the wall.

“Fuck you!” Dean snarls, fisting his shirt tightly enough that the material pulls tight at his throat and makes it difficult to breathe. “Fuck you, Sam, Dad didn’t have anything to fucking do with it, and when we find him you’re gonna keep your goddamned mouth shut!”

Sam gapes at him. “Dad didn’t …”

“No!” Dean snaps. Then, more evenly, he repeats, “No.” Loosening his hold on Sam’s shirt, he steps back, right hand fluttering up to its customary place at his temple. “He doesn’t know. And he doesn’t need to. You want to be pissed at someone, you be pissed at me.”

But Sam can’t be pissed at Dean for this, not after watching the tape. Not after indulging, however briefly, in his own twisted desires. Instead, he breathes, “Then why? Dean, why did you—how could you do that?”
Shifting his hand down from his scar and scrubbing it over his face, Dean sighs and walks back over to the table to sit down. He reaches out with one hand and toys with his coffee cup.

“Couple of months after you left, Dad got torn up pretty good while we were hunting a black dog. Fucker knocked him over the side of a bridge. He busted some ribs, hit his head, pretty much shattered his left leg. I—he wasn’t breathing when I fished him out.”

Sam’s breath catches. As angry as he still is with the man, he feels ill at the news: at the knowledge of how close he and Dean had come to being orphans. Then his mind replaces Dad’s face with Dean’s and Sam shivers.

That could have been Dean in the river. Dean battered and broken. Could’ve been Dean easily.

He can tell from the way that his brother’s fingers have abandoned the Styrofoam cup and returned to his temple that Dean is just as upset as he is by the memory. He thinks of his brother’s hero worship for the man, and his devotion to family, and it isn’t difficult to intuit that Dean must have been scared shitless. He can see his brother in his mind: alone and panicked and pulling his father’s heavy, breathless, shattered body from a dark river. Shouting John’s name, breathing for him, dragging him to the car and driving to the hospital at breakneck, reckless speed.

Sam parts dry lips and asks, “Why didn’t you call me?”

“You made it pretty clear you didn’t want anything to do with us,” Dean answers.

It isn’t an accusation, just a statement of fact, and Sam doesn’t know how his brother manages to twist things around in his head so thoroughly. Dean was there for that final, apocalyptic fight: he heard Dad’s ultimatum same as Sam, saw Dad pushing Sam away. Sam never wanted to sever all ties: he’d been driven to it by Dad’s fury.

He could argue the point—set the record straight—but Dean is actually talking and Sam doesn’t want to waste the opportunity. “So what happened?”

“Docs said he was gonna need about two months of therapy for the leg, so we had to stay put. I had the insurance all sorted out okay, but it was a small town in Bumfuck Nevada, and I couldn’t—we couldn’t risk using the credit cards if we were gonna be stuck there that long. I got a couple of part time jobs, tried to make ends meet. It worked for a couple weeks, but then I, uh, I lost one of the jobs.”

He sounds embarrassed, but Sam guesses that he has no reason to be. He knows Dean well enough to read between the lines: to understand that Dean’s ‘couple of part time jobs’ probably meant about eighty hours a week doing backbreaking, humiliating manual labor. It isn’t as though Dean could have gotten hired anywhere else, what with no records and no clerical skills. Sam can even guess how his brother got fired: Dean probably fell asleep and was late for a shift, or maybe had to call out one too many times so he could run an errand for Dad. He saw both happen more times than he could count, those last few years before Stanford.

Different verse, same as the first.

“I, uh, figured I’d head over to Vegas: score enough cash to last out the rest of Dad’s rehab,” Dean continues, and pauses to take a swig of his coffee. Then, setting the cup down again, he continues, “Things didn’t go so great, but one of the other guys at my table was a producer. He gave me his card. Told me I could make some serious cash for a few hours work if I wanted to, that I had ‘the right look’.”
His hand flutters up again: fingers absentmindedly brushing his lips before finding the hook-shaped scar. This time, instead of staying, Dean’s fingers stroke once before falling away. Sam has wondered about that scar more times than he can count, but looking at it has never made him sick to his stomach the way he is right now. Something about the way his brother touched first his lips and then that scar. Something about the way Dean is rubbing his fingertips on the tabletop as though he just touched something dirty.

“Anyway, one thing led to another and I came back with two grand in my pocket. Problem solved. Piece of fucking cake.”

But it wasn’t, obviously, and even if Dad hadn’t explicitly told Dean to sell himself, he’d put Dean in the position to do so. The man had raised Dean to think of himself in such a way that selling his body would seem like a logical, acceptable option. Dean could say what he wanted, but this was still Dad’s fault.

And, Sam supposed, it was his fault too. After all, if he’d been there, he could have gotten a job of his own: helped cover the bills. At the very least, he could have stopped his brother from doing something so goddamned degrading and stupid.

“Dean—”

“Share time’s done, Sam.” Dean sounds determined, but Sam isn’t quite ready to let this go.

“You shouldn’t have had to do that, Dean,” he says. “I should have been there.”

A muscle in Dean’s jaw jumps and his fingers flex around his coffee. “Yeah, well you weren’t,” he says, looking away, and there’s nothing more to say.
Chapter 6

As if things weren’t already complicated enough, Sam dreams again—dreams the way he dreamt before Jess died—and he isn’t stupid enough to ignore the warning a second time. Dean is clearly more freaked by the prospect of returning to Lawrence than by the possibility that Sam is psychic. Probably because he doesn’t actually believe in Sam’s ‘visions’ yet.

But there is a woman in trouble in their old house. Then their mother steps in, and Sam has never seen his brother look so devastated. Sam doesn’t know why Mary apologizes to him, unless it’s because she knows that her death was the catalyst that sent John haring off into the night and dragging Dean and Sam along after him. Her death that caused Dean to be raised the way he was: like a soldier—like a tool and a weapon instead of a son and a person. Her death that alienated them both from the rest of the world and left Sam wanting things he shouldn’t.

Then again, dying seems like a stupid thing to apologize for.

Sam doesn’t have time to ask for clarification, because he blinks and Mary is burning: destroying herself to save them both. Sam’s cheeks feel wet as he comes unglued from the wall, and when he steps closer to Dean he sees that his brother is crying as well.

“Hey,” he says, reaching for Dean’s shoulder, but his brother ducks out of range.

“Don’t,” Dean chokes out, wiping his eyes on his sleeve. He takes a deep breath, centering himself, and then offers Sam a small smile. “Guess you’re the real deal, huh, Haley Joel.”

Sam wants to talk about Mom, about what just happened, but the warning in Dean’s eyes stops him. “Guess so,” he says instead.

“This mean you can pick me a winning lotto ticket?” Dean asks, glancing up at the charred ceiling that is the last trace that remains of their mother.

Sam wonders if Dean would slug him for attempting a hug. Probably. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“Figures.”

One week later, when Dad texts them the coordinates of an asylum in Rockford, Illinois, Sam’s sixth sense fails him miserably.

If he’d been any kind of psychic at all—if he’d been ‘the real deal’, like Dean said—then it should have warned him. Then he could have stuffed Dean into the trunk of the Impala and driven as far away from Rockford as humanly possible. And if worse had come to worse, if he’d known, Sam would have shot himself before he set foot inside those rusting doors.

Should have, could have, would have.

He wonders what the point of being psychic is, if he can’t protect the people he loves.

He’s so angry.

Sam has been angry before, of course: has succumbed both to brief flares of rage and to longer,
lower burning furies that leave his muscles tense for days. This feeling is a new breed entirely: anger
heated to flashpoint and infused with electricity. It transcends fury and rage and births into an
incandescent burn that leaves his skin overheated and sparking.

And Dean—stupid, pretty Dean—doesn’t have the faintest idea.

Sam watches his brother probe for the hidden door (Sam knows exactly where it is, of course, saw it
as soon as he stepped into the room, how fucking dumb can Dean be) and adjusts his grip on the
shotgun. His eyes trail over his brother’s body while memories flicker in his mind: Dean on his
knees, Dean bent over a couch, Dean lying on his back, Dean squirming while he’s pierced with two
cocks at once.

Fucking whore, letting strangers touch him but denying Sam his turn.

The shotgun lifts slightly.

“Dean,” he calls.

Dean glances back. Notes the gun. Instead of fear, there’s only knowing resignation on his face.

A trickle of something seeps from Sam’s nose onto his lips—tastes like copper, tastes like blood—
and he wipes at it with his free arm. “Step back from the door,” he orders.

Slowly, Dean stands and turns to face him. “Sam, put the gun down.”

“Is that an order?” Sam asks.

He’s pretty sick of Dean and his orders. Dean ordering Sam not to talk about it, not to think about it,
it’s not going to happen. Because Dean’s fucked in the head and doesn’t want to have sex with
anyone, let alone Sam. Never mind the fact that he’s been fucking every willing woman (and
probably his fair share of men) from L.A. to New York.

“No,” Dean says, still cocky with the mask of confidence that he wears whenever he’s in a tight spot.
“It’s more of a friendly request.”

Sam adjusts his hold on the gun, lifting it and pointing it at his brother. Angry or not, he’s feeling
pretty good right now. Charged. Strong. Soaring high.

“’Cause I’m getting pretty tired of taking your orders.”

“I knew it,” Dean says, eyes narrowing. “Ellicott did something to you, didn’t he?”

Distantly, Sam knows there’s truth to his brother’s words, but he’s too focused on Dean’s mouth
(lips, fucking cocksucker lips) to pay any attention to it. “For once in your life, just shut your mouth,”
he orders.

For now, anyway. Once he’s finished putting Dean in his place, he’ll have his brother open up nice
and wide for him.

“What are you gonna do, Sam?” Dean demands. “The gun’s filled with rock salt. Not gonna kill
me.”

As if that’s what Sam wants to do with him.

But stupid or not, Dean’s in pretty good shape, and Sam is going to need a little help to subdue him.
He pulls the trigger without thinking about it, unloading the round into his brother’s chest and
sending him crashing back through the wall. Dean makes a hurt noise as he falls, knocking his head hard against the floor.

Sam can tell that his brother has been knocked unconscious, leaving him without an audience, but he answers anyway with a soft smile. “No, but it’ll hurt like hell. Keep you nice and quiet until we sort this out.”

Dropping the gun, he steps through the debris to stand over his brother. Then, letting the anger and want slide through him, he looks down at Dean, studying him. Dean is so pretty like this, face relaxed and muscles slack. So fucking pretty with all the vulnerability that he puts so much effort into hiding on display.

Dropping to his knees, Sam reaches out and lets himself touch the full, soft lips that have been haunting his dreams. He thinks about opening his brother’s jaw and letting Dean come around with a cock in his mouth, then decides against it. In that groggy, half-aware state, Dean might bite down accidentally before realizing what a monumentally bad idea that would be. Besides, it isn’t enough. Not for the tsunami of rage inside of Sam.

He wants to take Dean, wants to fill him up and possess him completely, but he also wants it to hurt. He wants his brother to regret keeping this from him, like Sam means less than all the others he’s been spreading his legs for. Like Sam doesn’t deserve to have what Dean has been giving away, what he’s been selling.

Straddling his brother, he goes to work on Dean’s pants. As he pulls the buckle free, Dean moans softly and turns his head to one side. Looks like he’s coming around. Sam ignores his brother’s sudden, gasping inhalation: the weak flutter of Dean’s hands up to his peppered chest.

“Wha—” Dean slurs, breaking off as Sam yanks his zip open and starts tugging his pants down.

Sam allows himself a glance up, hungry for the moment of realization. Dean’s pretty green eyes are fogged with pain and confusion as they flit around the room. He looks dazed, still trying to play catch up and figure out what’s going on. Well, Sam can help him out with that.

“Welcome back, baby,” he purrs, and as his brother tries to focus his eyes, Sam shoves his pants down around his thighs, exposing him.

Dean flinches at the rush of cold air and then it hits him—Sam sees it hit him: sees the panicked awareness widen his brother’s eyes and catch in his lungs. Panic and, for a split second, something else. Something like recognition. Then the expression, whatever it is, is gone as Dean starts to struggle.

“No,” he spits. “Sam, we gotta burn Ellicott’s bones, and this’ll—”

He breaks off on a hurt cry as Sam plants a hand in the center of his chest and pushes, grinding the pellets of salt deeper. Dean’s head drops back against the floor as the renewed flare of pain cords his body with tension. Never one to miss an opportunity, Sam uses his brother’s momentary distraction to flip Dean over onto his stomach. Easier access like this, and besides, this way he can use his weight to drive Dean’s raw chest against the debris on the floor with every thrust. Dean will be lucky if he can think straight with that much pain spiking through him, let alone put up any real fight.

“Sam,” Dean pants, trying to get his hands underneath him. “Sammy, wait.”

“I’m done waiting, Dean,” Sam spits. Planting his left hand between his brother’s shoulder blades, he leans on Dean and opens his own pants with his right. “You’re gonna take it like a good whore.
Pretty, fucking cocktease. That’s all you’re good for, isn’t it?”

Pulling his cock free, he looks down at his brother’s bared ass and hesitates. He wants to spread Dean’s legs and can’t without taking his brother’s jeans off completely. Injured or not, that sort of maneuver is too risky with Dean squirming like this. Maybe Sam should knock him out again …

No. He wants Dean awake for this. Wants him to feel every inch as Sam sinks into him. He’ll have to make do with this for now: play with new positions later, once Dean has been properly broken in.

“Sam, this isn’t you!” Dean yells, protesting, but he isn’t trying to push off the ground anymore. Good boy.

“Sure it is,” Sam answers, gripping his cock and rubbing it along his brother’s exposed crack. “I’m right here. Can’t you feel me? How hard I am for you?”

“Get off me, you son of a bitch,” Dean spits. The muscles in his ass clench and unclench violently. Grinning, Sam positions the head of his cock directly over his brother’s entrance. Without any lube, this is going to hurt him as well as Dean, but as long as it hurts Dean more, he doesn’t care. Dean needs to learn what happens when he cuts Sam off.

“I’m a little big to take you dry,” he says, “But you took two cocks at once, so I think you can handle it.”

“Sam,” Dean chokes out, and then grunts as Sam makes a tentative trial thrust. He isn’t breaching his brother, not yet, but the threat is obvious.

“The things I’m going to do to you, Dean …” Sam promises. “Make you scream.”

“You first,” Dean says, and then Sam is screaming because it feels like his balls have been trapped in a vice.

Instinctively, he pulls off and away and Dean (sneaky fucker grabbed Sam’s nuts) lets him go. Sam sprawls sideways with his hands cupping his throbbing balls and swears. His skin feels swollen with rage: aching with it.

“Oh, you bitch! You fucker! You fucking whore!”

“No mirrors here, you son of a bitch,” Dean pants, which makes no fucking sense at all, and then something that feels like a semi impacts with the side of Sam’s face and everything goes black.

When he comes around again, he isn’t angry anymore. The left side of his face aches and his balls are on fire and he’s lying on the dirty, cold floor with his jeans around his ankles. Confused, he lifts his head and spots Dean sitting with his back against a wall and his hand to his temple. His brother’s body posture is painfully stiff, the front of his shirt is shredded, and Sam remembers what happened and immediately pukes all over the floor.

When his stomach has finished emptying itself, he draws a shaking hand over his mouth and starts to pull his pants back up. He can feel Dean’s eyes on him, and shame lies over him like a thick second skin.

“You’re not going to try to fuck me, are you?” Dean asks.

“No,” Sam mutters, staring at the floor. He can’t look at his brother right now. Doesn’t think he’ll be able to look at him for a while.
“Good,” Dean says dryly. “Because that would be awkward.”

Dean doesn’t ask Sam to help clean out the wounds on his chest and Sam doesn’t offer. He knows his brother will only turn him down the same way he turned down the offer to talk about what happened. The same way he turns down any offer Sam makes that doesn’t involve a six pack and or a quarter-pounder with fries.

‘You didn’t mean it, Sammy,’ Dean told him on the drive back. ‘Besides, nothing happened. No biggie.’

The really fucked up thing is that Sam is pretty sure his brother actually believes that.

Sam tried to rape him and Dean is fine with it: just another day on the job, ho hum. Well, Dean may be fine (maybe, maybe not, he keeps touching that scar), but Sam is vibrating with disgust and shame and guilt. He remembers how he felt, what he was thinking, and yeah, a lot of it was Ellicott, but the initial impulse came from him. The frustrated hunger came from him.

Even now, just thinking of Dean squirming beneath him is making Sam hard. The memory of watching Dean getting fucked while wearing that cat mask hasn’t been so persistent since he first watched the movie.

What kind of sick fuck are you? he demands of himself as he lies in his bed that night, just a few feet from his brother with the image of Dean’s raw, abused hole burned into his mind.

But Dean’s slow, steady breathing is the only answer he gets.

The sound of a ringing phone wakes Sam in the morning. Muzzy-headed from a restless night, he listens long enough to identify it as Dean’s rather than his and then calls, “Dean.”

Dean doesn’t so much as twitch.

Sighing, Sam leans over and answers for him without glancing at the caller id. Way his luck has been going lately, it’ll probably be one of Dean’s old conquests. “Hello?”

It isn’t.

“Sam? Is that you?”

Heart pounding in his chest, Sam sits up. “Dad?” he blurts. “Are you hurt?”

He can’t think of another reason for their father to actually break his long silence. Odd, considering how angry he’s been at the man, but all of a sudden he’s terrified of the answer to his question.

“I’m fine,” Dad answers. His voice is weary but fond, and relief floods Sam at the assurance.

“We’ve been looking for you everywhere,” he says. “We didn’t know where you were, if you were okay.”

“Sammy, I’m all right. What about you and Dean?”

At the reminder, Sam glances over to find his brother stirring. The blankets have slipped down slightly and the sight of Dean’s sore, salt-peppered chest is an accusation. Guilt and resentment twist
together in Sam’s stomach and leave him a little breathless.

“We’re fine,” he lies shortly. Fucked if he’s getting into the conversation he wants to have about Dean over the phone. “Dad, where are you?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Dean sit up, letting the blankets pool in his lap.

“Sorry, kiddo. I can’t tell you that.”

“What?” Sam chokes out. “Why not?”

“Is that Dad?” Dean wants to know. He sounds and looks about five, with his hair sticking up all over the place and that faithful expectation coloring his voice. Then Sam’s eyes slip down to Dean’s chest, to the evidence of his sickness, and he has to shut his eyes against a wave of anger—human this time, and natural, and all his. Dad is going on about trusting him, something about a demon, but Sam doesn’t want to hear it.

“We’re not fine,” he says.

On the other end of the phone, John is silent for a moment and then he says, “Listen, Sammy, I, uh, I know what happened to your girlfriend. I’m so sorry. I would’ve—”

“I’m not talking about her. I’m talking about Dean.”

“Give me the phone,” Dean orders, holding out a hand. Sam hunches his shoulder, making it a shield between them.

“What about Dean?” Dad doesn’t say anything else, just that, but there’s a wariness in his voice that tells Sam his father knows exactly what he’s talking about.

His breath catches and his head pounds because it’s one thing to suspect and another to know. The anger currently flooding him isn’t as all consuming as what Ellicott made him feel, but it’s close. Too close for him to keep his mouth shut.

“How could you do that to him, Dad?” he demands. “How could you—”

Dean snatches the phone from Sam in a rapid movement that has to hurt and then sits back in his own bed. “Dad, it’s me. Where are you? … Yes, sir … Uh, no I don’t know what Sam’s talking about …”

Dean shoots Sam a pissed off glare—looks more upset about this than he did about nearly having Sam’s cock shoved up his ass yesterday—and Sam can’t take it. Tossing the sheets back, he stands up and goes into the bathroom in search of some air he can breathe without wanting to scream. The change of scenery doesn’t help much. Neither does the cold water he splashes on his face. Not when he can hear his brother playing good little soldier in the next room.

As Sam clutches the edge of the counter and stares into the mirror (no mirrors, no mir—), he realizes that he can’t do this anymore. He can’t stay so close to Dean (—rors here you son of a bitch) when he’s nothing more than a ticking bomb.

He has to leave.

Again.
Running off to find Dad provides the perfect excuse to leave. There are hurtful words on both sides, of course, and anger, and Sam can all but see the wounds reopening inside of Dean’s chest, but this is better. It’s safer.

Sam clearly can’t be trusted to control himself around Dean.

Dean clearly can’t be trusted to take care of himself where Sam’s concerned.

As he watches the taillights of the Impala disappear in the distance, Sam shivers a little. He has never felt so alone or cold or hollow. There’s relief, too, but it’s bitter and small. flavored with the salty tang of tears.

He makes it almost two full days before caving, and of course Dean welcomes him back. Dean welcomes Sam with relieved eyes, a stoic expression and a joke: the Winchester equivalent of open arms. Sam looks at the sunset bruise on his brother’s eye, the curve of his lashes, the sensuous lines of his mouth. He looks at the hooked, white scar at his brother’s temple, which is all the more noticeable right now for the reddened, irritated skin around it where Dean can’t seem to leave well enough alone.

But Dean smiles at him. Dean smiles and lays his hand on Sam’s shoulder and squeezes gently before laughing and climbing into the driver’s seat.

If sheep were this trusting when wolves slunk around their enclosures, they’d have been extinct long ago.

*C~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

In Nebraska, Dean nearly dies. Sam’s not talking about it.

*C~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Cassie is a kick to the groin when Sam is already down. She’s petite and beautiful and intelligent, and Sam hates her on principle. He hates her more when he notices the way that she looks at Dean: warm and familiar and fond. She looks at him like she has a right to him.

Worse, Sam has caught his brother looking back.

He doesn’t want to know, not really, but there’s some deep, masochistic streak that makes him push for the information anyway. He manages to wait until they’re alone, at least, getting ready to interview some sources at the docks, and then, as casually as he can, broaches the subject.

“I’ll say this for her—she’s fearless.”

Dean, fussing with his suit, doesn’t so much as glance over. “Mnhmm.”

Drop it, Sam tells himself. Just finish getting dressed, go interview some dockworkers, solve the case, and get out of here. Problem solved.

“I bet she kicked your ass a couple times.”

That gets him a look, just like he knew it would, but Dean’s ‘fuck you’ expression doesn’t tell Sam anything he wants to know.
Forcing down the painful lump in his throat, Sam continues, “What’s interesting is you guys never really look at each other at the same time. You look at her when she’s not looking, she checks you out when you look away.”

Now Dean’s expression is more useful, if indefinable. He looks … uncertain, maybe? Intrigued?

“It’s just an interesting observation,” Sam hastens to continue. “In a, you know, observationally interesting way.”

Dean’s jaw firms and he turns away. “I think we might have some more pressing issues here.”

“Hey, if I’m hitting a nerve—”

“You got a question, Sam, just ask already,” Dean mutters, pulling his jacket on.

As if this is that simple. As if anything between them has ever been that simple.

But there’s no reason not to give it a try now that Dean’s called him out. “I was just wondering when you two got together. I mean, I know it was while I was at Stanford, I was just—”

“You want to know if I rode Cassie before I got ridden,” Dean says, turning back to face him. His voice is flat. His face unreadable.

Sam flushes, but he isn’t backing down now. “Did you?”

“Does it matter?” Dean asks. He’s watching Sam carefully, and Sam doesn’t know what’s going on here, but suddenly it’s difficult to breathe.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Sam struggles with that question for a moment before confessing, “I don’t know.” It’s the truth: he has no idea why he cares so much. All he knows is that it’s vital that Dean met Cassie after the movie, when he wasn’t just damaged but broken.

Dean nods like Sam’s answer actually means something to him—which, if it does Sam wishes he’d let Sam in on it—and starts for the door. “Let’s go.”

“Dean,” Sam says softly without moving. Just that, but the plea is clearly audible. If Dean turns around, he’ll be able to see Sam’s need written on his face in stark, desperate lines.

Dean pauses with his hand resting on the doorframe, but he doesn’t turn around. “Before,” he says over his shoulder. “I met her before.”

Except ‘met’ isn’t what he means.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

There are two things to remember about drinking your troubles away. The first is that it gets to be habit if you do it enough. The second is that it doesn’t work.

Sam acknowledges the first fact as he orders a couple of kamikazes at the bar, and he doesn’t want to go down that road any more than he already has: doesn’t want to follow in his father’s footsteps any
more than he already is. But he can’t be sober while Cassie takes Dean away from him—while she
fucks him and reminds him what pleasure is, and happiness, and love. He needs the liquid help to
numb the hollow ache in his chest.

It isn’t until he’s stumbling back to their room, weeping the whole way, that he remembers the
second fact.

Fuck, he actually feels worse now than he did before he started drinking, which he didn’t think was
possible. He pauses outside the room, leaning against the wall with one hand pressed to his forehead.
The world spins around him, empty and cold and hostile, but it’s better out here than inside. Inside,
Dean’s absence will be painfully obvious, and Sam is going to have to get used to it because this is
how things will be from now on. This is his life, he has to accept it, he—

“Sammy?”

The voice doesn’t penetrate immediately: Sam’s sobs are too close and immediate. Then Dean is
right in front of him, Dean is running concerned hands over Sam’s body and saying, “Fuck, man,
where were you? You okay? Sammy?”

Sam blinks, opening his eyes to find his brother peering up at him, the door to their room gaping
wide behind Dean’s broad shoulders. “Dean?” he hiccups.

Dean frowns, intent, and swipes his thumbs over Sam’s cheeks, wiping away the tears. “C’mon.
Let’s get you inside.”

Sam follows docilely, stunned by the fact that Dean is here, that Dean is guiding him over to the bed
and sitting him down and pushing a glass of water at him and running his hand through Sam’s hair.

“You gotta stop doing this, dude,” he says as Sam downs the water.

“Thought you’d be gone,” Sam tells him. “I thought you were gonna be with her.”

“What,” Dean says, taking the glass back and setting it on the table. “And miss out on all this
blackmail material?”

“Not funny,” Sam protests, reaching up and getting a fistful of shirt. Dean lets himself be pulled
close, leaning one hand on the mattress to prop himself up.

“Sure it is,” he says, one hand going to Sam’s and gently trying to pry his fingers loose.

Sam ignores the attempt and insists, “No. No, you were. You were s’posed to be with Cassie. You
were gonna. You said ‘don’t wait up’. Why’re you here?”

He wishes, desperately, that he wasn’t drunk. Wishes he could read the emotions flickering through
his brother’s beautiful, green eyes. He realizes suddenly that they’re only inches apart, that he can
feel Dean’s breath ghosting over his own lips. The scar at Dean’s hairline is shiny and pale, and Sam
wonders whether it would taste any different than the rest of him. He wonders what Dean would do
if he tried to find out.

“Lie down, Sam,” Dean says. Giving up on disengaging Sam’s grip, he pushes lightly at Sam’s
chest.

Sam clings tighter, resisting. “No. Answer me. Dean, you have to tell me, you have to.” It’s stupid,
and he’ll probably be embarrassed about it later, but he’s so desperate that he’s crying again. “Please,
Dean, please.”
“I don’t know why I’m here, okay?” Dean says, and now he’s trying a two for one: working at Sam’s fingers with one hand and pushing him back with the other. It must be hell on his lower back, bending over like this without any support. Must be putting him off balance. “Now drop it and just —”

Sam yanks his brother closer and kisses him.

Dean tastes good: his lips, his tongue, his mouth. Dean is warm and wet and welcoming and he chose Sam, he’s here—and then Dean jerks his face to the side.

“No,” he says.

Something deep inside of Sam’s chest crumples. “Please. Dean, please. Just—just this, just let me kiss you, just—brothers kiss all the time, s’okay, s’alright.” He unlocks one hand and paws at his brother’s face, trying to turn Dean back toward him, to get at those lips again.

“I didn’t come back for this,” Dean says, but he isn’t trying to get away, and he’s letting Sam kiss the graceful arch of his neck.

“Just this,” Sam repeats. “Just this, please.”

“Sam,” Dean tries, but Sam can hear surrender in his name, and when he tugs again Dean comes. Sam rolls them, getting Dean on his back, and Dean lets him. Dean lets Sam pull his shirt off and then lies there and strokes Sam’s hair while Sam licks and nips at his chest, tracing the memory of rock salt before latching onto one nipple and sucking.

Dean bucks at that, breath stuttering, and Sam can feel his brother’s cock hardening. He shifts, pressing his thigh solidly against the bulge in his brother’s jeans, and Dean’s hand tightens in his hair. Lifting his head, Sam says, “Let me, let me, let me.”

“You—” Dean’s voice cuts off in a gasp as Sam rocks against him. “You said just kissing. Sam—”

“Want to make you feel good,” Sam begs. He understands, distantly, that he shouldn’t be doing this, but he can’t help himself. “I can make it feel good, Dean, I can, let me show you, let me, love you, fuck, love you so fucking much.”

He makes himself shut up then and Dean doesn’t respond. But the absence of a yes isn’t a ‘no’, and when Sam rolls them again, drawing Dean on top of him, Dean doesn’t fight him. Sam pushes a hand into his brother’s pants to cup his ass and Dean shudders, legs falling open as Sam drags their lower bodies snug together.

“C’mon,” Sam pants, nipping at his brother’s neck while thrusting up. “Just like this. Rub against me, it’ll feel good, come on.”

His hand shifts on his brother’s ass, fingers searching for the entrance he knows is there, and Dean jerks as he finds what he’s looking for.

“Shh,” Sam soothes, pushing one finger inside. “Shh, feels good. Feel so good. C’mon, move, you can, want you to.”

Dean shudders again and then leans forward, upper body sliding against Sam’s and rucking his t-shirt up. Sam imagines what it would feel like to have Dean’s skin sliding over his and wishes he dared stop long enough to get his own shirt off. He doesn’t want to chance breaking the moment, though: not when Dean has started to move against him in tentative thrusts.
Dean’s cock, which wilted when Sam’s finger first penetrated him, is beginning to swell again, and his breath is coming faster. Sam uses his free hand to maneuver his brother’s face into position and starts kissing him again, fucking his tongue into Dean’s mouth while he feels around in his ass for that shocky, pleasurable spot he knows is there. Dean gives another full-bodied shudder when he finds it, moaning into Sam’s mouth, and Sam has never heard anything so hot. Fuck, Dean sounds so much better in person than he did on film.

Now that he has found it, Sam makes sure to rub repeatedly at his brother’s sweet spot as they rock against each other. Dean’s breathing is ragged now, and he’s sweating, making little pleasure-pain noises that are going straight to Sam’s cock. He releases his brother’s lips so that he can hear them better, settling for licking his earlobe and neck.

Dean’s ass is still tight—unbelievably so, after what Sam saw him take in the movie—but it’s loosened enough that he manages to work a second finger in beside the first. At the addition, Dean’s hands come up and clutch at Sam’s biceps. Sam would be concerned except for the fact that Dean also drops his head down, bracing his forehead against Sam’s shoulder and rocking his hips faster. Sam can feel his brother’s heart racing where their chests are pressed together—knows Dean is close, so close. His brother makes a choked noise, shifting his head, and Sam’s eyes fasten on the white, hooked scar centimeters from his lips.

“Come for me,” Sam murmurs, pumping his fingers more quickly in and out of Dean’s ass. “Come on, baby, come for me.” He darts his tongue out, running it over smooth, raised skin, and Dean jerks.

“Sam!” he chokes out, stiffening.

Pressed together so snuggly, Sam can feel his brother’s cock twitching as he comes, and a moment later Dean collapses against him, breathing hard and trembling slightly. Hooking his left leg around his brother’s body, Sam thrusts up while driving his fingers in deep again (warm and tight and his) and then comes himself with a low moan. Panting, he lets his leg slide free and lies there waiting to come down from his high.

After about a minute, he can smell it in the air—the salted musk of semen—and the sticky mess in his pants is going to start cooling off and getting gross really soon, but he still doesn’t want to move. His head is spinning pleasantly with orgasm and alcohol and Dean is warm against him. Dean’s ass is snug around his fingers. His Dean. All his.

“Sam,” Dean says in an odd voice. “I need you to get your fingers out of my ass.”

“Don’t wanna,” Sam murmurs, wiggling his fingers just to feel Dean twitch. “Wanna stay here ‘n go to sleep with you.”

“Sammy—”

“You’ll get up and go away.”

“I just—” Dean breathes out heavily and then says, “I just want to get my pants off. C’mon, dude, this crap’s gonna crust. I don’t want to have to peel my boxers off my dick tomorrow morning.”

Sam’s pretty sure that his brother is lying, but he also isn’t wrong about the whole crusty boxers thing. It’s a dilemma. Absently, he rubs at Dean’s prostate while he considers the problem.

Dean squirms against him, breath hitching. His hands, which are still gripping Sam’s arms, tighten.

“Sam!”

“Okay, fine. Gotta stay.”
“I will. *Fuck*.”

“Promise,” Sam pushes, still sliding his fingers around. Dean is getting hard again. Interesting.

“I promise, okay? Now s-stop fucking around and get your fingers out of me.”

Grudgingly, Sam obeys. As soon as he tugs his hand free, Dean is off the bed and heading for the bathroom, unzipping his pants as he goes. Sam figures he’s got the right idea and clumsily opens his own pants. He manages to get them down around his ankles before they catch on his shoes. After a moment of blinking down at the problem, he shrugs it off and drops back against the mattress, closing his eyes to wait. Dean will help him out when he comes back from the bathroom.

When Sam opens his eyes again again, it’s morning. His pants aren’t around his ankles anymore, and he isn’t wearing his shoes, but his shirt is still on and he isn’t under the covers and Dean is gone.

Dean is …

Dean …

“Oh my God,” he blurts, pushing off the bed and stumbling into the bathroom. He just manages to make it to the toilet in time. When he finishes puking up what little was left in his stomach, he rests his head against the cool porcelain and shuts his eyes.

In his mind, he can hear his own voice, slurred and begging and insistent. He can hear Dean’s responses.

No.

*I didn’t come back for this.*

*You said just kissing.*

And Sam had—he’d—fuck, he’d *violated* Dean. He went and got drunk and then put his hands all over his brother and Dean … Jesus Christ, *Dean* …

The ring of his phone jars Sam out of his misery and to his feet—Dean’s ring, unmistakable. Dean calling him.

Sam rushes out to the main room, barking his shin on the bed as he goes, and snags his phone off the table. Hopping awkwardly on one foot while he rubs at his aching ankle, he catches the call and blurts, “Dean, I’m so fucking sorry, I—”

“The mayor’s dead,” Dean cuts in.

“What?”

“You heard me. Cass and I are out on Route 6. Just look for the flashing lights.”

When Sam gets to the scene, there’s no time to talk. He can’t figure out if that’s because Dean is manipulating things or if it’s just chance. It could be avoidance that has Dean sending Sam home with Cassie while he follows in the Impala, but then again it might just be Dean worrying about his ex-girlfriend’s safety.

Or maybe this is Dean’s way of getting back at him.
“You don’t like me very much, do you, Sam?” Cassie asks quietly as she pulls away from the crime scene.

Sam is too busy trying to watch Dean in the side mirror to bother dissembling, but he does manage to mutter, “I like you fine.”

“No, you don’t.”

Sam sighs. Thus far, he hasn’t seen any evidence of Cassie taking Dean’s shit, so there’s no reason to think she’d take his, either, but he was still hoping.

“Fine. I don’t.”

“Mind if I ask why?”

“It’s not because you’re black, if that’s what you’re thinking.” He realizes a moment after he says it how condescending that came out. Cringing a little inside, he glances over at Cassie and finds her smiling. It isn’t a happy smile, but it isn’t exactly hostile either.

“It’s not,” she tells him. “Although I think I’d prefer it if it were. Prejudice I know how to deal with.”

_She knows_, Sam thinks. Despite the chill permeating the cab of Cassie’s truck, a trickle of sweat runs down the back of his neck and into his shirt. His stomach lurches around completely independent of the road while he wonders how she figured it out, whether Dean told her. Whether Sam left some sort of evidence on Dean’s body. He didn’t notice anything back at the crime scene, but then again it was really fucking difficult to look at Dean at all back at the crime scene, so maybe ...

Cassie is still waiting for some kind of response. Sam considers categorically denying everything and then, clenching his jaw, sits there with his mouth shut. After all, he can’t walk into a noose if he doesn’t move.

“I’m not trying to take him away from you,” Cassie adds, and after a split second of complete and utter terror, Sam realizes that the declaration is missing the disgust and anger it should hold if she meant it the way he thought she did. Cassie does think he’s jealous, but only in the normal, ‘he’s my big brother I come first in his life’ kind of way.

Of course, relaxing from the terror of discovery leaves Sam free to get annoyed about her interference again.

“Even if I were,” Cassie continues, oblivious. “I don’t think that’s possible. I just … I care about him, Sam. I don’t know, maybe I even love him.”

It’s funny how quickly Sam manages to go from annoyed to pissed off these days.

“You don’t deserve him,” he blurts before he can censor himself. He doesn’t deserve Dean either, of course, but anger leaves little room for rational thought or fair play.

“And here I thought you liked me fine,” Cassie says dryly.

“You want to know what I think?” Sam answers. His hands clench into fists where they’re resting in his lap. “I think you lost any right to Dean the second you threw him away. You don’t get hurt him like that and expect him to come crawling back to you.”

“No, only you get to do that.”
One short statement and Cassie has cut right to the heart of what Sam hates most about this situation, about his life, about **himself**. His chest constricts, or maybe that’s his anger swelling, and Sam can’t figure out whom he wants to lash out at. Dad’s pretty high on the list, and Dean for letting both of them fuck him up so thoroughly, and then there’s Sam himself, of course. The tension gets bad enough that it’s either scream or hit something or explode and so Sam grits his teeth and slams his fist against the dash before looking back out his window.

Cassie’s reflection jumps in startlement at his outburst, but her voice is steady when she says, “I’ve made my share of mistakes, Sam, but letting Dean go—having it end like that—that’s the only one I truly regret.”

**Must be nice,** Sam thinks. Regret. He’s getting way too familiar with the way that particular emotion tastes in his mouth: bitter and sad and wasted.

“Are you fucking him?”

It takes a couple of seconds for the question to penetrate, but when it does Sam jerks like he’s been electrocuted, whipping his head around to stare at Cassie with wide eyes.

Cassie’s eyes are steadfastly focused on the road, but even so there’s no way she could have missed his reaction. She taps her fingers against the steering wheel with a nod. “I thought so.”

It takes a minute, but Sam finally manages to unglue his tongue from the roof of his mouth to ask, “How did you—”

“Know?” Cassie smiles again: cynical and a little sad. “I’m a reporter, Sam. It’s my job to read people.”

“We aren’t—Dean and I, we haven’t—”

“But you want to.”

Sam can’t deny that. Hell, he shouldn’t really be denying the sex. Not after last night.

“Dean would do anything for you, you know,” Cassie continues after a moment. “What I was wondering was whether you’d do the same for him.”

Sam knows where she’s going with this and wants to open the door and jump out of the car before she can get there. He wants to punch her before she can open her mouth and say it. Wants, childishly, to plug his ears with his fingers so that he can’t hear her when she does.

But he’s a grown man, no alcohol in his system to blur the lines of conscience, and so he sits there quietly and waits for Cassie to damn him.

“Let him go, Sam. For his own sake, let him go.”

Dean seems to sense that something happened when they get to Cassie’s—Sam can read the question in his brother’s eyes—but he looks away without answering. He doesn’t know what to say. Right and wrong and need and desire are all tangled up in his head.

All he knows is that he loves Dean. He loves Dean and last night he defiled him. As good as raped him.
So what if Dean hadn’t said no at the end? Once should have been enough, and like Cassie said, Dean would do anything for him. Dean would do anything for him, and God help him Sam knew it when he started begging last night.

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Let him go, Cassie urged him—is still urging him with those dark, knowing eyes. And she’s right to demand it of him.

As Sam turns away, cradling his aching hand close to his stomach, he knows that he doesn’t have it in him to obey.

Cassie is ‘kind’ enough to lend Sam her truck so that he and Dean can split up to do some more research, so Sam’s plan for a long, heartfelt apology is postponed yet again. He’s both relieved and anxious as he drives her truck back down toward the dock where, for some reason known only to the inhabitants of Cape Girardeau, the town records office is. Between his trip to the docks and Dean’s visit to Cassie’s newspaper, they manage to narrow their suspects down to a list of one: Cyrus Dorian. What they don’t know is why he’s so pissed off or where to find the son of a bitch’s body so they can burn it.

Sam is supposed to meet Dean for dinner back at the room—where they’ll hopefully get to discuss more pressing matters than killer ghost trucks (fuck, his life is weird)—but instead he gets a frantic call from his brother telling him to get over to Cassie’s right away. Sam shows up on Dean’s heels, just in time to see a tearful Cassie open the door and fling herself into his brother’s arms. She’s clearly frightened—still shaking enough that Sam can’t manage more than a dull mix of annoyance and jealousy as Dean leads her back inside. She fits in against his side perfectly, Sam notices, like they were made for each other. She fits against him far better than Sam ever will.

“I’m gonna make some tea,” he mutters as Dean sits Cassie down on the couch.

Dean kneels at Cassie’s feet without acknowledging the statement. Resting his left hand on her knee, he reaches with his right to cup her face, rubbing the tears away with his thumb. Cassie puts her hand over Dean’s, leaning into the touch, and Sam turns away before he can see any more.

He knocks his hand against the doorframe in his haste, setting off the dull ache in his fingers again, but it hurts less than his chest does. At this point, having all of his skin ripped off would probably hurt less than his chest. Sam doesn’t cry as he searches through the kitchen’s fifteen-odd cabinets for the kettle, though. He won’t cry here, in her house. Won’t cry while he listens to Cassie’s soft murmurs and his brother’s lower assurances that ‘everything’s gonna be fine’.

He’s so focused on not crying that he doesn’t realize anyone is in the kitchen with him until the sound of someone clearing their throat makes him jump and whirl, hand dipping to the gun tucked at the small of his back. Sam actually has his fingers on the plastic grip when he realizes that it’s just Cassie’s mom. He eases off immediately, releasing the gun and schooling his expression into something reassuring.

“Oh, hey, Mrs. Robinson. I was just trying to find the tea kettle.”

“Oh me,” she says, reaching past him into a cabinet he’s sure he already searched. If he did, he must have done a sloppy job because she emerges with the kettle and brings it over to the sink. As she turns the water on, she clears her throat again and says, “Sam, I have to ask you a question and I need you to be honest with me.”

Oh crap. Conversations like that never end well.
Sure that the woman is going to ask if he intends to try stealing her daughter’s boyfriend, Sam reluctantly says, “Okay.”

Mrs. Robinson doesn’t ask immediately. Instead, she finishes filling the kettle, puts it down on the counter beside her, and turns off the water. Then, turning around, she asks, “Is this truck real? Is my daughter in danger?”

She’s looking at him with the expected concern and fear, but there’s something else there as well. An emotion with which Sam is increasingly familiar these days.

Guilt.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Yes,” he answers. “Crazy as it seems, it’s real enough to kill, and if it showed up here then it’s after Cassie. Dean and I need to find Cyrus’ body and burn it. After that, she’ll be safe.”

Mrs. Robinson’s mouth purses and her chin trembles in a way that Sam associates with tears. She doesn’t cry, though. Just takes a deep, shaky breath and nods.

“Then there’s something you should know …”

“You know we’re going to have to dredge that body up from the swamp, right?” Sam asks an hour later.

He and Dean are outside standing by the car. They’re alone for the first time all day—have been for the last ten minutes—but Sam hasn’t been able to bring himself to apologize. Dean hasn’t brought last night up either, but Sam can tell that his brother is thinking about it because his hand keeps going to his temple before he realizes what he’s doing and puts it back down. He won’t look Sam in the eye, either, and he keeps shifting his weight and pacing around in a tight circle like a tethered dog.

They’re going to have to talk about it soon.

“Yeah,” Dean says. He pauses, grimaces, and then opens his mouth as though he’s going to say something else. Cassie’s sudden emergence from the house distracts him, though, and Sam resists the urge to scowl as his brother leaves him leaning against the car to meet her.

“Hey,” Dean says.

“Hey,” Cassie answers, offering him a wan smile. “She’s asleep.”

Sam guesses that Mrs. Robinson will stay that way for a while, too, considering the tranquillizers she took after she had told her story for a second time—this time to her daughter. She had held up okay when it was just Sam, just a stranger, but telling your only child that her father was a murderer is always going to be more difficult—no matter how justified the murder in question. He has to admit that Cassie is dealing with the news pretty well.

Now, outside, he watches her stick her hands into her pockets and ask, “Now what?”

“Well,” Dean answers, “You stay put and look after her. And we’ll be back. Don’t leave the house.”
Cassie fixes Dean with a no-nonsense look, but her voice is playful when she says, “Don’t go getting all authoritative on me. I hate it.”

“Don’t leave the house, please?” Dean corrects himself. Sam can’t see his brother’s face, but he can tell from his voice that he’s smiling.

Cassie slants a look past Dean’s shoulder at Sam, smiles herself, and then grabs Dean’s face and pulls him down into a kiss. Sam straightens and takes a step forward before he knows what he’s doing. When it hits him—when he realizes that he’s a heartbeat away from doing something unforgivable (something else unforgivable)—he draws up short. Then, with a dull pulse in his head and an acidic taste in his mouth, he stands there and watches as his brother’s hands flutter over Cassie’s body.

Dean’s own body is tense, surprised, and he can’t seem to figure out whether he’s supposed to be touching her or not. It looks awkward as hell, and satisfaction is tugging Sam’s lips up when the tension suddenly drains from his brother’s shoulders. A moment later, Dean’s hands settle on Cassie’s hips and she goes up on her tiptoes, deepening the kiss. Dean holds her there, his hands flexing in a languid, easy rhythm, while he kisses her back.

Suddenly, it looks comfortable—looks familiar—and Sam’s stomach burns. He can’t fucking watch this. Cutting his eyes away, he lets out a loud, pointed cough.

Dean immediately breaks the kiss to say, “Yeah, coming,” which is gratifying, but his hands linger a moment longer and he gives Cassie’s waist a quick squeeze before stepping away and strolling around to the driver’s side door. He doesn’t so much as glance in Sam’s direction. Cassie’s looking at him, though. She’s watching Sam the way a cat might watch a cornered mouse.

“Take care of him, Sam,” she says, folding her arms across her stomach.

Sam tightens his jaw and gets into the car without responding.

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Sam isn’t going to have this conversation. Not now. Not when he can’t figure out if he’s jealous or guilty or angry or scared. Not when Dean’s kiss with Cassie is stuck on replay in his head. He isn’t stupid enough to get into such an important discussion when he’s already so far off balance he might as well be flat on his back.

So, of course, they make it almost all the way to the swamp in silence before he says, “Dean.”

“No,” Dean says.

Sam taps his aching fingers against his leg for a moment and then says, “You don’t even know what —”

“You were gonna apologize for last night, and then you were gonna promise it won’t ever happen again, and I don’t want to hear it, Sam. We’re in the middle of a fucking case, get your head on straight.” Dean isn’t rubbing his scar, which might be a sign that he isn’t as upset as his voice indicates, but then again that might be because his hands are white-knuckled on the wheel.

“Just let me—”

“Been there, done that, not happening again. Now shut your goddamn cakehole.”

“Dean,” Sam tries one last time, and his brother slams on the breaks. Sam reaches one hand up to the
dash automatically as he lets out a startled swear. Dean puts the car in park and turns off the engine and then swings sideways in the seat to glare at him.

“Are you deaf or just suicidal?” he demands.

Sam is still a little breathless from thinking his head was going to go through the windshield, but he still manages to get out, “We need to talk about this, Dean!”

“No, Sam. You need to talk about this. I need to forget it.”

“How can you just forget something like that?” Sam demands, and suddenly he’s crying. They’re weak tears, more leaky faucet than downpour, but that doesn’t make him feel any better about losing control like this. He should be used to it by now. After all, losing control is getting to be a habit. His tears come faster at the thought, and he wipes a hand miserably across his eyes.

“Jesus Christ, Dean, how the hell am I supposed to—I hurt you. I—you said no, and I just—I—”

Dean doesn’t reach out and comfort him like he used to, but he doesn’t yell again either. He just sits there quietly while Sam cries himself out. When Sam’s tears finally start to taper off, Dean fixes him with a look and says, “I could have stopped you, Sam. I didn’t. It wasn’t rape. Stop angisting.”

He turns back to the road and reaches for the ignition.

“It was,” Sam insists. “Dean, you don’t—you don’t know how to say no to me.”

Dean laughs harshly, dropping his head. He lets it hang for a moment, forehead just brushing the wheel, and then says, “You are a real piece of work, you know that? No matter what I say, you’re gonna twist it into Sam the Martyr hour, and I’m not gonna play that game with you.” Straightening, he continues, “So listen up, Sammy, cause I’m only gonna say this once and then we’re gonna go toast us a corpse.”

He pauses, staring out the windshield at the dark road ahead. He looks eerily beautiful in the reflected glow of the dashboard lights. Looks young and fragile. When he speaks, though, his voice is as strong as ever—harsh and almost angry.

“You’re my brother, man, and I love you. I’d kill for you, and I’d fucking die for you, and you know that. But I told you no when you finally manned up to what you wanted from me in California, and I didn’t let you rape me in Rockford.” He turns finally, trapping Sam’s gaze with his own as he asks, “So what the fuck makes you think I’d let you do it now?”

Sam blinks at Dean because everything he just said is true. Cassie’s words and his own selfish actions have gotten him so twisted around that he forgot about Rockford, about Dean’s refusal in California. He doesn’t know how to fit those puzzle pieces together with the Dean from last night: the Dean who let Sam finger him open and kiss him. Has no fucking clue what he’s supposed to read into Dean’s willingness to let Sam touch him one minute and his announcement that he wants to forget the whole thing the next.

And Dean is grimacing now, rubbing at the too-familiar spot on his temple as though there’s a wound there instead of a scar. As though there are jagged sparks of pain shooting through his skull.

“Are you okay?” he asks, reaching out to lay a hand on his brother’s shoulder.

Dean shrugs him off. “I’m fine,” he says shortly, and the hand at his temple shifts up and back to rub through his hair before coming to rest on the wheel. “Look, I’m not saying that I want you or anything. Like that. You know, for sex. I’m still.” Grimacing, he glances at the road and swallows.
“I’m not interested in that kind of thing, okay?”

Let it go let it go let it go

“You looked pretty interested with Cassie.”

Fucking idiot.

But instead of snapping at Sam or declaring his undying love for Cassie, Dean only says, “You know what they say about old habits,” in a deadpan tone of voice that Sam can’t read. Then, giving himself a little shake, he continues, “Last night was … whatever it was. It’s not something that’s gonna happen again, but I don’t want you beating yourself up over it either. You hear me?”

God, how can Dean say that? And what the fuck is Sam supposed to be taking away from this conversation? Is it a promise? A warning? Is this what Dean’s forgiveness looks like these days?

“Sam?”

“Yeah, I hear you,” Sam says, although if anything he’s more confused than he was before this little heart to heart.

“Okay then,” Dean says, starting the car again. “Let’s go fry Casper.”
Chapter 8

When they drive off the following day, Cyrus’ truck is gone for good and Dean is right where he should be: in the driver’s seat of the car beside Sam. Cassie stands at the side of the road where Dean left her, arms crossed and unsmiling. Sam watches out the window as she first dwindles and then falls away and does his best not to smirk.

He’s pretty sure he’s unsuccessful.

His smile lasts until they stop for the night and his brother asks for two rooms. Dean doesn’t stutter. Doesn’t bother looking in Sam’s direction as he slides one of the keys across the countertop toward him. It’s probably a good thing that Dean’s attention is on his own hands because Sam’s expression feels pitifully open.

“See you in the morning,” Dean says—casual, like this is routine—and Sam mumbles something that sounds vaguely like, ‘ok,’ and doesn’t move while his brother pushes the office door open and steps back outside into the purple dusk.

When the door falls shut behind him, the sound jars Sam into motion. Palming the room key, he turns and starts for the door. Then, catching sight of Dean pulling his bag out of the backseat of the car, he makes a quick detour to the rack of pamphlets against the wall instead.

Sam thumbs through a paper brochure for Ed + Annie’s Steakhouse while his brother shuts the Impala’s door and strides toward the western flank of the motel without so much as a glance in his direction. Dean knows Sam is watching, though. Sam can tell. It’s evident in the defensive set of his shoulders. In the way he holds his hand at his temple while he walks, shaking his head as though to clear it.

Sam’s hands tremble on the brochure. His eyes burn, and his throat is hot and swollen. He feels like a voyeur, standing here and watching Dean surreptitiously through the glass while memories of the other night flutter through his head.

As Dean strides out of sight, Sam shifts, putting his back to the window. He forces himself to read three pamphlets cover to cover while the desk clerk hums along to the radio (tuned to a bland, elevator country station) and pops his gum. When Sam is sure that his brother is safely holed up for the night, he puts the last pamphlet back, lets himself out to retrieve his bag from the car and goes in search of his own room.

He can’t sleep.

It takes three straight nights of tossing and turning before Sam realizes that it isn’t the guilt keeping him up—not just guilt, anyway. It’s the silence.

Sam grew up with Dean’s steady breathing keeping time in the darkness. When he went away to college, he traded roommate for roommate for Jack. When he and Jack moved into the apartment, and Sam had his own room for the first time in his life, he slept to the throb of Jack’s music, which played near constantly after dark. On the rare nights Jack wasn’t home, he used to turn on his fan without thinking about it—let the uneven whir of the blades lull him to sleep. Then Jess came along and he had her soft noises for company: her restless shifting and sleepy, nonsensical mumbling and contented sighs. When Jess died, Dean was right there to scoop Sam up again, and once more he
traded the rhythm of one person’s breathing for another’s. More familiar this time, more deeply loved. Home.

Now there’s nothing. In the out of the way motels that Dean chooses as they drift in search of another job, the soft, blurred noise of passing cars comes infrequently, if ever, and Sam is left aching. He’s left straining his ears in the darkness for something other than the echo of his own heartbeat—something to tell him that he isn’t alone. Silence roars back, spiteful, and when each morning rolls around he’s left muddle-headed and wincing at the light. He looks into the mirror and there are dark circles under his eyes. His skin is pale. His lips dry and tight. He thinks Dean notices, but his brother doesn’t mention Sam’s deteriorating appearance any more than he deigns to discuss the change in their sleeping arrangements.

‘I’m not going to touch you,’ Sam wants to say, but he has already made that promise and broken it and he’s no stronger now than he was before. He may actually be weaker, because now he knows what Dean feels like. He knows—in real, living color—what his brother sounds like when he comes with something up his ass. He knows how soft those maddening lips are, and how they taste, and the first night the silence robs him of his rest Sam finds himself pulling his cock out of his boxers and jerking off to the memory. His mouth tastes bitter when he comes, like regrets and mockery, and his exhausted mind spins. But it doesn’t stop him from doing the same thing on the following night, and again on the next.

During the day, with Dean at the wheel as they drive in aimless patterns, Sam can sleep a little. It’s easy to sleep with Dean’s scent in his nose and the sound of Dean’s breathing in his ears and the comforting creak of leather as Dean shifts in his seat and the pulse of Dean’s mullet rock. Sam dozes with his head lolling against the window, and he dreams of tight heat around his fingers and a firm, heavy body draped over him. He wakes no more rested than before with his cock a hard, hot line against his jeans.

Dean never says anything, but the way he rubs tersely at his temple tells Sam that his dreams aren’t exactly quiet. He vows not to fall asleep again where Dean can hear him, but less than an hour later, his exhausted body betrays him and dumps him under again. He dreams, and then he wakes, and Dean is rubbing his temple, and the whole fucking mess starts all over again.

On the fifth night, Sam finally—fucking finally—figures out that the TV can double as the white noise he needs. He drifts off to the muted sounds of a car chase: relieved to feel sleep closing in on him and so fucking grateful that he’d be crying if he wasn’t already too out of it to do more than make a weary little grunt.

Figures the first thing he dreams is another nightmare.

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“Dean!” Sam shouts, pounding on the door again. “Dean, open up!”

The door cracks open—not far, just enough to reveal one of his brother’s eyes, puffy with sleep, and a glimmer of the chain still holding the door closed. Sam swallows the pang that tightens his throat at the sight of the lock and lets his hand rest against the door.

“Better not be drunk,” Dean mutters, rubbing his face.

“We have to go,” Sam says, pitching his voice low. There isn’t anyone out here, but he feels self-conscious all the same. He knows what he looks like, after all: wild haired and begging at his brother’s locked door with his t-shirt on inside out and his shoes untied. His head aches from exhaustion or the nightmare or both and his mouth tastes funny—something like sulfur and blood—
and he wants his brother. He wants Dean to put an arm around his shoulders and squeeze his bicep and tell him everything’s going to be fine.

Instead, he gets to lean on the door while Dean peers mistrustfully out at him.

Sam is sure he’s going to cry. He’s going to burst into tears right here in the parking lot in the middle of the night while somewhere out there a man chokes to death on exhaust fumes.

“I had another dream,” he manages, clinging to the man’s fear, his desperation. Even secondhand it’s a horrible feeling, but it’s still better than Sam’s own emotions. Helps steady him a little.

Something flickers across Dean’s face—comprehension, maybe—and the door shuts. There’s a rattle of chain and then it opens again, swinging wide. Dean is naked except for a worn pair of boxers and, despite the urgency of the situation, Sam can’t help looking.

If Dean notices, at least he doesn’t call Sam on it.

“Start talking,” he says instead, moving over to his bag and pulling out the first articles of clothing he gets his hands on. Sam does, already explaining as he steps inside and shuts the door behind him. He watches Dean hide his skin, burying freckled muscles beneath four layers of cloth and a leather jacket. Dean doesn’t look at him once, but he’s listening. And he knows that Sam is watching.

It feels strangely hot in the room as Dean pulls on a ripped pair of jeans. Dizzying. Sam’s mind aches with the memory of the nameless man’s frantic face. His cock aches with the very real sight of his brother in front of him. He isn’t sure, suddenly, that he ever woke up at all. Maybe this is just a hellish extension of his nightmare.

Then Dean tosses his bag at Sam’s chest. Sam manages to catch it and the impact, the weight of the bag, makes everything real again.

“Get the car started,” Dean tells him, heading for the bathroom.

“Where’re you—”

“Man’s gotta piss when a man’s gotta piss, Sammy,” Dean says, and then the bathroom door slams shut between them.

Ten minutes later, they’re on their way South.

Max Miller’s mother died in a nursery fire when he was six months old.

Like Mary.

Around Max Miller, objects had a habit of moving without being touched.

Like cabinets.

Max Miller had a domineering, controlling father who was a little too fond of drinking.

Like John.

Max Miller was a monster.

Alone in his single room, Sam packs his bag and can’t help but draw the last, irrefutable parallel. It’s
obvious as day: blaring and making him flinch from the memory of the fear in Dean’s eyes as their gazes locked over Max’s body. Better that look than the other memory, though: better the fear than the stupid, stunned shock and the red spatter of blood on pale walls. But the image intrudes, relentless, and Sam bows his head and trembles with the force of it.

Fuck, he watched Dean die. Not forever, not for keeps, but it seemed real enough in his head and he can still … God, he can still …

“You ready yet, Sammy?”

Sam swallows, clenching his jaw and lifting his head. Dean is standing in the doorway with his bag slung carelessly over one shoulder. Sam can’t remember whether he locked the door or not. Can’t figure out if Dean’s supposed to be in here: what the rules are for this new arrangement.

“Yo, earth to Sam,” Dean calls, waving his hand.

Sam is suddenly blindsided by the almost overwhelming urge to stride across the room and drag Dean inside, slam the door and curl up in bed with his brother. Fuck the world outside, fuck his ‘powers’, fuck the goddamned demon. Fuck Dean’s issues, too—he can handle a little human comfort, he can—

Sam turns away sharply. “I’m not coming.”

“What?” Dean says. It sounds like he’s laughing. Like he thinks Sam is joking.

“I’m not,” Sam says, zipping his bag closed. He doesn’t turn around. It’ll be easier to do this without looking at his brother. “I—Dean, I’m not safe. I don’t want to—”

“Bullshit.” Dean doesn’t sound like he’s laughing anymore. “I don’t want to hear that crap from you, Sam. You’re fine.”

“Am I?” Sam demands. A rush of adrenaline turns him, lifts his head to face Dean. “Am I really, Dean? Cause last time I checked, what I want from you isn’t anywhere near fine.”

Dean just looks at him for a moment, expression unreadable, and then he steps further into the room and shuts the door. “So you’re just gonna run away again? Huh? You’re gonna leave?”

Sam sort of wants to point out that Dean left first, but that isn’t really what this is about. And while Dean may be content to argue about shadowed reflections, Sam has always been more inclined to reach into the mirror and drag the Jabberwocky itself out into the light. Even if this particular Jabberwocky has acid for blood and smells like sulfur.

“When Max locked me in that closet, that big cabinet against the door—I moved it.”

He’s looking straight at his brother, so he sees the flicker of fear: fast and fleeting as a hummingbird’s wings. Then Dean tries for a smile and says, “You’ve got a little bit more upper body strength than I give you credit for.”

The words stick in Sam’s throat a little—fuck Dean for making him say this twice—but he manages to say, “No, man, I moved it—like Max.”

There’s no real way for Dean to deny it this time, but there’s a long, awkward pause before he says, “Oh. Right.” Turning away, he drops his bag from his shoulder to the floor and walks over to the dresser.
“Yeah,” Sam says. He wishes he didn’t sound quite so subdued, but he can’t help himself. Rubbing his thumb against his pants, he continues, “So I can’t—”

“Bend this,” Dean interrupts. Turning around, he holds up the spoon that Sam found rattling around in one of the room’s desk drawers.

Sam would think it’s another attempt at a joke except that Dean actually looks like he expects Sam to do something. All of a sudden, the whole situation strikes him as absurdly funny. Maybe it’s the stress, maybe it’s the lack of sleep, maybe Sam’s sense of humor is just as twisted as the rest of him. He starts to smile and then soberes again beneath a fresh, unreasoning wave of despair.

“I can’t turn it on and off, Dean,” he says as he sits down on the bed.

“Well, how’d you do it?” Dean asks, squinting at the spoon in his hand. Sam isn’t sure, but he thinks his brother is checking to see whether he can do anything with the stray utensil.

“I don’t know.” Leaning forward, he runs his hands through his hair. “I can’t control it. I saw you die and it just came out of me, like a punch. You know, like a freak adrenaline thing.”

When he glances up, Dean is shrugging and putting the spoon back down. “Well, I’m sure it won’t happen again.”

And he sounds sure. Sounds as confident as ever. But Sam saw beneath his brother’s mask in the first moment when he told Dean what happened, and he knows that the confidence is ice-thin and riddled with cracks. He doesn’t know whether to be grateful for the charade or angry—it’s always this way with Dean, they never talk about anything. They fight monsters for a living but never face up to the demons in their own closets. In the end, after a struggle, he settles on hurt exasperation.

“Aren’t you worried, man?” he demands. “Aren’t you worried that I could turn into Max or something?”

“Nope,” Dean answers instantly. He’s looking right at Sam when he says it and Sam wants to believe despite himself. He wants, desperately, for the solid faith he sees in his brother’s gaze to be real. “You know why?”

“No. Why?”

“Cause you’ve got one advantage that Max didn’t have.”

Sam realizes where this is going—wishes he’d seen it soon enough to head the whole thing off at the pass. But it’s too late now, and he’s opening his mouth before he realizes he means to say anything.

“Dad? Because Dad’s not here, Dean.” He manages to shut up then, before he adds the rest. Before he says that the last thing either of them needs right now is the help of a man who had no problem letting his eldest son whore himself out. Dean still thinks that John doesn’t know, after all, and the longer Sam can keep it that way, the better. If Dean finds out, it’ll kill him.

Sam expects his brother to jump to their father’s defense, just like always, but instead Dean just shakes his head and says, “No. Me.” He smiles then, soft and genuine enough that Sam feels some of the knots in his stomach relaxing. “As long as I’m around, nothing bad is gonna happen to you.”

The promise lodges in Sam’s chest, warming him but making it difficult to breathe.

“Now,” Dean continues, stepping forward and picking up his bag again. “I know what we need to do about your premonitions. I know where we have to go.”
Sam tenses a little as his brother approaches and leans down to pick up Sam’s bag as well. The motion ends the conversation about Sam leaving just as firmly as Dean’s lightened tone. Sam could try to prolong the discussion, of course, but he can already tell from the white knuckled grip that Dean has on the straps that his brother isn’t taking no for an answer. He wishes that he didn’t feel so selfishly grateful for the gesture.

“Where?” he asks. It comes out a little scratchy, but his throat is tight enough that he’s lucky he’s able to speak at all.

Dean looks down at him, serious, and says, “Reno.”

Then the corners of his mouth tilt up into one of those rare smiles that crinkle the corners of his eyes and make him look about five years old at once. It isn’t lust that steals Sam’s air at the sight, isn’t any kind of conventional desire, but it’s desire all the same. Desire to sun himself in the mischievous, joyful warmth radiating from his brother. Desire to freeze Dean right here, with light in his eyes and innocence in his smile and the hooked scar all but invisible at his temple.

There isn’t a way to communicate what he feels for Dean in this moment, but kissing his brother breathless would make a start. Sam can’t do that, though. He refuses to tarnish his brother’s brightness, which is fleeting enough without him bumbling around and breaking things. So instead he keeps a firm hold on his heart and scoffs.

He scoffs because Dean won’t let himself be loved the way he deserves. He scoffs because there’s a line between desire and necessity, and he isn’t sure which side he’s standing on anymore. He scoffs because it’s either that or break down crying.

Then, standing up, he moves for the door before his brother can read the hunger in his eyes.

“What?” Dean says, following. “Come on, man. Craps table. We’d clean up.”

The joke really shouldn’t make Sam feel so much like sobbing.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

A week later they’re in Hibbing, Minnesota, and Dean’s light is firmly buried again. Sam is too busy brooding about his brother’s deteriorating mood to pay any attention to his surroundings, and as he leaves the local dive bar, he gets grabbed by a bunch of inbred hillbillies. It’s embarrassing at first, and then horrifying when he learns what said hillbillies plan to do with him—worse as he realizes he has no idea how to get himself out of this situation without dying.

Dean comes for him before anything bad happens, but in the end Sam manages to free himself anyway. When the dust has settled, his brother is conspicuously absent; Dean went into the house to find the key to unlock Sam’s cell and then Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum came out, and Sam is so worried about his brother that he thinks he might puke. He leaves the female cop Dean brought with him to stand guard over Papa Tweedle, not much caring whether or not she intends to pull the trigger, and rushes out of the barn and up to the house.

The smell hits him as soon as he opens the door—reek of old sweat and grime and, more immediate and alarming, the stench of burnt flesh. He takes a step inside and there’s a sound to go with the smell: muffled screams and a little girl’s laughter. Sam lets adrenaline carry him forward.

Walking across the living room is like moving underwater, and Sam is half convinced that he fell asleep on his way into the house because he’s walking toward a nightmare.

Dean can’t be tied to a chair with a dirty rag stuffed in his mouth. Can’t be sweating and screaming
and all but blind with pain while a girl with matted, bird's nest hair laughs and presses a white-hot poker against his arm, his chest, his stomach. As Sam closes those final feet, she shifts the poker—aiming for Dean's face this time—and then Sam is there. He grabs the other end of the poker without thinking about it, too angry and horrified to feel his own skin burning, and wrenches the weapon out of her hand.

Just a girl just a girl just a girl, his rational mind screams, but Dean's head is hanging against his chest, and his brother's body is shuddering, and his shirt is smoking, and it smells like a goddamned pig roast in here as Sam brings the butt of the poker down on the bitch's head, dropping her to the floor. He doesn't check to see if she's still breathing: just shoves her body aside with one foot and drops the poker and crouches in front of his brother.

"Dean," he breathes. His hands flutter over his brother's torso, not quite daring to touch. He's not sure where it's safe to touch. "Jesus, Dean. It's okay, man. It's okay, I'm right here."

Dean shakes his head, eyes scrunched shut as he screams into the gag, and when Sam brushes his cheek, he jerks like he was struck.

"Dean," Sam tries again as he works at the knot holding the gag in place. "Dean, it's me. It's Sammy."

That finally gets him Dean's eyes, wet and glassy with pain. Dean blinks, brow furrowing as he tries to come back to himself. Sam keeps talking to him in a low, soothing voice, saying first Dean's name and then his own, while his fingers fumble with the dirty cloth. That sick, smoky smell keeps curling in his mouth—the roast pig smell, which is also the smell of his brother's burnt flesh. By the time he gets the knot loose Sam's stomach is roiling, but Dean looks calmer.

He swallows as Sam eases the cloth free and then rasps, "Sammy."

"Right here, man," Sam agrees. He crouches, shifting to his brother's side so that he can go to work on the ropes strapping Dean in place.

"Sam," Dean blurts, panicked, and Sam covers his brother's hand with his own.

"I'm still here. I need to get the ropes loose, okay, but we're gonna get you out of here. Gonna get you fixed up. Can you tell me how bad it is? Do you need a hospital?"

"You're okay?" Dean pants, ignoring the question. "Sam. Sammy, you're okay?"

Sam should be used to Dean putting Sam's needs before his own by now, but he isn't. He doesn't know that he's ever going to get used to the futile, sickening rage that always accompanies his brother's frantic inquiries. He knows he's never going to stop feeling guilty when it happens—when Dean is down and bloody and still looking around to make sure that the prime directive hasn't been broken, that Sam is safe.

"I'm fine." Sam's voice is a little hoarse, but he's pretty sure that Dean isn't aware enough to tell.


"Yeah, I'm okay," Sam repeats. He doesn't like how out of it Dean sounds: how laborious his words are. Swearing under his breath, he tugs harder on the ropes.

"Sammy," Dean says. "Stay away from the mirror, okay?"

Sam's hands freeze on the ropes as his stomach plummets. He has no idea what his brother is talking
about, but he thinks ... he thinks he remembers something. From Rockford.

No mirrors here, you son of a bitch.

“Promise me,” Dean pants. He’s starting to struggle against the ropes, which are already too tight for Sam to work loose with his fingers and which seem to be drawing even tighter with every twitch. “Promise me you’ll stay away.”

“I promise,” Sam says quickly, laying a hand on the unburnt part of Dean’s forearm. “I promise, okay? But you need to stop moving. You hear me, man? Just sit still for a minute.”

Whether because Sam promised or because Sam asked him to, or maybe just because he’s too tired to keep fighting, Dean goes limp. “You don’t,” he mumbles, blinking. “S dangerous. Can’t see through the blood.”

Sam’s eyes dart up to his brother’s forehead, to the hooked scar there, and he wants to ask—wants to take advantage of Dean’s disorientation to get some answers. It’s maybe not the time, but the bad guys are down and Dean is stable and Sam is about to ask when his brother shakes his head once, blinking rapidly.

“Sammy?” Dean says. His voice is clearer, more rational. Back with the fully conscious.

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, shoving aside his twinge of regret at the lost opportunity.

“Bitch burned me. You get her?”

“Yeah, man, I got her. I can’t undo the knots on your arms, though. They’re too tight. I need to get a knife. I’ll be right back, though, okay?”

He doesn’t really want to leave Dean alone, even when the threat has been neutralized, but Dean doesn’t look worried. Nodding, he mutters, “Should be plenty ’round here.” His breath catches as he shifts in the chair.

Dean is right: Sam finds an entire array in the next room, stuck into a wooden carving block next to a slab of meat that doesn’t bear much looking at. Grabbing the smallest blade he can see, he hurries back to his brother’s side. Dean looks even more alert than before, has his head up as he tracks Sam’s movements with his eyes. He’s still sweating, though, and Sam doesn’t like how pale he is.

“Jesus, Dean.” He doesn’t mean to say it aloud, but it comes out anyway. Sam can hear his nausea clearly in the choked sound of his voice.

“Yeah, little miss psycho got pissed when I said I’d haunt their asses if they served me with carrots. Bitch can’t take a joke.” Dean offers him a weak smile. “Looks worse than it is, though. ‘M thinking about going out for a couple rounds of pool when we get out of here. You up for it?”

“You’re a shitty liar,” Sam mutters as he slices through the knots.

He expects the ropes to fall away once they’ve been cut, but they don’t. Instead, he has to peel them free from Dean’s skin strip by strip. As the rope finally starts to come off, Dean sucks in a sharp breath and groans. The revealed flesh on his wrists is bloodied and bruised—doubtlessly from struggling to free himself while he was burned. Some of the abrasions have already scabbed over, but they open fresh as Sam pulls the rope away. He winces as his brother’s blood trickles down onto the arms of the chair.

“Sorry,” Sam apologizes.
“Just get me out of here,” Dean answers, and Sam obediently bends to free his brother’s legs. Dean’s ankles aren’t anywhere near as bad as his wrists were—his jeans protected his skin from everything but faint bruises—and a moment later, Sam puts the knife down and sits back on his heels.

“Okay, you need help standing?” he asks, glancing up, and then his brother’s hand is fisting his t-shirt and yanking him up. Pulled off balance, Sam falls awkwardly against his brother, one hand dropping onto Dean’s upper thigh in an attempt not to crush his seared chest and stomach. He’s so concerned with not hurting Dean that it takes him a couple of seconds to realize that Dean is kissing him.

Dean’s mouth tastes like crap and that burnt smell is worse than ever and Sam doesn’t know what the hell is going on. He doesn’t know what to do with himself, whether Dean is delusional again or what the fuck ever, and there’s no good explanation for the way that his brother is trying to shove his tongue down Sam’s throat.

“Mmph,” Sam starts, having forgotten that he can’t ask questions when his mouth is otherwise occupied.

Dean breaks the kiss at the sound, dropping his forehead down onto Sam’s shoulder and breathing heavily. After a couple of moments, which Sam spends shell-shocked and staring at the wall, Dean turns his head so that his ear is pressed against Sam’s throat. His hand clenches and unclenches in Sam’s t-shirt.

“Dean?” Sam finally asks, tentative.

“Shut up,” Dean mutters. “Just. Just shut up and let me listen to your heart.”

It doesn’t make any sense, even for Dean, even taking into account the amount of pain his brother must be in, but Sam isn’t going to argue with that tone of voice. He holds himself very still while Dean quiets, and thinks about pokers and mirrors and hooked scars and his brother’s lips. Dean is still shivering when he finally releases Sam’s shirt and lets him straighten, which isn’t great, but there’s also a peacefulness in him that tells Sam he isn’t going to have any trouble getting his brother to sit still and let himself be taken care of—which will be a minor miracle.

Dean’s coat is lying on the arm of the couch where their captors tossed it, and although his left arm isn’t working well enough to get the coat on, he seems to take comfort in having it draped over his shoulders. It makes things easier on Sam as well—makes it easier for him to hurt his brother when he can’t see the damage he’s doing. And he is going to hurt Dean, that’s unavoidable: his brother obviously can’t stand on his own, and Sam isn’t going to be able to support him without putting pressure on some of the burns.

Despite the expected pain, Dean is docile while Sam lifts him into a standing position. His breath comes a little faster, but aside from that there’s no indication that his upper body is a mess. As Sam tries to figure out the best way to support his brother’s weight, he catches Dean staring down at the girl’s slight form. Shifting over, he moves between his brother and the sight of his tormentor. Dean’s eyes are pained, but thankfully lucid as they lift to Sam’s.

“She alive?”

*Does it matter?* Sam is tempted to respond, but now that he’s sure Dean is going to be okay he’s feeling a little more charitable himself. A little. It only takes a moment to crouch and check for a pulse—while keeping a wary eye on his brother in case Dean starts to tip over—and then, nodding, he straightens.
“Yeah. She’s gonna have a hell of a headache, though.”

Dean nods wearily and then, without waiting for Sam, turns to start for the door. Sam scrambles after his brother, reaching, but Dean shoots him a single warning glare that stops him before he actually makes contact. So much for Dean letting him help.

Oh well. Maybe later, after Sam has shoved a couple of Vicodin down his brother’s throat, Dean will be more cooperative. For now, though, all he can do is trail after Dean while he heads for the door with ginger steps, moving with all the agility of an eighty year old man with a slipped disc.

“Sometimes I really fucking hate people,” Dean mutters as he rounds the corner into the front hall.

He glances idly to his right and then, unexpectedly, flinches back violently enough that he runs into the opposite wall. Hissing, he pushes back the other way and overbalances. Sam darts forward and manages to catch his brother before Dean actually topples over—one hand on his waist and the other arm slung across his chest, keeping him close and upright. Dean lets out a second, harsher hiss at the contact and drives his elbow back into Sam’s ribs.

“Fuck! Get off, I’m fine, I’m fine. Jesus Christ.”

Sam releases his brother as quickly as he can make his hands open and then stands there while Dean walks toward the door again in a rapid shuffle. He stands there staring at the wall to his right, where he expected to see a gruesome trophy or a photo of an old hunt. But there aren’t any trophies. Aren’t any photographs.

There’s nothing but a mirror.
“You kissed me,” Sam says.

Having any kind of meaningful conversation when Dean is exhausted and hopped up on painkillers is cheating and he knows it, but he can’t help himself. He doesn’t know when his brother’s walls will ever be low enough again to get a straight answer from him. Dean shifts a little in the bed—Dean’s room, mostly because Sam couldn’t find his own key—and turns his head to one side so that he can look at Sam better. Though, from the vague expression in his eyes, ‘better’ might be a relative term.

“Hrm,” he grunts.

“You kissed me,” Sam repeats. His hand—the one he burnt on the poker—twitches without his permission and sets off a deep-seated burn that radiates through his palm and down into his wrist. Sam ignores the flood of pain, keeping his attention focused on his brother while Dean visibly tries to process his words.

Despite his near-obsession with his brother’s mouth, the kiss isn’t what Sam wants to talk about right now. But he thought about it while he dressed Dean’s burns and the abrasions on his brother’s wrists, and he came to the conclusion that this is the easier conversation for Dean to have. If he can get Dean talking about the kiss, then they can segue smoothly into Sam’s second, more important question. And if Dean is already used to giving answers when they do that, then maybe he’ll tell Sam about the mirrors.

Dean blinks, eyes focusing slightly, and then sighs. “Yeah, well, I thought you were dead. Thought those sick fucks killed you.”

“Oh,” Sam says. Despite himself, he’s disappointed. Looks like there was a small, stupid part of him that was hoping the kiss was more than some fucked-up response to adrenaline.

“Told ‘em to hunt you,” Dean mumbles, turning his face away again. “Fuckers told me I had to pick you or her or they’d blind me and I picked you.”

Sam stares.

“M’ sorry,” Dean adds after a moment. Sam can’t see his brother’s face, but Dean’s voice sounds suspiciously wet.

Prodding himself back into motion, Sam sits down on the edge of the bed and breathes, “Hey, man. Dean, don’t.” He stops. Has to swallow before he can continue, “Don’t be sorry.”

After the night he’s had, he can’t manage any more than that: can’t figure out how to put words to the unfolding, proud feeling in his chest. Can’t even begin to explain how such concrete evidence of Dean’s faith in him makes him feel. Can’t describe how fucking happy it makes him to hear that Dean sees him as a partner, and not just a kid brother. That Dean sees him as someone who can hold his own, and not just someone who has to be protected at all costs.

“Gonna sleep for a fucking week,” Dean sighs. He rubs his cheek against the pillow and Sam’s fingers tremble with the need to touch.

Dean looks so beautiful lying there. Hair ruffled and spiked. Skin pale and flecked with freckles. Lips full and slightly parted.
The scar at his temple is the only imperfection on Dean’s face, and it’s leering at Sam now. Mocking him.

“Dean?” he says softly.

“Mmm?”

“Why are the mirrors dangerous?”

Dean cracks his eyes with a frown, but he doesn’t look frightened. He doesn’t look angry, either. He just looks confused. “Did you just ask me why the mirrors are dangerous?” he asks, wrinkling his brow.

“Uh, yeah?” Sam tries.

Dean stares at him for a moment longer and then snorts. “You sneak a couple of Vicodin for yourself while I wasn’t looking, Sammy?” he asks, letting his eyes slip shut again.

“No. Earlier, when I was cutting you loose, you said—you made me promise not to stay away from the mirrors.”

Yeah, well, you let some bitch poke you with a hunk of white hot metal for a couple of hours. See how coherent you are.”

But Dean flinched. In the hallway. And tonight isn’t the only time he’s mentioned mirrors. And then there’s ...

“How did you get the scar on your forehead?”

“What scar?” Dean asks, but his hand is already up and touching it and before Sam can answer he says, “Oh,” and puts his hand back down. “Bar fight. Y’should see the other guy.”

Sam’s hand is really starting to pound, which means he should be slathering it with antiseptic cream and not sitting here staring at his brother, but he can’t bring himself to move. He doesn’t know what’s going on here, but something has to be going on because nothing is adding up. Sam keeps on trying to put two and two together and coming up with hollow, tin soldiers. Keeps coming up with lies.

“I know I’m pretty, but if you’re just gonna sit there and stare all night I’m gonna start charging,” Dean mumbles without opening his eyes.

Okay, yeah, that’s pretty much Sam’s cue to get going. This whole mirror and scar thing is going to have to wait until Dean is more coherent. Which means that questioning him is going to be about as much fun as petting a cactus, and about as easy as punching through a mountain, but Sam can’t see any other options here. Not when Dean is so clearly tapped out for the time being.

Pushing himself to his feet, he heads over for the table where he left the tube of antiseptic. “Just give me a minute to dress my hand and I’ll get out of your hair, okay?”

“No.”

Sam tenses at the word, not that he really should have expected Dean to be any more accommodating after the mini-inquisition and subsequent staring. “Okay. Yeah, okay, I can do that in my own room—” (if he can get the door open) “—so I’ll just—”
“No,” Dean repeats more strongly. Pushing up awkwardly on his good arm, he peers at Sam. “Don’t go, okay?”

Wait, what?

“You want me to stay?” Sam asks cautiously.

Dean squints at him for a few more seconds and then, with a grunt, drops back against the pillows. “Can’t fucking sleep without you here,” he mutters.

Sam glances at the floor, which, apart from being filthy, looks really hard and not at all appetizing after having spent the last few days in a cage. He already knows that he isn’t going to turn this chance down, though.

“Uh, okay,” he says.

As he uncaps the antiseptic again and squeezes a generous amount onto his burnt palm, Sam can feel his brother’s eyes on him. When he glances over, Dean isn’t even bothering to hide the fact that he’s watching, lying on his back and looking at Sam with a half-lidded, lazy stare. Sam wonders if this is how Dean feels when their positions are reversed, when he can’t keep his eyes off his brother. If it is, then he can’t blame Dean for getting so fed up with him, because it’s probably the most uncomfortable sensation he’s ever experienced.

Urged on by the rapid thud of his heart, Sam hurriedly finishes with his hand and then turns off the lights. Stumbling around the unfamiliar room to the empty side of the bed, he grabs the extra pillow and turns to feel his way back to an open patch of floor.

“What’re you doing?” Dean demands, lifting up on an elbow again.

Sam freezes in place. He hasn’t felt this exposed and unsure of himself since his switchblade fell out of his back pocket in the middle of recess in fifth grade. Shifting his grip on the pillow, he wishes he could get angry at the way Dean keeps changing the rules on him, but he can’t work himself up to anything more strenuous than anxious confusion.

“I, uh—I thought you wanted me to stay?”

Dean sighs and flips the covers on the far side of the bed back. “Get in,” he orders before dropping down and turning his back to Sam again.

There are times when Sam has questioned his sanity. This is definitely one of them.

“Dean, are you—are you sure? I mean, I—”

“Jesus Christ, Sam. We’ve shared a bed before. You’re not gonna molest me. Get the fuck in here.” As though he hasn’t spent the last three weeks avoiding Sam like the plague.

Sam knows this is a bad idea—Sam is still confused as hell from the kiss and, considering the amount of painkillers he’s on, Dean’s judgment isn’t so much impaired as it is vacationing in Tahiti—but he can’t remember how to say no. He wants this too badly to say no. Wants this illusion of trust and love, even if it’s going to bite him in the ass when his brother sobers up tomorrow.

“Oh, okay,” he agrees, pulling off his shoes. After a moment of hesitation, he puts one hand on the top button of his jeans and glances at his brother. Dean still isn’t looking at him, of course, so Sam clears his throat.
“What?” Dean growls.

“Can I—is it okay if I—”

“Just spit it out, Sam.”

“Can I take my pants off?” He feels like an idiot asking, but he isn’t going to climb into bed with Dean in nothing but a t-shirt and his boxers without explicit permission. Mostly because he likes his dick where it is, thanks.

“Do I look like I give a crap?” Dean mutters without rolling over.

Sam doesn’t actually know what Dean’s expression is right now, but his voice says that he’s losing what little patience he had, so Sam doesn’t waste any time opening his jeans and pushing them off. When he climbs into the bed, he’s careful to lie as close as he can to the edge, but is still painfully aware of his brother, lying less than three feet away. Fuck, he isn’t going to sleep at all tonight, but Dean asking him to stay more than makes up for any exhaustion he’s going to feel tomorrow, so—

The mattress shifts unexpectedly and Sam tenses as Dean grabs the back of his shirt and tugs.

“What?” Sam says brilliantly, not moving.

“Wanna make sure you don’t wander off,” Dean announces, tugging harder.

“Wanna make sure you don’t wander off,” Dean announces, tugging harder.

“Get over here, asshole.”

“What?” Sam says brilliantly, not moving.

“Wanna make sure you don’t wander off,” Dean announces, tugging harder.

Sam knows that this is just the Vicodin talking again—he’s stupid but he isn’t a complete moron—but he inches closer anyway. There’s only about a foot between them now, but Dean is still pulling awkwardly on Sam while he grumbles under his breath about Sam being ‘worse than that Funny Farm dog’, and threatens to get him ‘implanted with one of those tracking devices’. Dean turns Sam into kind of an idiot at the best of times, and tonight Sam seems to be running a couple of years slow, so it takes him a few minutes to realize what his brother is after.

Then he tenses. Suddenly, the backseat of the Impala is looking really inviting. After all, there’s sleeping in the same bed with Dean while he’s high as kite, which is going to get Sam’s ass kicked, and then there’s this, which is going to get him shot. With rock salt, yeah, but still: it's gonna hurt.

“Dean, you don’t want—”

“I’m sore as fuck, I’m tired, and you’re starting to piss me off. Now get over here so I can keep a goddamned eye on you.”

Sam recognizes an order when he hears one, and, while he’s always been pretty good about ignoring that sort of thing, he’s helpless to do anything but obey this one. After all, he doesn’t want Dean getting into a wrestling match like the stubborn son of a bitch he is and overexerting himself while trying to make Sam do what he wants. Or while he tries to make Sam do what he thinks he wants Sam to do.

Anyway, this is a clear-cut case of Sam having to take one for the team.

Obviously.

“Okay,” he whispers, rolling over.

When he eases his arms around his brother, careful not to touch any of the burns, Sam can’t help
thinking how well their bodies line up. He didn’t think they would fit this perfectly—didn’t think that Dean’s back would slot so seamlessly against his chest. He didn’t think that his brother would rest so peacefully against him, so easily. Dean smells strongly of the antiseptic cream, and beneath that he still smells burnt, but when Sam cautiously buries his nose in his brother’s hair, ready to move back at the first warning that he’s crossing a line, the next breath he takes is all Dean: heady and masculine and familiar.

“This okay?” he rasps, certain that his heart is pounding hard enough to make his brother’s spine vibrate.

“Mmm,” Dean answers drowsily, shifting his lower body in a way that makes Sam bite his lip and think, desperately, about Bobby in a Speedo. “But if you kick me in your sleep, I’ll kick back.”

Kicking isn’t going to be a problem, though. No way in hell is Sam going to be able to sleep when he has Dean in his arms like this. Not in a million years. Not even if he were drugged.

Taking another deep breath of Dean-scented air, Sam lets his eyes fall shut. Despite the last couple of days, despite the throb in his hand, he’s smiling widely enough that his mouth aches. When he thoughtlessly knocks one of his legs between his brother’s a few minutes later, Dean makes a sleepy grumble and hooks his ankle back around Sam’s foot, keeping him close.

Two minutes after that, they’re both asleep.

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In the morning, they don’t talk about it. Dean eases out of the circle of Sam’s arms and Sam, after a brief moment of disoriented panic, wakes up enough to let him go. Dean doesn’t look at him as he moves over to the bathroom, or when Sam changes his dressings a few minutes later, or over breakfast in a sunlit, yellow-walled café.

When they stop again for the night, though, he asks for a single room with two queens. Sam recognizes the gesture for what it is and somehow manages not to thank Dean for forgiving him. For trusting him.

He falls asleep that night with his arms empty and the soft sounds of Dean filling the air. His chest aches in a way that is becoming familiar, but he thinks that he’ll settle for this, if it’s all he can have. He can learn to stop reaching for the sun and settle for reflected light of the moon. He can learn to be okay with being Dean’s brother: his partner and friend.

He can learn to be grateful to have that much.

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Three weeks later, the ache in Sam’s chest still hasn’t subsided at all. If anything, it’s actually worse. He can’t help wanting, is the problem. Dean is right there, sitting beside him in the car or across from him at a diner or a library or a motel table, tossing jibes and belching and scratching his nuts and basically being as crass and disgusting as he knows how to be, and Sam still wants to lean forward and kiss him. He wants to be able to say, ‘I love you’ and get a smile in return instead of a glare: wants to warm the chill in his brother’s eyes.

He wants to love Dean strongly enough and purely enough to make him stop touching that goddamned scar.

Then again, he also wants to stop staring at his brother’s lips while he fantasizes about kissing them, about dragging his cock over them, about fucking them swollen, and Dean isn’t helping with that
one either. In fact, he seems to have developed an oral fixation when Sam wasn’t looking. Keeps chewing on pens or sucking on the plastic spoons he uses to stir his sugar into his coffee or trailing his beer bottles back and forth across his plump lower lip and it’s driving Sam fucking nuts. He’d accuse Dean of doing it on purpose, except he knows better.

He knows better because the beer bottle thing entices one of Dean’s fans over to try his luck one night and Dean’s startled flinch when the guy asks if he’d be interested in trading that bottle for something tastier isn’t faked. Having gone eerily, completely still, Dean stares up at the guy while his admirer sways drunkenly and reaches for his face—for his lips—and mutters about how he’s even prettier in real life, gonna feel so good, make him howl for it...

Sam is up out of his seat before he knows what he’s doing. He punches the guy hard enough to knock him off his feet, grabs Dean, and gets them both out of there. Dean lets himself be dragged outside, but he shakes Sam off in the parking lot and says, “I don’t need you defending my honor, dude.”

“Someone needs to, Dean, and you sure as hell aren’t bothering!”

“Because it doesn’t matter, Sam!” Dean yells back. He has a hand to his temple, fingers twitching like he’s in pain. “It’s not like he was doing anything a hundred other assholes haven’t before.”

“No one touches you,” Sam replies. His voice is soft and serious and the sound of it makes Dean quiet. He doesn’t lower his hand, not yet, not the way Sam wants him to, but his fingers still. Sam curls his own hands into fists to keep from reaching out and making his brother stop touching the fucking scar. Letting out a breath, he fixes Dean with a steady gaze: trying to put all of the hurt and the indignant rage boiling inside of him into his eyes.

“No one talks to you like that.”

Dean stares back at him for a long moment and then his jaw twitches once and he turns away, dropping his hand to his side. “Don’t do it again,” he says as he starts for the Impala.

Dean might not appreciate Sam playing the white knight, but he didn’t say anything about preemptive strikes, so the next time they go out, Sam is careful to sit closer to his brother. Close enough that it’s obvious Dean isn’t alone. Dean gives him a slanting look when he sits down, but doesn’t remark on it. Either he knows what Sam is doing and doesn’t care, or he’s completely clueless and ... doesn’t care. Or maybe this is actually making Dean feel better. God knows his hand hasn’t so much as twitched in the direction of his forehead all night.

The only downside to Sam’s brilliant plan, actually, is the fact that the beer bottle thing is even more distracting from this angle. Now he’s close enough to see the drops of condensation sliding from the mouth of the bottle to wet his brother’s lips. The moisture makes them gleam, slick and inviting, and Sam has to widen his legs under the table a little to make room for his stiffening cock.

Dean is obviously some kind of siren. Or possibly an incubus. He’s alluring without making any effort—those full lips and green eyes and soft lashes have the power to draw Sam in from across the room, and when he gets close enough to spot the freckles speckling his brother’s cheeks and the bridge of Dean’s nose, and to hear his low, rough voice, his hands itch to trail over his brother’s tapered hips and broad shoulders. If he looks at Dean for longer than a minute or two, other things start popping out: the tilt of his head, or the sprawl of his legs, or the curve of his throat. Or maybe even the competent way he holds his beer bottle to his mouth, which makes Sam think of other things that his brother might be able to do with his hands, or with those lips ...

Dean makes people want without meaning to—he makes Sam want—and as Sam watches his
brother toy with his beer bottle, he doesn’t know how much longer he can do this. He doesn’t know how long he can stand next to the sun without falling prey to its gravitational pull and being burned alive.

It’s a small blessing that Dean isn’t picking up women anymore: that he hasn’t done anything more than smile at one since they left Cassie in the dust. Sam knows himself well enough to recognize that he wouldn’t be able to handle his brother’s casual conquests anymore, not now that he’s had a taste of what those women get. The pushy, covetous part of Sam—the part that wants to know every last detail about his brother: that wants to own Dean completely—prods at him, demanding that he ask his brother what changed.

Then Sam remembers how Dean felt on top of him, how Dean’s ass caught tight and snug around his fingers, how his mouth was hot and wet and pliant. He remembers, and then he thinks of how restless his brother’s fingers have been with the scar on his right temple since that night and bites down deliberately on the inside of his cheek.

Next to him, Dean finally tilts his head back and takes a slow pull from the bottle: sensuous lips wrapped around the mouth, throat working, fingers flexing around the dark glass. Sam’s own throat has gone dry and he has to look away before he does something completely embarrassing like come in his pants.

Yeah, this whole ‘just be Dean’s brother’ thing is working out great.

In Chicago, the pixie of a girl whom Sam met on his aborted trip back to California—the girl he didn’t give a moment’s consideration to because he was too busy thinking about Dean—shows up again. Sam would say it was nice to see her, but that’s kind of difficult to do when she turns out to be such a bitch: summoning demons and setting a trap for their father and bad-mouthing Dean, then feeling him up with a leering glance in Sam’s direction.

“Get off him!” Sam spits. He has his knife out and is working through the ropes tying him to his own post, and he knows that he shouldn’t be calling attention to himself—shouldn’t chance Meg taking his blade away like she took Dean’s—but he can’t help it. Can’t just sit here and watch while that blonde bitch straddles his brother and licks at the blood on his face.

“Oh, but Dean doesn’t want me to go, do you, Dean?” Meg purrs, gyrating down.

Dean makes a choked noise that, shamefully, goes straight to Sam’s cock, but otherwise he doesn’t respond. The lack of a flippant retort is worrisome, and as Sam saws through the last few strands of rope, his eyes dart to his brother’s hands, which are flexing uselessly against his bonds.

“Gonna take you for a ride, cowboy,” Meg announces, and licks a slow line up the side of Dean’s face to suckle at the hooked scar on his temple. Back flexing, she works a hand down between them into Dean’s lap—and even though Sam can’t see what she’s doing, the dragging, reluctant noises Dean makes are painting a pretty clear picture.

Sam’s pulse demands that he scramble over and pull Meg off of his brother now, but he makes himself move slowly and quietly. If he spooks her before he’s close enough to get a solid hit in, she’s just going to sic the daevas on him again and then they’ll be right back where they started. He spots a hunk of wood on the dusty ground—possibly from one of the crates Dean got tossed into when they were captured—and bends over to pick it up. The wood scrapes against the ground as he lifts it, and Sam sends a tense, worried glance at Meg, but the bitch is too busy molesting Dean to notice.
Carefully, Sam edges closer: hands flexing on his weapon.

“—still thinks about you,” Meg is panting in Dean’s ear as she writhes on top of him. “Gotta say, Dean: I was skeptical, but I’m starting to see the attraction. Maybe, if you’re a good boy, I won’t strangle you with your own entrails when we’re done here.”

“Don’t,” Sam snarls as he swings the wood and connects solidly with the side of her head. “Touch him.”

The blow is hard enough to knock Meg sideways out of Dean’s lap, and Sam’s earlier suspicion is confirmed by the sight of his brother’s hard dick, which is hanging out from his open pants. Sam’s hands convulse on his weapon and he’s already lifting it for a second blow when Dean says, “Altar. Sam, get the altar.”

Sam follows his brother’s wild gaze and, on the far wall, Meg’s pet daevas are stirring. Fuck.

Tossing the wood aside, Sam sprints over and grabs the edge of the altar instead. As he heaves it up and over, Meg (how is she even still conscious?) lets out a despairing shriek. The din of the paraphernalia tumbling onto the floor is almost loud enough to block out the rush of air as the daevas attack, but it isn’t anywhere near loud enough to block out Meg’s enraged scream.

Sam looks over just in time to see her being dragged away from his brother and toward one of the dirty windows. He knows what’s going to happen seconds before it actually occurs—nothing supernatural about it this time, just good old fashioned instinct—and doesn’t quite know what to do with the dark, vindictive joy that pulses through him as the daevas hurl Meg through the glass and onto the pavement eight floors below.

They might be near-mindless, animalistic demons, but it looks like they don’t like being ordered around.

By the time he turns away from the window again, Dean is already loose and on his feet. Sam watches his brother tuck his dick back into his pants and zip up, and then follows Dean on his unsteady way over to look down at Meg’s body. Dean wipes at his scar as he stands at the window, and Sam wants to think that his brother isn’t doing anything more insidious than wiping Meg’s spit away, but he knows better.

Leaning out of the window, he exchanges one uncomfortable sight for another. Meg’s body looks small so far below: limbs bent into impossible, boneless positions as though they belong to a rag doll instead of a person. Sam thinks of his earlier, momentary joy when he realized she was going out the window and his stomach lurches. In fact, he’s seriously thinking about throwing up. Just as soon as he makes sure Dean is okay.

Bracing himself for his brother’s expression, he straightens and looks over. Where he expected to find pain and fear and near-devastation, though, there’s nothing. Dean’s face is as stiff and empty as a mannequin’s. When he returns Sam’s look, his eyes are calm.

“You good?” Sam probes.

“Nothing a couple tons of soap won’t cure,” Dean answers. “Bitch slobbered like a goddamned St. Bernard.”

He’s still worrying at his scar, but his expression is finally warming into something human—lips twisting and nose wrinkling with disgust—and Sam’s breath comes a little easier. Then Dean looks down at the windowsill and frowns. There’s a jagged piece of glass there, glinting in the moonlight,
and now Dean reaches out with the hand that was pressed against his forehead to trail his fingers across the flat surface of the shard. For a moment, a shadow of that stiffness passes over him again, and then Dean is shoving his hand into his pocket and turning away from window.

“Hey, Sam?” he says as they start back toward the elevator.

“Hm?”

“Next time you decide to make friends, try to make sure it isn’t with someone so buckets of crazy, huh?”

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Dad’s waiting for them back at the room.

Sam stands in the open doorway and looks at his father and the last, lingering tendrils of guilt for his part in Meg’s death are swept free by a black cyclone of anger. All these months of studying the damage up close and personal, of watching Dean rub his scar at the slightest provocation: all these months spent living with a burning, creeping rage that something like that could happen to his brother, and now the man who’s responsible for Dean’s degradation is here. The man is here and smiling at them like he has the right and Sam is too shocked—too angry—to move.

Then Dean strides across the room and hauls Dad into a hug.

Sam’s rage tastes metallic. It makes his head pulse. The skin on his hands suddenly feels too tight: feverish.

Dad looks over when Dean releases him and Sam doesn’t know if his father is oblivious or if he’s just that much of an asshole, but there’s a welcoming smile on his face. “Sammy,” Dad says, and there’s something that sounds horribly like forgiveness in his voice. Forgiveness. As if Sam is somehow in the wrong here.

Sam watches his father’s arms lift in obvious invitation and doesn’t move. He wonders whether the man would fight back if he punched him, or if, somewhere in there, John is aware of his own guilt. If he’s maybe hoping for a little retribution.

Do you know what you did to him? Sam thinks as he stands there unmoving. Do you have any fucking clue how damaged he is?

Dean is still staring at Dad like he’s the fucking messiah, eyes warm and wet and happier than Sam has seen him in a long time. It galls Sam that Dad can get that kind of response while he only seems to be fucking Dean up more, and his mouth twitches. His right hand curls into a fist. Dad’s smile finally fades and his hands fall to his sides.

Dean is just starting to sense the tension in the room, glancing with increasing uncertainty between the two of them, when something comes out of nowhere and sends Dad flying into the cabinets. Dean is next: hurled across the room to land in a crash on the floor. When he lifts his head again, there’s fresh blood on his face, and Sam loses his tenuous grasp on his rage.

He isn’t sure, later, how he manages it, but somehow he finds the flares in the weapons bag and sets one off. Somehow, he manages to get both Dean and Dad outside. Somehow, he manages to keep his fists to himself as Dad breaks Dean’s heart again and drives away.

Sam himself hasn’t spoken a single word to the man, but judging from the stiffness in Dad’s shoulders as he stomps toward his truck, he’s pretty sure that he got his point across anyway.
After Chicago, the rage won’t let go. Sam regrets, fiercely, not having gotten his punches in while the punching was good. He’s short with Dean, who doesn’t seem to be doing all that great after Chicago himself (if Sam never sees him touch his scar again, it’ll be too fucking soon). Sam keeps waking up in the middle of the night to the muffled sound of whimpering in the other bed, and in the morning, when he sits up and swings his feet onto the floor, his neck and back are one stiff line of tension.

Dean says he sleeps like a baby. He doesn’t have nightmares. He’s fine.


Sam can’t take his anger out on Dean—he won’t—and there’s really only one other option.

The bar he picks smells like stale beer and doesn’t look like it has been swept in a month, which makes it perfect for Sam’s needs. He sits at the bar and downs beer after beer while the room fills up, thinking about Dean waiting back at the motel. Thinking about his brother, who gave Sam a single, quick look when he left and then said, ‘I’m not cleaning up after you this time,’ before turning back to USA’s Saturday Night Movie.

But drinking himself stupid isn’t on the agenda for tonight: not when he has to go home to Dean afterwards. Sam has already shown that he can’t be trusted around his brother when he’s drunk. He is drinking, but only enough to take the edge off: only enough to dull his senses a little. He’s drinking enough to make it look like he’s drunk to other people, so that he has a plausible excuse for what he’s about to do.

The man Sam settles on is almost as broad as he is tall: dude’s built like a goddamned linebacker. He came in earlier with a few friends and promptly started hitting on the waitress, all wandering hands and a too loud voice. The woman clearly isn’t interested, but she also clearly can’t afford to tell him to go to hell, and as Sam studies her pinched expression he thinks about scars and pinched lips and dull, green eyes. He delays long enough to down the rest of his beer and then orders another—this one on tap—and gets up to wander over in Asshole’s direction.

The beer does a pretty good job of soaking the guy when Sam ‘stumbles’ next to his table. Asshole is on his feet immediately, sputtering and growling and demanding where the fuck Sam thought he was going.

Sam looks down at him, a superficial coating of calm masking the rage beneath, and says, “You owe me a beer, Asshole.”

They take it outside.

Big as the man is, the fight doesn’t last as long as Sam would like—Asshole goes down after nothing more serious than a couple of rabbit punches to his kidneys and lies on the pavement groaning like Sam just cut his balls off. Sam would have thought he’d be good for a couple of upper cuts at least. Looks like appearances really can be deceiving.

Sam gives Asshole a single kick—hard enough to bruise but not to break ribs—and then crouches next to him. Getting his hand in the man’s sweaty hair, he twists Asshole’s head up.

Then, smiling, he says, “I ever hear you’re anything less than a gentleman to a woman, buddy, and the next time I’ll put you in the hospital.”

That isn’t what he wants to say. This isn’t whom he wants to say it to.
It isn’t enough, none of it, not even close, but it’s all Sam has. All he’s going to have even if Dad wanders around again and gives him another shot. He can’t do that to Dean. Can’t hurt his brother like that when he’s already hurt him so much.

Sam’s anger drains away suddenly, leaving him empty and cold. With a grimace of disgust, he releases Asshole’s hair and straightens. The man’s supposed friends scuttle back further. One of them holds his cell phone up, hand trembling.

“Don’t come any closer,” Cell Phone says. “I called the cops.”

Sam waits for that announcement to set off the same tight, thrumming nerves it usually would, but nothing comes. He’s too exhausted to feel anything but numb. Turning around without a word, he begins the walk back to the motel. When Sam opens their door half an hour later, Dean is on the computer. He looks up, face carefully blank, and watches Sam come inside.

“You drunk?” he asks after a moment.

“No,” Sam answers. He’s not. His head feels a little lighter than usual—probably from all the fresh air on his walk—but he’s thinking clearly enough. More clearly than he has in a long time, actually.

Dean’s eyes drop to Sam’s knuckles, which are bruised and slightly swollen, and one of his eyebrows lifts. “You get in a fight, Sammy?”

“I won,” Sam says, shrugging off his jacket and going to sit on the bed.

“Better have fucking won,” Dean replies. He leans back in his chair and looks consideringly at Sam. “Make you feel any better?”

“No.”

Dean doesn’t say anything to that, but he watches Sam as he cools his knuckles off in the sink and cracks them carefully. His fingers are going to be stiff in the morning.

After a few minutes, Dean clears his throat from the other room and says, “I think I found us a lead. Couple of locked room murders in Ohio.”

At the announcement, weariness settles over Sam’s shoulders in a heavy mantle. He leans on the edge of the sink and thinks about how it felt to take that asshole down. How it didn’t actually make him feel righteous at all, or like a hero, or like anything but a sick son of a bitch who wants to fuck his own brother and can’t figure out how to take no for an answer. How it made him feel like the coward, like the one who runs, like the one who left Dean unprotected and aching and exposed.

He thinks about how much he wanted it to be Dad.

“Sam?”

“I wanted to hurt him,” Sam says as he stares into the mirror. His eyes look more haunted than he thinks they should, reflecting emotions that he’s too numb to actually feel right now. “Dad,” he clarifies. “I wanted to hurt him for hurting you. But I think—I think maybe I hurt you more than he ever did.”

Behind him, Dean sighs. “Sammy—”

“I’m sorry,” Sam whispers, dropping his head. He can’t look into his own eyes anymore: can’t handle what he sees there. “I’m so fucking sorry I left. It wasn’t—it wasn’t you. God, Dean, it
wasn’t _ever_ you I was running away from.”

Which is probably why he has been so unsuccessful. After all, you can run from places, and you can run from other people, but you can run as long and as hard as you want, and you’ll never truly be able to run from yourself.

Sam is crying suddenly: tears spilling hot down his cheeks. He’s still numb enough inside that he only catches the edges of the aching swell inside of him, but that’s enough. That’s more than enough. Distantly, he hears Dean shove his chair back and a moment later his brother lays a steadying hand on the small of his back.

“S’okay, man,” Dean tells him. “Just take a deep breath, okay?”

No, it’s not okay. _Nothing_ is okay.

“I’m sorry,” Sam repeats. His body shakes as he clings to the edge of the sink. “I need you, I do, I need you so fucking much it scares me.”

“I’m right here, Sammy,” Dean promises. His hand moves on Sam’s back, soothing circles, but it isn’t enough.

Thoughtlessly, Sam turns, reaching out and getting a hold on his brother’s shirt. When he pulls Dean in, his brother is pliant and unflinching. As Sam slides his cheek against his brother’s, Dean’s arm comes up to hold him close. His other hand lifts to drag through Sam’s hair.

“Such a fucking girl,” Dean whispers. His voice is fond, though, and his tone makes Sam smiles a little through his tears. “C’mon, Sasquatch.”

Guiding Sam over to the bed, Dean pushes back the covers and then eases him down. Sam isn’t quite ready to let his brother go, but it turns out he doesn’t have to because Dean follows without prompting. Sliding an arm beneath Sam’s body, Dean pulls him close, chest to chest. Sam shudders and leans into his brother’s bulk, resting his forehead against Dean’s shoulder and breathing in his strong, familiar scent. Their legs are tangled together, and it should be awkward but it isn’t.

“You and me,” Dean tells him, and, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Sam falls asleep to the comforting sound of his brother’s heartbeat.
They spend the next three weeks recuperating. Dean drives them around to all the mindless local attractions (there are an awful lot of ‘world’s biggest’ in the Midwest) and makes up stupid stories about how they got clawed up (beavers, man: they’re vicious), and complains about the healing wounds on his face (like Sam’s don’t itch just as badly). He still worries at his scar more than Sam would like, but he’s also smiling more often, and singing along with the radio again, which he hasn’t done in a while. He’s also standing taller, less self-consciously, and when he grins over at Sam, Sam is helpless to do anything but smile back.

Just outside Richardson, Texas, Sam wakes up with a spoon in his mouth and his brother’s slightly off-key rendition of *Fire of Unknown Origin* ringing in his ears. The childish prank is Dean’s way of reconnecting, of trying to reestablish familiar boundaries, and Sam plays along gladly. It isn’t what he wants from his brother, not exactly, but he must be maturing because instead of reminding him of what he can’t have, the easy-going camaraderie eases the ache in his chest.

For the first time, Sam actually thinks that this might be enough. That he might actually learn how to be satisfied with what Dean is offering him. To his own surprise, he finds himself going all out in their impromptu prank war, messing with Dean’s radio and bringing out the crazy glue and basically behaving like he’s seven instead of twenty-two.

At the end of the job, when Dean tosses his head back and laughs, it feels like victory. Grinning, Sam watches his brother and knows that he isn’t hiding anything; knows that if Dean looks he’s going to see the depth of what Sam feels. What he wants.

Dean looks.

Sam waits for his brother’s smile to fade, but it doesn’t. It only softens a bit, gentled but not diminished. “Truce?” Dean asks.

Sam sort of wants the war to go on forever if it’s going to make Dean laugh like that, but he also knows that it isn’t practical. They can’t afford to be distracted by pranks in the middle of jobs, when a moment’s inattention could get one or both of them killed. It was stupid enough to do it once.

“Truce,” he agrees.

“Okay, then,” Dean says, and ruffles Sam’s hair on his way to the car.

In a diner in Peking, Arkansas, Dean leans over the table and starts picking food off of Sam’s plate. “Hey!” Sam protests, but he doesn’t really mean it. It’s an automatic response, ingrained from years of childish thievery.

“What? Not like you’re eating it,” Dean responds, snagging Sam’s half-eaten pickle. When he slides it into his mouth, it’s just about the most obscene thing Sam has ever seen. Flushing, he looks out the window and refuses to turn back until his brother lets out a belch and announces he’s finished.

On their way through Missouri, Dean reaches out and flips the radio over to an alternative station. He leaves it there for two full hours before muttering, “Can’t take any more of this fucking crap,” and
shoving one of his tapes in.

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In a café in Red River, Indiana, Dean orders a plate of fish n’ chips and makes an orgasmic, rapturous noise when he pops the first piece into his mouth. The sound makes Sam’s groin go hot and tight.

“Dude, you’ve gotta try this,” Dean says, licking the fingertips of his right hand.

“That’s okay, I’m not—mph.”

Sam blinks in surprise as Dean’s left thumb and forefinger rest against his lips. The bit of fried fish that Dean just popped into his mouth sits on Sam’s tongue, and yeah, it tastes pretty good, but he’s more concerned with the way Dean is looking at him. The way Dean isn’t taking his hand back.

Then Dean jerks—a minute motion—and draws back to his own side of the table. His cheeks look flushed and he’s frowning. Sam swallows the piece of fish and sits there for a moment, not sure whether to ignore it the way Dean seems determined to. In the end, though, he can’t.

“Dude, did you just—”

“No.” Dean pokes at his fries with one finger. “Maybe.” He scowls, hunching his shoulders. “Didn’t mean anything.”

“Okay.”

“Just eat your fucking food,” Dean grumbles.

Sam leaves it in silence for a minute and then offers, “The fish is pretty good.”

Dean grunts noncommittally, but when Sam comes back from going to the bathroom there’re a few more pieces on his plate. Some of his own steak seems to have migrated over to Dean’s. He slips into the booth and picks up a piece of fish wordlessly. Across from him, Dean is looking down at his own plate, but he’s smiling.

“Surf n’ turf, huh?” Sam says. His knees accidentally knock Dean’s under the table and he holds his breath, waiting to see what his brother is going to do with the contact. After a brief hesitation, Dean pushes back, sliding his leg more firmly against Sam’s.

Sam’s stomach flutters. He picks up a piece of fish and puts it in his mouth, but it’s an automatic, reflexive motion. He has never been less interested in food than he is right now. Never more aware of his brother’s proximity.

“’S good, right?”

Sam isn’t sure what Dean is talking about, but he agrees anyway.

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In Carmel, Indiana, Dean hurries around the side of the Impala to open the door for Sam. It’s uncomfortable and awkward and wrong, and leaves both of them feeling unsettled for hours.

Dean doesn’t try it again.
In Farmington, Illinois, Dean decides it’s time for a night off and they head out to a bar. Dean buys round after round of beers, leaning toward Sam over the table and telling outrageous stories about the earliest bits of Sam’s childhood. They’re lies, every one of them—Sam is sure that he’d remember ‘coloring’ the kitchen with the ‘paint’ he found in a Chef Boyardee can—but that doesn’t stop him from laughing like a loon.

Later in the evening, they make their way over to the pool table for a couple of games—not hustling, just the Winchester boys passing the time. Dean has always been better at this—his hand-eye coordination is so good it’s downright eerie—and he kicks Sam’s ass soundly the first time around. When Sam ekes out a victory during their second match, he’s pretty sure his brother let him win. He lifts his hands in victory anyway, just to hear Dean grumble insincerely about cheating little brothers.

Dean knocks their shoulders together on his way to rack the balls and the contact makes Sam grin. He leans one elbow on the edge of the table and studies his brother’s face. If he squints, he can make out the faint outlines of the daevas’ claws on his brother’s forehead, but the last few weeks have left them blurred and indistinct. The scar at Dean’s temple seems faded as well, and Sam realizes that his brother hasn’t so much as brushed the damned thing in weeks.

As though he can sense Sam’s scrutiny, Dean’s hands still on the balls. He glances up from the table, catches Sam’s eyes, and smiles.

Dean shines when he’s happy. He shines so goddamned bright.

If anyone else at the bar notices, then Sam doesn’t know because he can’t stop looking at Dean long enough to check.

It’s a good night.

Then Dad sends them to Fitchberg.

Sam doesn’t want to be angry with their father for something that happened when they were kids, but his anger at the man’s carelessness is habit by now and he can’t help it. He does manage to keep his anger under control. Every time Dean raises his hand to his head (fifty seven times since they got here, Sam counted), Sam is all but blinded with rage and sick with the need to call Dad and tell him what a fucking asshole he is, but he manages to resist the urge. Somehow, he manages that much for Dean’s sake—at least until the case is over and the shtriga is dead.

Then he tells Dean he’s going to pick up some dinner. On his way back from the Wong’s Palace, Sam leaves six messages (the answering service keeps cutting him off before he’s done) telling John exactly what he thinks of a man who would do that to his son. He doesn’t say anything about Dean’s foray into adult entertainment, but that’s just because he gets back to the motel before he gets around to it.

When Sam opens the door, Dean is waiting for him: elbow propped on the table and head in his hand. His fingers are methodically working at the scar, but that’s not unexpected. What is unexpected is the half-empty bottle of Wild Turkey at his brother’s elbow. There’s no sign of a glass. Sam doesn’t even bother asking the obvious question as he steps inside and shuts the door.

“You called him,” Dean says—slurs, really.

Sam could deny it, but there doesn’t seem to be a point. “Yeah.”
“It’s not his fault, Sam,” Dean protests, and he may be drunk, but even drunk he should know better than to bait Sam like that.

“Don’t you,” Sam growls, stepping forward. His hand clenches and unclenches helplessly on the carryout bag. “Don’t you make excuses for him, Dean. You were just a kid, you—”

“I was just a kid, but that isn’t what I was talking about,” Dean says, lifting his head.

“Then what—”

“It isn’t Dad’s fault that I’m fucked up.”

Sam goes still. He feels ambushed by this conversation, which he never thought they’d have. Conversations like this aren’t Dean’s style—confessions aren’t his style. Dean doesn’t admit when he’s hurting—never has. You could cut off his arm and he’d morph into the Black Knight, radiating bravado and spouting nonsense about ‘flesh wounds’.

Then again, Dean doesn’t usually self-medicate with whiskey, either. That’s more Sam’s shtick.

“I’m fucked up,” Dean repeats, and this time his voice cracks with the words. He isn’t crying, not yet, but Sam doesn’t think tears are all that far off. He wants to move forward and offer his brother some comfort and isn’t sure it’s allowed.

Swallowing, Dean twists his eyes away toward the wall. His hand lifts: presses to his temple like he’s trying to hold his skull together.

“I was so scared in Fort Douglas,” he says. “When the shtriga came for you. I was so fucking scared and I-I froze. I thought it was going to kill you, Sammy, and I couldn’t—I couldn’t fucking move. I didn’t think anything could be worse than that, but I—”

He stops, face momentarily tightening with pain, and then continues, “I didn’t know what it would be like. I thought. It was just sex, right? It was—just a couple of hours, you know? And then Dad’d be taken care of and everything would be fine. But there were so—there were so many people there. And they were all—kept going on about my fucking lips, and they put—” Dean draws in a shallow, harsh breath, fingers moving faster at his temple, and then chokes out, “They h-had to open me up before we got s-started, and—”

Sam finally forces through the shock and into action, carelessly dropping the take out bag on the floor as he moves forward. “Shh. Dean, it’s okay, you’re okay.”

As Sam reaches for him, though, Dean lurches up to his feet and moves away. “I’m not, Sam,” he spits. “I don’t. I look at a hot girl and you know what I feel? Nothing. I don’t, not a fucking thing. I fuck them and I come and I don’t fucking feel any of it. I might as well be riding a goddamned bike!”

Sam’s mind flickers involuntarily back to the night that he gave in to his drunken impulses and touched his brother. He remembers how Dean reacted—so sensitive—body arching and breath coming fast and tiny, urgent noises pushing out of his throat.

Dean must see the question on his face because he says, wearily, “Yeah, you too. I feel. It’s like my body knows what feels good, but I’m too fucked in the head to.” He stops short, grimacing and rubbing at his scar again, and then says, “I threw up after.”

Sam has a heartbeat for his gut to go tight and horrified and then Dean’s eyes lift to his. Dropping his hand, Dean adds, “Not with you. After I made the movie. I managed to hold it together until I got
back to the bathroom and then I puked in the sink. Couldn’t even make it to the goddamned toilet. Fucking pathetic, right?”

It isn’t pity crawling around in Sam’s gut, though. Pity doesn’t have tiny claws and acidic, burning venom all over its snake-like body. No, the thing in Sam’s gut is rage. The other emotion, stronger than the rage and pulling his chest tight, isn’t pity either. But the wretched, miserable mix of guilt and sorrow and compassion that’s making it difficult for Sam to breathe is probably close enough to pity to be just as damning in Dean’s eyes.

Softly, and with all the conviction that he can muster, Sam says, “You’re not pathetic.”

Dean bites his lower lip and nods, but Sam can tell his brother isn’t actually agreeing with him. No, Dean is ignoring him in favor listening to some internal voice that Sam really wishes he could throttle.

“It’s not Dad’s fault,” Dean repeats as he walks unsteadily over to sit on the bed. “He didn’t know what I was doing. I know you think he did, but he—if he ever knew, if he knows, then he found out after.” Tilting his head up, he offers a weak smile. “No use crying over spilt milk, right?”

There’s enough need in that question—enough pain in his brother’s eyes—that Sam chances stepping closer. When Dean doesn’t tell him to stop, he steps forward again and starts, “Dean—”

“I’m sorry I can’t,” Dean interrupts. “You know, with you. But it isn’t because you’re my brother, Sam. I just. I love you, man, but I don’t want that with anyone. Okay?”

He’s still looking up at Sam, eyes wet and so desperate that Sam doesn’t have the heart to argue with him about Dad anymore. “Okay,” he says instead, taking the last step needed to close the distance between them and putting a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Okay, man.”

Dean leans forward, resting his forehead against Sam’s stomach and bringing his arms up to clutch at Sam’s waist. If Sam weren’t too messed up inside to be reacting normally, that would make for an awkward situation—Dean’s mouth is right fucking there: if Sam’s jeans weren’t in the way, he’d be breathing on Sam’s cock—but as it is, he only rests one hand on the back of his brother’s head and cards his fingers through Dean’s short hair. It’s softer than it has any right to be, the amount of styling crap he puts in it.

“I’m sorry,” Dean says again. “Sorry, Sammy.” His shoulders shake and, with a horrible, sinking sensation in his stomach, Sam understands that his brother is crying.

“Shh,” he whispers, stroking Dean’s hair.

At the light caress, Dean’s grip tightens and he sobs harder. Sam wishes that he had the words that would fix this—would fix Dean—but he doesn’t, and he’s left with this weak, second best attempt at comfort: letting Dean cry into his shirt while he touches Dean’s hair, and the back of his neck, and anything else he can reach.

By the time Dean’s sobs start to die off several minutes later, Sam’s shirt feels noticeably damp against his stomach and his calves ache from holding himself still, Dean sniffs and eases back to swipe at his nose with one sleeve, and his face is red and puffy. His lashes are wet, but the eyes they frame look dry and sore.

“Hey,” Sam whispers, tentatively stroking his hand down his brother’s cheek. When Dean doesn’t flinch away, he does it again, more firmly this time, and wipes away some of the moisture with his thumb.
“Sorry,” Dean says again, and Sam can tell that this time his brother is just talking about the crying jag. It’s still ridiculous and not something that Dean ever has to apologize for, but now definitely isn’t the time to get into that.

“S’okay,” Sam says. Then, giving his brother’s hair one final brush, he leans down and pulls Dean to his feet. “Come on, man; let’s get you to bed.”

It takes more than a little coordination to hold Dean up while pulling the covers back, and Sam is left wondering how his brother managed for all those years with Dad, who was always far heavier—and far drunker—than Dean is now. Laying his brother down on the mattress, Sam takes off Dean's shoes and flannel shirt and then, with a little prodding, gets him to roll over onto his stomach. Just in case.

“Dunno how you ‘n Dad do this,” Dean mutters into the pillow. “Feels like crap.”

“That’s kind of the point,” Sam tells him.

“’S stupid.”

Despite himself, Sam smiles slightly. “Yeah, it is. Do you want some water?”

“No,” Dean answers immediately, and then turns his head, seeking Sam out. “You’re not gonna leave me, right? Now that you know, you won’t—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Sam promises, but Dean is still peering at him with this anxious, pleading expression—like Sam is going to disappear the moment he closes his eyes—and so Sam drags a chair up to the bed and sits down in it. “See? I’m going to sit right here, okay? I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Dean flings out a hand and settles it across Sam’s lap. As his fingers curl loosely around Sam’s thigh, he breathes out and lets his eyes fall shut. “Love you, Sammy,” he mutters.

“Yeah,” Sam breathes, resting his own hand on top of his brother’s. “Right back at you, Dean-o.”

It’s reflexive, a slide back to his brother’s childish nickname because Dean looks so young right now: so innocent. If anything, Dean should get annoyed at Sam’s slip (he never liked that name, only tolerated it from Dad), and his face does scrunch up—in pain, though, not distaste. The hand on Sam’s leg twitches as Dean tries to pull it away, but before Sam can lift his own hand and let Dean go, his brother has given up and is moving his left hand up to his forehead. To the goddamned scar.

“Does it hurt?” Sam asks, leaning forward and putting his own hand beside Dean’s. Dean stiffens for a moment and then his hand falls away and he tilts his face up into Sam’s touch. The scar is almost unnoticeable beneath Sam’s thumb: a tiny, smooth bump.

“Aches,” Dean mumbles.

Sam puts a little more pressure on it, rubbing, and asks, “Better?” There’s no response and so he prods, gently, “Dean?”

“Yeah,” Dean says, but he sounds unsure, and as Sam continues to run the pad of his thumb over the tiny, raised hook, he realizes that, whatever Dean feels when he touches this scar, it isn’t real. If there’s pain, it’s a phantom: remembered from when the wound was fresh. The damage is long done, nothing Dean can do about it now, but that doesn’t stop him from trying to massage it away.
Clenching his jaw, Sam slides his hand down to the back of his brother’s neck: to the pressure points he knows are there. Dean is already frowning, reaching for the scar again, but as Sam works his fingers into his brother’s nape, Dean hesitates. After a moment, he makes a sleepy, contented sound and arches into the touch, whatever phantom pain he feels forgotten.

“Go to sleep, okay?” Sam whispers.

Any reply Dean makes is too garbled to understand, but it must be some kind of assent because a few minutes later he’s snoring with his mouth hanging open. Sam’s fingers still as he watches his brother sleep, but he doesn’t take his hand back. He wants to be able to distract Dean when his brother's expression inevitably pulls tight and his hand twitches up toward his face.

In the night, Sam keeps watch and, for once, his brother lets him.
Dean wakes up hung-over and cranky. Sam isn’t sure whether his brother’s foul temper stems from the headache or the knowledge that he spilled his guts like a little girl last night. Both, probably.

Dean spends the morning wincing at the light and burying his head in the pillow and complaining about the smell of the Chinese, which Sam never cleaned up after dropping it on the floor. Whenever Sam asks how Dean’s doing and whether he can get him anything, he gets a finger and a “fuck off, grandma”. When he leaves Dean alone and sits down to do some research on the computer, he gets his brother’s glare of death for clicking the keys too loudly.

Finally, he gets the message and goes out for the day. Sam spends the rest of the morning and the early afternoon walking around town, looking at playgrounds that are empty right now but which will soon be full again, once the kids are released from the hospital. The kids who Dean saved, the same way he saved so many others.

Sam frowns as he sits down on an empty swing, thinking about his brother. Thinking about Dean, who cheerfully proclaims that he’s a hero to anyone who will listen but who never believes the truth in his own boast. Dean with his scars and his flaws and his juvenile sense of humor. Dean, who is beautiful and compassionate and brave and human, but who thinks that he has to be perfect to be worthy of love.

Dean is exhausting.

He’s maddening.

He’s also wonderful, and Sam is getting pretty fucking tired of being the only one who knows it.

When he finally circles back to the room around five o’clock, Dean is at least out of bed. His eyes are still bloodshot and puffy-looking (this must be why Dean learned to hold his liquor so well: it’s a defense mechanism), and he squints at Sam when he opens the door, but he’s upright and dressed. And not messing with his scar, thank God for small favors.

“You up for dinner?” Sam asks.

Dean looks at him, considering, and then answers, “I want something greasy.”

They settle on KFC. Sam buys three buckets of chicken (two original, one hot) and brings them back to the room along with a carton of mashed potatoes and a bag of those buttery biscuits that Dean likes. Dean eats his way through almost two of the buckets on his own before finally leaning back and licking at his fingers.

Luckily, Sam is used to that sort of thing after all these months and he barely notices the stirring interest in his dick. Right now, he’s more focused on the contented expression on his brother’s face and the lazy lounge of Dean’s body.

There probably isn’t going to be a better moment to say what he needs to.

Sam shifts, getting his brother’s eyes with the movement, and then says, “I know you don’t want to talk about it—”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Dean mutters, scrunching his face in annoyance.
“—but it’s okay for you to feel the way you do. And I’m not gonna leave, okay? And—and if you want to talk about it, I’m here.”

Dean doesn’t look content anymore, of course, but Sam knew that was going to be the case. He knew he was going to put that tight, angry pinch back into his brother’s expression. But Dean needed to hear that promise more than he needed to maintain his comfortable shield of denial. And Sam needed to make that promise before he drove himself nuts trying to figure out how to subtly tell Dean he wasn’t going anywhere.

Of course, none of that makes Sam feel any better about the hostile way Dean is looking at him.

“What do you think is going to happen here, Sam?” Dean says. The words are clipped with anger: shards of flint scraping against Sam’s skin. “You think I’m gonna cry on your shoulder while we talk this out and then I’m gonna magically be healed? You gonna fuck me better?”

Actually, Sam is starting to think that fucking isn’t ever going to be on the agenda. He wants to hold his brother’s gaze, but he can’t manage it. Not without crying.

Dropping his head, Sam pushes a piece of chicken around on the napkin serving as his plate and says, “I just want you to stop pretending with me. I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

Dean doesn’t agree with him, but he doesn’t shower Sam with any more abuse, and when Sam chances a glance up he isn’t rubbing at his scar either.

It’s a start.

Three days later, they’re in New Paltz, New York, investigating an art gallery with a haunted painting for sale. The owner of the gallery has a daughter who reminds Sam of Jess. Same sass and verve. Same instant, unblinking interest in Sam. Jess was more forward, though. This girl, Sarah with the dark hair and the sparkling eyes, hints and then watches him leave with his brother without saying anything. The first time he met Jess, Sam wasn’t allowed to go anywhere until she had his number plugged into her cell phone and her own digits scrawled in Sharpie across the back of his hand.

Dean doesn’t mention Sarah on the way back to the motel, but once they’re there he won’t shut up. Keeps telling Sam he has to ‘take one for the team’ and all but throws them at each other. He hasn’t been this bad since he first learned how Sam feels about him.

Sam knows what his brother is doing, of course—subtlety has never been Dean’s strong suit. Sam doesn’t know whether Dean is getting worse at dissembling or if he’s getting better at reading his brother, but either way it’s painfully obvious that Dean is angling for another drop and run like the one he tried to pull at Stanford. If it didn’t piss Sam off so much, he’d find it funny: how someone so frightened of being left behind could be so damned determined to end up alone.

Sam agrees to the dinner—mostly because Dean is right, they need information and Sarah is the quickest way to get it—and he’s angry enough not to correct his brother’s assumptions about his motives. Dean’s face is a mask as Sam gets ready for his pseudo-date, all leers and easy grins. When he doesn’t think Sam is looking, though, the mask cracks and reveals the crumpled sorrow and aching loneliness that lies at his core.

It only infuriates Sam more, how willing Dean is to play the martyr, and he wishes that his brother would reach for his temple right now because this time Sam is going to call him on it. He’s going to
grab Dean and drag him into the bathroom and shove him up against the sink and demand to know what the fuck is so goddamned compelling about that scar. And while he’s at it, Dean can fill Sam in on the mirrors, too.

But Dean doesn’t reach for his temple. He just tosses a condom at Sam and sits down on the bed and says, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Bile burns in Sam’s throat. He asks Dean to stop pretending and this is what he gets? This Dean? This brother who is so filled with lies that Sam thinks he could cut him open and find sawdust where there should be blood? This?

“I have my own, thanks,” he says finally and turns on his heels, leaving his brother staring and the condom lying on the floor where it fell when it bounced off his chest.

His bitter satisfaction at having gotten the last word lasts until he gets to the restaurant, and then he starts thinking about Dean’s face. About the wounded, little boy expression in Dean’s eyes when Sam turned away and left. He flounders through some small talk with Sarah while pretending to look at his menu, and when the waiter arrives Sam has read through it twice but hasn’t understood a single word.

“Uh,” he says, stalling while he scans the page again, actually focusing on it this time.

It’s in French. How the hell could he not having noticed that the fucking menus are in French?

“We’ll have two beers and a double order of the fillet mignon,” Sarah breaks in.

Sam looks across the table at her and thinks, reflexively, about Jess. She used to do that: order for Sam when they went out. They made a game out of it, sometimes: Sam ordering one thing for himself and Jess another and then both of them waiting to see what their waiter or waitress ended up bringing back. More often than not, Jess got the last word.

‘It’s because I’m so awesome,’ she would announce, and then beamed at Sam while he rolled his eyes and dug into the steak or the burger or the fish in front of him.

“Very good, miss,” the waiter says, bringing Sam back to the present. His chest aches strangely as he hands over his menu and then goes back to looking at Sarah, who is smiling at him nervously.

“Too forward?” she asks.

“No,” Sam assures her. “No, I was just, uh, thinking that you reminded me of someone.”

Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, Sarah tilts her head. “Good someone or bad someone?”

Sam can’t help the twitch of his lips. “A little of both, actually,” he admits. Putting his hand on the table, he slides it around the stem of his water glass. The stem is cool against his palm, and wet with condensation.

“Ah,” Sarah says. “Bad breakup?”

The smile on Sam’s face, which wasn’t all that happy to begin with, slips and he glances down at the tabletop. He doesn’t think of Jess often—not because he doesn’t care, but because his thoughts are too full of Dean to have room for anything else. When he does think of her, though, he pictures her as she was before the fire. Pictures her smiling, with sunlight caught in her hair.

It’s horrifying how easily that sunlight turns to flames whenever he has to have this conversation.
“She died,” he says shortly.

Sarah reaches across the table and wraps her hand around his wrist. When Sam looks up at her, she isn’t smiling anymore: eyes serious and mouth sad.

*The great Sam Winchester, ladies and gentlemen,* Sam thinks humorlessly. *Spreading joy and laughter wherever he goes.*

“I’m so sorry, Sam.”

“It’s okay,” Sam says, trying for a smile. It feels lopsided on his lips, but it’s genuine and just the act of smiling makes him feel a little better. He takes a quick breath in through his nose, clearing the phantom scents of ash and sulfur away and replacing them with the more pleasant aroma of Sarah’s perfume. Which, thankfully, isn’t like Jess’s at all.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have mentioned it,” he continues. “I told you I haven’t been on a date in a while.”

“You’re doing okay,” Sarah tells him. A soft, tentative smile of her own plays across her lips, and she runs her thumb deliberately over the back of Sam’s hand before easing away. The caress sends confusing little shivers through Sam’s skin, and he takes a quick sip of water in an attempt to hide the fact that he’s blushing.

The rest of the meal is uneventful and pleasant, and afterward Sarah invites him back to her place so that she can give him a copy of the provenance papers he needs. Sam is sitting on her couch going over said papers when she sits down beside him and offers to give him more than that.

For the first few seconds of the kiss, Sam is surprised. Then, for a moment, he’s tempted. Sarah is beautiful, and it isn’t fair to Dean to keep waiting—isn’t fair to keep putting all of that pressure, intended or not, on his brother to yield to Sam’s needs. It isn’t fair to either of them, actually. Sarah’s mouth is soft against his, and she smells like roses and reminds him of Jess, and Sam isn’t a eunuch.

But then he thinks of Dean alone in their motel room—of the resigned loneliness in his brother’s eyes as he left—and he pushes her back gently.

“You’re a really nice girl, Sarah,” he says as soon as his mouth is free, “But I’m—”

“Not ready,” Sarah supplies. She sounds a little disappointed, but when she touches his hair she’s smiling. “That’s okay, Sam. We can take this slow. Call me tomorrow, okay?” She leans in to kiss him again—not his mouth this time, just his cheek—and it’s nice.

Nice and safe and normal and very, very tempting.

But he leaves her there, and he doesn’t look back.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Dean is already fast asleep when Sam gets home, but in the morning Sam wakes up to his brother’s smirk. Dean’s mask is firmly in place and he’s running with all of his defenses raised, eyes as guileless and opaque as Sam has ever seen them while he jokes and jibes and sprinkles innuendo on every syllable. Sam drags himself out of bed, hunches down, and waits for his brother to get tired of baiting him.

This time, of course, Dean seems incapable of losing interest. He uses every possible excuse to prod at Sam about Sarah—‘when are you going to see her again’; ‘I hope you’re using protection’; ‘you know, Sam, condoms expire’—and when he calls her Sam’s ‘girlfriend’ for what feels like the
hundredth time, Sam finally snaps.

Jerking around in his chair, he glares at his brother, who is lounging against the headboard of the bed with his feet stretched out in front of him and his arms folded across his chest, and says, “Dude, enough already!”

Dean blinks. He looks surprised by the vehemence of Sam’s response. Who the hell knows, maybe he is. “What?”

“’What?’” Sam repeats incredulously, and then, before Dean can say anything else, continues, “Ever since we got here, you’ve been trying to pimp me out to Sarah. Just back off, all right?”

Dean frowns, uncrossing his arms and shifting forward. “Well, you like her, don’t you?”

Sam, who still can’t quite believe that his brother can be this fucking obtuse—despite all evidence to the contrary—stares at Dean and doesn’t say anything. He can’t say anything. Not without saying a whole hell of a lot more than Dean is in any shape to hear.

Nodding as though Sam agreed with him, Dean continues, “All right. You like her, she likes you, you’re both consenting adults …”

“I’m still in love with you, Dean,” Sam finally manages. His ‘date’ with Sarah may have left him off balance in some indefinable way, but it hasn’t changed the way he feels about Dean. No, it’s going to take a mandate from God to alter that particular emotion.

“I’m not talking about marriage, Sam,” Dean answers dryly.

“You know what, I don’t get it,” Sam says, twisting more fully around in his chair so that he doesn’t have to contort his back to keep looking at his brother. “What do you care if I hook up? It’s not like I’m gonna molest you in your sleep if I don’t ‘get some’.”

Sam’s lying, of course. He knows exactly what Dean’s after—has ever since he glanced away from Sarah during their first meeting and caught his brother looking at him with an evaluating glint in his eyes. What Sam doesn’t know is whether Dean is fully cognizant of what he’s doing.

If he is, then Sam is going to make him say it out loud.

If he isn’t, then he’s damned well going to make his brother face up to his own neurosis.

Dean shifts in his chair, uncomfortable, and looks away. His hand twitches in his lap, like maybe it wants to do something. Like maybe it wants to lift up to a certain scar. Sam tenses, but instead Dean grips his knee and says, “Sarah, she could be good for you. And maybe you don’t love her, but I’ve seen the way you look at her, Sammy, and you could.” His hand drifts from his knee to the bed spread. His fingers rub at the material for a moment and then start picking at a loose thread. “You could stay here. Have a normal life. You could be happy.” Dean’s jaw clenches and then he adds, “I want you to be happy.”

Sam’s anger deflates. He wishes he could tell Dean that he is happy, that Dean makes him happy, but while that’s true it’s also a lie.

Dean is sunlight and air and everything good in Sam’s life, but there are so many things about his brother (the scar, Dean’s unflagging refusal to see his own value, his inability to accept love even when it’s unconditional and freely given) that leave Sam bleeding inside. Dean does make him happy, so much so that it hurts sometimes, but he also makes Sam miserable and furious and mournful, and that’s the only thing Dean is going to hear.
Finally, Sam settles on saying, “I said I wasn’t leaving, Dean, and I meant it.”

Dean is silent for about three seconds and then, awkwardly, he offers, “You, ah, you don’t have to stay. I was drunk, so it doesn’t—”

Count, he’s going to say. As though Sam’s faithfulness is determined by how many shots Dean has tossed back at a particular moment.

Before Dean can get the word out, Sam says, “I’m not leaving. You can try to ditch me here like you tried to ditch me in California, but if you drive off without me again I swear to God I’ll track you down and handcuff myself to the fucking car. Do you understand?”

“Handcuffs, huh? Never knew you were so kink—”

“I’m not kidding, Dean. I’m not above tagging you with some kind of tracking device, either. I’m sure Bobby could rig something up.”

Dean’s eyes flick to Sam, startled, and then, a moment later, narrow slightly as belief creeps in. It’s maddening, that Sam needs to invoke Bobby’s name in order to validate his promise, but then again he supposes that he deserves that kind of suspicion after all the times he’s let his brother down.

Dean is resolutely staring at the far wall again, as if by not looking at Sam he can hide the naked relief on his face. It’s a ridiculous illusion, but also harmless enough that Sam is willing to let it go if it’s going to make Dean feel better. He watches as his brother fights to get himself under control again, and although Dean hasn’t actually responded to his ultimatum, Sam knows from the way that the tension seeps from his brother’s shoulders that the message was received.

When Dean finally looks back several minutes later, his face is carefully blank. “Well, we still gotta see that painting, which means you still gotta call Sarah.”

“Just as long as you think you can restrain yourself from making any more comments,” Sam responds.

Dean’s mouth twitches in something that’s almost, but not quite, a smile.

The funny thing is that Dean was right. If Sam weren’t already in love with his brother, he very probably could have fallen in love with Sarah. She’s gorgeous and smart and brave. The revelation that ghosts exist rocks her back briefly, but she recovers from her surprise and actually insists on helping with the investigation. When they’re both nearly killed by Melanie Merchant’s ghost, she looks more excited than terrified: her cheeks flush with adrenaline and eyes sparkling.

Afterward, when everything is said and done and Dean is getting the car, Sam stands in the doorway of the auction house, looking at Sarah and thinking, for what has to be the hundredth time over the last few days, about Jess. He finds himself wondering, in an idle, sad way, how Jess would have reacted if he had ever taken the time to sit her down and explain about the family business. What she would have said if he had told her how his mother really died—if he had confessed that the scar on his left bicep wasn’t from a bicycle accident at all but from the stray shard of a crypt that Dad had to blow open so that they could get at the body inside.

Sam would like to think that she would have responded more like Sarah than Cassie, but of course he isn’t ever going to know.

“I don’t suppose you’d be up for a celebratory drink before you go,” Sarah says, jerking him from
his thoughts. She’s leaning against the doorframe and looking up at him with a soft little smile that looks like Dean’s might if he was a little more genuine about it.

Somewhere, there’s another Sam that tells her yes. There’s a Sam who isn’t so tangled up in his brother that he can’t look at a pretty woman without thinking of Dean—a Sam who hasn’t already given away every last inch of his heart and maybe still has something left to offer. Somewhere.

“I don’t think that’s a great idea.”

Sarah doesn’t look surprised. Shrugging, she tells him, “Had to ask. After all, it isn’t like someone so tall, dark and dangerous comes along every day.”

“‘Dangerous’?” Sam jokes. “Not ‘handsome’?”

“Mmm, that too.” Sarah tilts her head back, regarding him thoughtfully for a moment, and then bites her lip. “Can I—oh, hell, I guess there’s no pussying around the bush on this one. Can I ask for a goodbye kiss?”

Sam is startled into grinning. “Yeah,” he says after a moment. “Yeah, that I can do.”

Their second kiss—which is also the last—is better than the first. There aren’t any expectations this time around, and Sam isn’t so off balance that he can’t participate, and when Sarah parts her lips for him, he takes the invitation and eases in. After a moment, he brings his hands up to cup her face and deepens the kiss. It’s been a while since he’s kissed a woman, and for a couple of seconds he finds himself comparing Sarah’s mouth to Dean’s, which isn’t really fair to either of them. Then his mind slots back further—to Stanford and Jess—and it still isn’t fair but it’s perhaps as close as Sam is able to come.

His eyes fall shut as he kisses Sarah, and if there’s a small part of him that’s kissing a ghost, then maybe that’s okay. Maybe this is his chance to say farewell to two women at once: one who was taken from him before he was ready to let go and one he never really had a chance to know. This is a goodbye kiss, yes, and something about it makes Sam realize that, in some ways, he’s been saying goodbye ever since he laid eyes on Sarah—ever since he looked at her and knew, instantly, that the spark of mutual attraction wasn’t going to go anywhere.

The taste in his mouth as he continues to kiss her is something like regret and forgiveness and release, but it’s the unfolding, settling sensation in his chest that makes him draw the moment out.

Jess is fading. She’s receding and taking everything else with her—all of Sam’s dreams of normalcy, and of a white picket fence, and of two and a half kids and a dog. She’s been fading this whole time, and Sam would have noticed if he’d taken the time to look before he met Sarah. She’s fading and there’s a part of Sam that will always feel that loss, but to his own surprise and relief, he finds that he’s okay with it.

He’s okay with it because letting go of Jess and Stanford and all the rest of it means that he can keep Dean.

Gradually, Sam becomes aware of the muted, familiar purr of the Impala’s motor to his left. He’s reluctant to lose the moment—to lose the blossoming warmth of his epiphany—but he eases back and releases Sarah’s face. For a moment, she gazes up at him silently, looking as stunned and breathless as he feels. Then she laughs.

“Wow! If that’s your goodbye kiss, Sam, then I’d love to see what hello looks like.” Smiling, she reaches up and brushes his hair back from his face. “Come back and see me, okay?”
Sam’s a little preoccupied with the newfound lightness in his chest, so it takes him a couple of days to notice that his brother is giving him the silent treatment. It seeps in eventually, though—Sam can only take so many grunted replies to his questions before he realizes something is up. He remembers Dean doing this when they were kids: once, when Sam accidentally broke Dean's favorite He-man doll, his brother didn’t say a single word to him for two weeks. Dean is at least grunting at him now, but Sam still thinks that this is worse because this time he has no clue what he did to piss his brother off.

The whole, frustrating mess is rapidly souring his good mood.

Still, Sam manages to put up with his brother’s attitude for three full days before he snaps. They’re in Lynette, Massachusetts, when it happens, and Sam is playing twenty questions with his brother in an effort to settle on something for dinner.

“Pizza?” he offers.

Dean, who is unpacking his bag onto one of the beds with methodical slowness, grunts, “Meh.”

“Chinese?”

“Eh.”

“Mexican?”

“Nah.”

Sam counts to ten and then wracks his brain for some other option. Finally, he says, “We could go to that family restaurant down the road.”

Dean usually loves trying local restaurants, which are the closest to home-cooked meals that they can come, but this time he just grunts dismissively without turning around.

“Fine, you pick somewhere. I’ll eat wherever you want to, okay?” By now, Sam’s mounting frustration is clearly evident in his voice, and he prays that Dean pays attention to it because he isn’t going to be held responsible for his actions if he gets another non-reply.

Dean shrugs.

Okay, that’s it.

“Jesus Christ, Dean,” Sam yells, “What the fuck do you want from me?”

Dean straightens slowly and turns around. He doesn’t look surprised at all by Sam’s outburst. His eyes are flat—not hostile, exactly, but not friendly either. After a few moments, he says, “Nothing,” and then goes back to his bag.

But Sam is done letting this slide. Striding over to his brother, he pulls Dean around and shouts, “That’s bullshit, man. You’ve been acting like I slashed the Impala’s tires for the past week and I’m sick of it. So just get whatever it is off your fucking chest and move on already!”

Dean yanks his arm out of Sam’s grasp and heads for the bathroom.
“Don’t you walk away from me, Dean!” Sam calls, following. He manages to get between Dean and the door, forcing his brother to draw up short. Dean’s jaw is tight as he looks everywhere but at Sam. “What did I do, huh? Stop acting like you’re stuck in a room with Hitler and just fucking talk to me!”

“You kissed her.”

Sam wasn’t expecting his brother to fold that quickly and he really wasn’t expecting that answer. He opens and shuts his mouth a couple of times, well aware that he looks ridiculous but unable to do anything else. Not like Dean is looking anywhere near his face anyway.

And speaking of Dean, what the fuck?

“That’s what this is about?” Sam says finally. “You’re pissed because I kissed Sarah?”

Dean shrugs, looking cross with himself for saying anything. He starts to turn away, angling for the front door this time, but Sam reaches out and grabs his arm.

“Woah woah woah. You don’t get to just throw something like that at me and run.” Dean’s muscles are practically thrumming beneath Sam’s hand, but he doesn’t resist when Sam turns him around. “Why the hell are you so upset about a goodbye kiss?”

“A goodbye kiss?” Dean repeats incredulously, finally lifting his head to look at Sam with burning, angry eyes. “You had your tongue so far down her throat you were practically licking her ass!”

As Sam stares at his brother, nonplussed, Dean takes the opportunity to yank his arm free and pace back over to his bed.

“I wh—wait, are you jealous?” It doesn’t make any sense, but there’s no other explanation for Dean’s behavior and the quick, furious glance his brother shoots him confirms it. “You are! What—what the hell, Dean?”

“I don’t know, Sam!” Dean yells. “I don’t—one second I’m fucking fine and the next you’re playing tonsil hockey with the girl and I just—fuck, I don’t know.” He reaches up and rubs roughly at the scar, but Sam is still too shocked to be bothered by the habit. When Dean speaks again, his voice is subdued. “I didn’t like her touching you.”

Sam’s chest has started to flutter alarmingly. For a moment, he’s worried that he’s having a heart attack and then he realizes that the unfamiliar, trembling sensation is hope. It takes him a couple of tries, but he finally manages to ask, “What are you saying?”

“No!” Dean blurts, eyes wide and almost panicked. Then, swallowing, he continues in a calmer voice, “No, just let me, uh. I need to think about this on my own for a few days.”

While Sam stares at him, he turns around and starts shoving clothing back into his bag. He packs a hell of a lot faster than he unpacked, and he’s already zipping the bag up when Sam recovers enough to say, “When, uh. Dean, when you say alone …” He trails off as his brother turns around again and
hoists the bag up onto his shoulder.

Dean just stands there for a moment, looking pale and apologetic, and then he says, “I’ll be right next door if you need anything. Just.” Wetting his lips with a quick swipe of his tongue, he shifts his weight and then finishes, “I need to do this, okay?”

And there’s really only one answer Sam can give to the pleading, frightened expression in his brother’s eyes.

“Yeah, okay.”
Chapter 12

Sam spends the next four days riding a roller coaster of manic highs and depressed lows. He wishes that he could just sit still for a few seconds, but he can’t manage the trick because, once his shock has finished wearing off, he doesn’t know what his brother’s jealousy means any more than Dean does. Oh, he knows what he wants it to mean, and the moments when Sam lets himself consider that possibility feel a little like floating, but then he remembers that the chances of them both being fucked up in exactly the same way would be astronomically slim even if Dean weren’t damaged, and he comes back to earth with a jarring crash.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

By the end of the second day, Sam has a chronic stomachache from all the tension. Popping half a dozen antacids, he curls up in bed to stare at the wall separating Dean’s room from his own. As he lies there, he keeps replaying the conversation in his head: turning over the slightest inflection, every tick of Dean’s jaw.

He falls asleep and dreams about kissing the sun and when he wakes in the morning, his lungs feel burnt.

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Midway through the third day, Sam realizes that he’s going to explode if he doesn’t leave the room for a couple of hours. He starts for the door, only to halt when he reminds himself that Dean could finish thinking things over at any moment, only to start forward again when it occurs to him that he won’t be any good to his brother if Dean has to peel him off the ceiling, only to stop yet again as he remembers his brother’s fears of abandonment. What the hell is Dean going to think if he comes over to talk and finds the room empty?

After agonizing over the problem for two and a half hours, Sam remembers that he has a cell phone: that they both have cell phones. He doesn’t trust his voice well enough to actually call, but he does text his brother.

-going out u want anything?-

Almost immediately, Dean texts back with, -im good dont get lost-

Smiling slightly, Sam sends, -here? its not even a one strbecks town-

He hasn’t even gotten one shoe on when his phone beeps again. Leaning over, he opens the text and reads, -gee sammy where u gonna get ur trp nofat halfwhip vanilla late-

A stupid little text shouldn’t make him feel so happy, but for some reason it does. Humming to himself, he responds, -latTe and they dont come with whip- and then sits there holding his phone and waiting for a response.

Sure enough, it’s less than a minute before Dean sends back, -ud know princess-

-jerk-

-bitch- And then, immediately on the heels of that: -go get ur drink or whtvr and stop bothering me assmunch-
Sam grins the entire way to the bar.

The fourth day finds him calmer, which means that he doesn’t feel like he’s two seconds away from coming out of his skin. Sam is even able to wander outside without sending his brother another text first, and that’s where Dean finds him: sitting at a picnic table around the side of the motel. Sam is watching a flock of seagulls fight over an abandoned bag of French fries when the crunch of gravel alerts him to his brother’s arrival.

He glances over and, despite the overcast day, Dean is wearing sunglasses. He’s also wearing his leather jacket and a couple layers of shirts, but it can’t be any warmer than forty degrees out here so that might not mean anything. Except for how it might because Dean does tend to use the bulk of his clothing as a shield.

Or maybe Sam is overthinking this just a little.

Nervous, he looks back at the gulls as his brother sits down next to him. Out of the corner of his eye, Sam sees his brother put both hands on top of the picnic table, which means that Dean isn’t worrying at the scar. It’s a good sign, but it doesn’t stop Sam’s stomach from starting to ache again.

“Hey,” Dean says after a few seconds.

Sam fumbles his first attempt at speech and has to clear his throat before he can manage his own, hoarser, “Hey.”

After almost an entire minute has crawled past, Dean asks, “You have fun at the bar?”

“Uh. Yeah. I guess.”

Silence falls again, broken only by the cries of the squabbling gulls. Sam’s chest has gone tight and his eyes are starting to burn. If it were good news—it can’t be, and Sam knows that, but if it were—then Dean would have said something by now. He wouldn’t be sitting next to Sam, quietly searching for a way to say ‘no’ one more time.

Swallowing, Sam shuts his eyes. He isn’t going to cry about this again. He’s twenty-two years old, damn it, and an adult, and he has more control over his emotions than this.

“I think we both know that I’m fucked in the head,” Dean says abruptly. Even with his eyes closed, Sam can’t get a read on his brother’s voice, but the fact that Dean is starting with that observation can’t be good.

“Yeah,” he sighs.

“I’m not gonna lie, Sam. The idea of sleeping with you is about as exciting as a Price Is Right marathon.”

Logically, Sam didn’t expect anything else, but the announcement still leaves a bitter, disappointed taste in his mouth. “Gee, thanks,” he mutters, and forces his eyes open again so that he can focus on something other than the painful constriction in his chest. If his vision is a little blurry, then it isn’t because he’s dangerously close to tears: it’s because it’s cold out here and his eyes are watering.

To his left, Dean continues, “But I don’t want anyone else doing it either, and I was jealous as fuck of Sarah. Still am.”
At the edge of Sam’s watery field of vision, there’s a blur of motion as Dean ducks his head slightly. At the same time, one of his brother’s hands lifts from the table, and Sam knows without having to actually see it that Dean is worrying at his temple again. He doesn’t like that much, but his brother’s words have taken some of the finality out of what initially sounded like a rejection, and Sam’s chest is doing that funny, fluttering hope thing again, and he can’t bring himself to worry about Dean’s fascination with the scar right now.

Swallowing thickly, he waits for Dean to get to the point and prays that his brother is heading in the direction that Sam hopes he is.

“I don’t think I’m capable of loving anyone like that. Sexually.”

The word comes out awkwardly, as though Dean isn’t very familiar with it or maybe doesn’t like the way it tastes in his mouth. The obvious discomfort in Dean’s voice, coupled with the way that he’s worrying at the scar again, leaves Sam feeling queasy despite his rising hope. When his brother’s hand drops back into sight on the picnic table a moment later, Sam’s breath eases out in a low sigh.

Then Dean says, “But if I were, it’d be you,” and Sam’s pretty sure his heart stops beating. It starts up again a moment later in a roaring rush that makes it difficult to hear, but somehow Sam manages to make out his brother’s voice as Dean continues, “I mean, I do love you, Sammy. I—I don’t know, maybe this is the closest I can come to that kind of—of relationship, and I know it isn’t, y’know, what you want, but it’s the best I can do.”

Sam can’t do this without looking at his brother anymore. He has to see if Dean means what he’s saying. If he’s saying what Sam thinks he is.

He shifts on the bench, turning to face his brother, and Dean’s head is lowered. He’s picking at a splinter on the table with his right hand and his lips are pursed and his brow is furrowed and his eyes are hidden behind his sunglasses. After a brief moment of hesitation, Sam reaches out—slowly, so that Dean can see him coming: can protest if he wants to—and hooks two of his fingers around the frame of his brother’s sunglasses. Dean swallows but doesn’t move, and Sam takes that for the permission it is, drawing the shades up and off.

Beneath the glasses, Dean’s eyes are tightly shut, but when Sam nudges his brother’s left hand with his own, Dean reluctantly opens them and looks over. Sam instantly sees why his brother felt the need to hide his eyes. He’s never seen his brother stripped so bare—with all of his defenses cast aside and his emotions on display for anyone to look at.

The cringing, naked vulnerability Sam finds there (and love, yes, and determination, but the vulnerability and the fear are stronger: more immediate) makes him feel like an asshole for what he’s about to do, but he has to ask. For both their sakes, he has to know what Dean is agreeing to.

“What are you saying, Dean?”

Dean swallows and his hand starts to lift. Sam’s own hand darts out thoughtlessly and pins his brother’s to the table. He doesn’t know why, but he can’t let Dean answer that question while he’s fiddling with his scar. He can’t allow whatever pain that scar represents to taint the fragile, tenuous thing between them.

“I need you to—Dean, I need you to say it, okay? I need to—I can’t just guess on this one.”

Dean licks his lips, cutting those defenseless eyes away while he draws in a deep, shuddering breath. Then, sitting up straighter, he looks back at Sam. Some of his walls have been raised again, but not all of them. Not so many that Sam can’t read truth there when his brother says, “I can’t make any
promises, but if you want to try, I’m in.”

For a couple of seconds, Sam isn’t sure if it’s the world spinning or just his head. That roaring sound is back again, louder than ever, and he realizes with embarrassed dismay that there are tears running down his cheeks. Dean looks embarrassed by the display as well, but Sam can’t figure out how to stop.

“You—” he chokes out. “Dean, you—”

One side of Dean’s mouth quirks up into a weak smile and he twists his hand beneath Sam’s. Not to free it: just so that he can thread their fingers together. “Dude, are you gonna be my boyfriend or what?”

Sam bursts out laughing. He can’t help it. This—them—it’s utterly ridiculous, and wonderful, and Dean is smiling at him, and before he knows what he means to say he blurts, “Can I kiss you?”

Dean’s eyes dim—only a little, almost unnoticeably, but Sam is watching and he sees it happen. He sees Dean go dull around the edges: sees his brother’s tentative shine fade. God, if he could take the question back he would in a heartbeat, but it’s too late now. The damage is already done, and if he tries to backpedal, Dean is just going to get pissed off and tell Sam he doesn’t need to be babied.

“Can’t promise I’ll enjoy it, but you can give it a whack.”

Dean doesn’t sound terribly excited by the prospect, but he doesn’t sound nervous either. He just ... He sounds disinterested. Detached.

Part of Sam is bouncing up and down at the fact that he just got a green light to do what he’s been fantasizing about for years. The rest of him has gone tight with concern. He knows that making the movie messed Dean up, but he’s starting to wonder if the damage is more serious than he thought. He’s starting to wonder just how deep his brother’s scars go.

As Sam hesitates, there’s a flicker of annoyance in his brother’s eyes and Dean licks his lips. Slowly. Deliberately. Like he’s goading Sam to do something about it.

Worried or not, Sam has never been one to back down from a challenge. Besides, this is a good opportunity to test the waters, so to speak.

“C’mere,” he says, tugging at his brother’s hand.

Dean obligingly shifts closer along the bench. His chameleon eyes are cool and pale and jade green today beneath the overcast sky. His skin looks washed out as well, robbed of color by their conversation or lack of sleep or the weather, and his pallor leaves the splash of his freckles on his cheeks and the bridge of his nose obvious in contrast. As Sam stares, Dean licks his lips again—unconsciously this time, as far as Sam can tell—and then swallows.

“Dean,” Sam breathes, and then moves forward and presses their lips together.

He means it to be a brief thing, just a test, but Dean kisses him back—fucking finally—and Sam’s good intentions tumble away unnoticed. Dean is good at this, good at kissing, and when Sam cradles the side of his brother’s face in one hand, Dean immediately returns the favor by cupping the back of Sam’s neck and sloting their mouths more firmly together.

When Sam finally breaks away several minutes later, he’s lightheaded and flushed and his cock is throbbing against the inseam of his jeans. He looks into his brother’s eyes, hoping for a second green light to take this inside, and Dean looks back at him. His expression is open again: guileless and easy
to read. There’s warmth there, and fondness, and even devotion, but no matter how closely Sam looks, he can’t find so much as a glimmer of passion. As far as Dean’s libido is concerned, he might as well have spent the last five minutes watching a rousing game of golf.

Sam’s mind flashes back to his earlier apprehension and it isn’t so much disappointment that tightens his chest (although that’s there), but dismay and dread. Sorrow, too, and he isn’t sure whether he wants to weep at what those sons of bitches did to his brother or if he wants to hunt them all down and make them pay. Starting with Dad.

Sam thinks he does a pretty good job of masking the tumble of emotions, but something must slip past his guard and onto his face because Dean’s eyes shutter and he starts to pull away. Stomach turning, Sam reaches out and grabs the hem of his brother’s coat.

“Dean, wait.”

Dean finishes getting to his feet and then stops. Looking down at Sam, who is still holding onto the edge of his coat, he says, “I warned you, man. I don’t mind giving you this, but you can’t expect me to sit up and beg for it.”

Sam should let it go—after all, he’s getting everything he wanted: there’s no reason to keep pushing. Only ... Only he isn’t getting everything he wanted. Because a large part of what he wants is for Dean to be honestly, completely happy, and that isn’t going to happen as long as Dean is ... God, what?

Wounded?

Handicapped?

Broken?

None of those words adequately describes how his brother is hurting right now, and if Sam can’t even put a name to it, then how the hell is he supposed to help?

Sam wants his brother. He wants to lay Dean down on a bed and spread him open and slip inside of him. He wants to find out if his brother will fit as snuggly around his cock as he did around Sam’s fingers. All of that, Dean is offering.

But that’s fucking. It’s rutting: coarse and instinctive.

And Dean can call him a girl all he wants, but Sam understands the difference between having sex and making love, and it isn’t fair for Dean to offer him one when he can’t manage the other.

Even if Sam were willing to settle for sex, how the hell is he supposed to perform when he knows that Dean is just lying there and counting water stains on the ceiling? How is he supposed to be able to do that to his brother?

“You used to,” he says. “Dean, you used to love sex. I know you did.”

Dean’s jaw tightens and he starts to raise his hand to his head again.

“No!” Sam blurts, dropping Dean’s coat and grabbing wrist before he can manage it. The look Dean gives him is two parts startled and one part pained. “I don’t—” Sam fumbles. “I don’t like it when you do that.”

That gets him a raised eyebrow and disbelieving huff, but when Dean shakes Sam’s hand off he
doesn’t touch his scar. Instead he says, “I used to love Cassie, too. Things change.” Then, turning, he starts for the motel.

Sam doesn’t understand how things went so horribly wrong so incredibly quickly, and for a few seconds he’s too stunned and numb inside (and a little hurt: Dean knows how Sam feels about Cassie) to do anything but stare after his brother. Then, with a slow, horrible sensation like sinking into murky water, he realizes that if he lets Dean walk away right now they’re going to lose any shot they have of making this work. Because Dean is going to go into his room, and he’s going to lock the door, and he isn’t going to come out until his walls are towering, frosty monoliths.

And if Sam even dares to try scaling them, he’s going to get smacked away and Dean will look at him with flat, distant eyes and say, “Fuck you, Sam. You had your chance.”

“Wait!” he blurts, pushing up from the table. “Dean, wait!”

Dean isn’t slowing, but Sam’s legs are longer than his brother’s and he manages to catch up to Dean before he steps up onto the sidewalk running alongside the motel.

Grabbing his arm, he says, “I know you’re hurting, man, but it doesn’t have to be like this.”

Dean isn’t pulling away, but he won’t look at Sam either. His head is lowered, eyes fastened on the ground. The muscle at the corner of his jaw twitches sporadically.

“Please,” Sam begs. “I want to help you. You have to let me help you.”

Dean glances up, glaring. “I don’t ‘have’ to let you do anything, Sam.”

Sam knows that. Dean knows that Sam knows that. His pointed reminder of his own independence is reflex—an offensive maneuver meant to drive Sam back onto the defensive. And maybe if this conversation weren’t so important, Sam would let that happen—for Dean’s sake, because Dean only lashes out like this when he’s at his weakest.

But it is important.

Sam searches his mind for the response that will diffuse his brother’s anxiety—some word or phrase that will make him feel safer and ease him off his guard—but everything he comes up with is only going to make the situation worse. In the end, he keeps his mouth shut and pleads with his eyes. It isn’t fighting fair—Dean has never been able to resist Sam at his most earnest—but Sam is desperate enough right now that he doesn’t give a shit.

Sure enough, after a moment the set of Dean’s shoulders softens. Pursing his mouth, he cuts his eyes away from Sam’s face and asks in a weary, bitter voice, “How the fuck are you going to help, Sam? You gonna fuck me better?”

Dean has said that to him before, has said those exact words, and while his brother doesn’t mean them any more now than he did then, Sam realizes that it isn’t actually a horrible idea. Maybe all Dean needs is to be shown what it’s like to sleep with someone he actually has feelings for. Maybe all he needs is to be shown that sex is as much about receiving pleasure as it is giving it.

A nagging voice in Sam’s head reminds him that it isn’t as simple as that—some infection is festering deep inside of his brother, and the disengaged libido isn’t the cause but a symptom, just like Dean’s obsession with his scar—but he pushes it away. He pushes it away because that would mean that there’s a chance he can’t help his brother—that Dean may be irrevocably damaged—and that’s just unacceptable.
“Yes,” Sam says.

Dean’s eyes are incredulous as he looks over. Clearly skeptical about the proposition, he repeats, “You’re gonna fuck me better.”

“Sex can be—Dean, it can be good. With the right person, it can be fucking fantastic.”

“And the right person would be you.”

The condescension in his brother’s voice is cutting, and Sam’s chest gives a painful wince as he urges, “Let me show you. Please.”

Dean stares at him for a moment longer and then looks away again. Sam is just about ready to get down on his knees and beg if that’s what it will take when his brother says, “Just don’t get disappointed when it doesn’t work.”

Ohthankgod.

“It will,” Sam promises, shoving his own doubts away. “Dean, it will.”

Dean’s expression could be called disbelieving at best, but he agreed. He may only be humoring Sam, but at least he’s willing to give this a shot. Give them a shot. Sam didn’t completely fuck it up.

Something is going on behind his brother’s eyes—some flicker of emotion or thought—and a second later Dean’s lips give a minute twitch. Sam is about to ask what’s wrong when Dean moves, liquid fast, and hauls Sam up against the side of the building. Sam lets out a grunt of surprise and then sucks in a sharp breath as Dean shoves a hand down his pants. He doesn’t push far enough to actually grab Sam’s dick, but the twitch of his brother’s fingers against his lower abdomen is still more than a little distracting.

“Okay, Sammy,” Dean says, scraping his fingernails through the short, wiry hairs leading further south. “Teach me the wonders of gay sex.”

Sam stares at his brother, wide-eyed and disbelieving, as Dean smirks and starts to ease his hand even lower, and then realizes that they’re standing outside in broad daylight and grabs his brother’s wrist. Dean’s smirk widens—no traces of his distress from moments before, only amusement—as Sam pulls his hand out and glances around the thankfully empty parking lot. God, they are so lucky that a couple of nuns weren’t walking by, or a gaggle of preschoolers.

No, scratch that: Dean is lucky.

Because Sam can tell from the smugness of his brother’s grin that Dean’s damaged, fragile core is buried again, leaving him with this other Dean, with his annoying older brother, and while Sam doesn’t love him any less when he’s being a dick, this Dean can be a real pain in the ass.

He did that deliberately, the jerk.

“Aw, what’s wrong, Sammy?” Dean taunts. “Shy? Worried the package won’t hold up to the promise?”

Sam flushes. “You can be a real asshole, you know that?”

“So they tell me,” Dean responds smoothly, stepping back and starting for their rooms again. “Come on, let’s get this over with. Oprah’s on in an hour.”
And just like that, Sam is left winded and sick to his stomach again. He wishes that he could believe
that his brother is still fucking with him, but he knows better. Dean has had his joke at Sam’s
expense and now he’s moving on with his day and he meant it. He really does see sex with Sam as
something to be “gotten over with”. It isn’t as though Sam expected his brother to be excited at the
prospect—not yet—but the fact that Dean is regarding it as a chore, as some inane task that has to be
completed in the allotted time before his TV show comes on is ... it’s ...

“What?” Dean is back, standing in front of Sam again. Must have realized that Sam wasn’t following
him.

Sam looks into his brother’s perplexed face and senses the magnitude of the divide stretching out
between them. There are entire oceans between his own understanding of what sex and love are
supposed to look like and his brother’s. Sam might as well try to explain what the color red looks like
to a blind man.

No, he tells himself. No, it isn’t the same. Dean hasn’t always been like this. He used to know, he
just ... he forgot.

Sam is going to remind his brother what it feels like to be worshipped, but he can’t do it in words,
which were never Dean’s strong suit anyway. No, this is going to have to be an old fashioned laying
on of hands, and it isn’t, Sam realizes suddenly, going to happen in some cheap motel. As though it’s
something dirty and low.

Dean deserves better than that.

“What, fuck me?”

Dean’s voice sounds overly loud in the quiet parking lot and Sam can’t help glancing around again
to make sure they’re alone. They are, but he still flushes as he says, in a quiet undertone, “Yes, okay?
I’m not going to fuck you here.”

Dean’s annoyance fades into consideration as he studies Sam. He looks at Sam like he’s trying to
look
through
him: like he’s trying to peer inside of his head and see what makes him tick. Although
really, if that’s what Dean wants to know, then all he has to do is look in a mirror.

Finally, and thankfully with no signs of the puckish humor he was infected with a minute ago, Dean
nods and says, “Okay then. Where?”

Oh. Right. Good question.

“What, uh, seems good to you?” Sam tries.

One corner of Dean’s mouth twitches up. “Oh no. It’s your show, dude, you pick the venue.”

Sam rifles through a series of different possibilities and tosses one location after another out. The
problem is that they don’t have a place of their own, nowhere familiar and safe except for Bobby’s
and Pastor Jim’s, and the thought of so much as laying a finger on Dean under either of those roofs is
—
“I know a place,” he says, blinking. He doesn’t know why he didn’t think of it sooner, actually. It isn’t theirs—Dean has never been within fifty miles of it, as far as Sam knows—but Sam is familiar enough for the both of them. And it’s safe and nice and the closest that Sam can come to a home on such short notice.

“How far?” Dean asks.

“It’s about a three hour drive from here. If we leave now we can be there before it gets dark.”

Dean tilts his head as he considers, and then, frowning, says, “Gee, Sam, I was really looking forward to braiding your hair while we watched Oprah.”

Sam is fairly certain that’s a joke. But he has actually woken up to his brother messing around with his hair before, and Dean is giving him a serious, hopeful look, and he finds the weirdest things amusing, and so Sam isn’t—quite—sure.

Then Dean laughs.

“You’re so fucking easy, Sammy,” he snickers, digging in his pocket. As Sam glares at him, he pulls out the keys to the Impala and tosses them over.

“Get the car warmed up, lamb chop: I’ll be out in five.”
Chapter 13

The cabin belongs to a friend of Becky’s. Sam used to come here on breaks with Becky and Jess and Jack and Jack’s current insignificant other, and when he steps into the small, neat kitchen with its blue checkered curtains, he feels a momentary pang of sorrow. The cabin is chill from the mountain air, and it smells almost overwhelmingly of the lavender patchouli Becky uses to keep the air from going stale when it’s vacant, but none of that stops him from remembering warmer, happier times.

This is where Jess tried to make him pancakes and burnt the first three batches. Where he finally found her when the smell of charred carbohydrates woke him up: scowling at the bowl with her hair a disheveled, frizzy mess. There were dried streaks of batter on her cheeks, and her nose, and it tasted sweet on his tongue, and she was still blushing an hour later when Jack stumbled in scratching his stomach.

This is where she used to stand, half awake and squinting out at the woods while she stumbled her way through her first cup of coffee.

This is where she accidentally sliced off the tip of her pinky while cutting up a watermelon.

This is where he carried her, giggling and dripping from their swim in the lake: where she squirmed until he set her down on the counter and kissed her docile.

This is where they set up the table for poker nights, and Sam didn’t have to concentrate so hard on playing worse than he knew how because the way that Jess always stuck the tip of her tongue out while trying to decide what to do with her cards was distracting enough to keep him at least three hands behind.

And where is she now? Gone. Nothing more than another memory swirling in his head.

Sam thought he was done mourning Jess, and he knows, rationally, that he is. It’s just this place bringing everything back. Just this place sinking into him and leaving ripples behind, like a pebble dropped into a pool.

The door slams as Dean follows him in. “Dude, it reeks in here,” his brother complains, wrinkling his nose as he sets his bag down on the counter.

For a moment, Sam just watches as Dean tests the faucet and starts poking through drawers and cabinets. His brother is inspecting his new surroundings, cautious and distrustful, and it puts Sam in mind of the stray cat he brought home when he was still young enough to think he could get away with it. The cat hadn’t been there long enough to learn to trust when Dad came back and made him get rid of it—it’s feral, Sammy; it’ll be happier on its own—and the diffuse, mourning ache in Sam’s chest sharpens.

This is a mistake, he thinks, and he doesn’t know whether he just means the cabin or whether he means Dean. Trying to fix Dean. To domesticate him.

Then his brother makes a surprised crow of pleasure and pulls something out of a cabinet.

“Dude, Boo Berry!” Dean exclaims, shaking the cereal box and grinning at the ensuing rattle. “I didn’t think they made this anymore.” He looks at Sam, beaming, and Sam takes three thoughtless steps forward (it’s exactly like falling into the sun) and hooks his fingers into Dean’s belt.

Dean blinks, surprised, and then Sam is reeling him in and kissing him. He’s vaguely aware of Dean
setting the box of cereal down on the counter but most of his attention is taken up by the way that Dean is already kissing him back. Sam’s already had the revelation that Dean is good at this, but it turns out his brother was holding out on him before. Because the way that he’s nipping and sucking at Sam’s lips and tongue feels light-years better than that earlier kiss.

Sam moans appreciatively and Dean steps forward, turning them and crowding Sam up against the kitchen sink. He’s cupping the nape of Sam’s neck with one hand while the other rests on Sam’s waist, thumb rubbing restlessly along his hipbone. Dean’s mouth is full of rough, filthy promises: his lips are wet and warm and eager.

Yes, Sam thinks, lifting his hands to cradle his brother’s face. Just like this.

He wants to be content with the kiss but his skin feels charged—overheated—and after only a few moments he has to take a hand off of his brother’s face and shove it into Dean’s pants.

Dean isn’t hard.

Oh, his dick fills quickly enough now that Sam has his hand on it, but Dean wasn’t hard at all and that fact snaps Sam back to what he’s supposed to be doing here. Pulling his hand out, he turns his face to the side and hauls in quick lungfulls of cold air.

Dean noses at the side of his face and mouths at his jaw in a skillful mime of passion and Sam shudders.

“Don’t,” he gasps out. “Don’t do that if you don’t mean it.”

Dean stills against him. After a few, wretched moments, he eases back enough so that Sam can see his face. Dean’s lips are still slick and slightly swollen from the kiss, which would make Sam’s stomach flutter if his brother’s eyes weren’t so dead.

“I thought this is what you wanted,” Dean says. His voice is guarded. Reserved.

“I want you to let me make you feel good,” Sam corrects. He’s trying to keep his own voice calmer than he feels right now, but it shakes anyway. “I don’t want you to lie to me, man.”

“You can’t fuck me better without actually fucking me, Sammy,” Dean points out, but he steps back, which helps with the whole thinking thing.

“And I will, but not like this.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Dude, you are one picky date.” After waiting for a couple of seconds to see whether Sam is going to say anything in response (he’s not—too busy thinking that his brother could have used a few more ‘picky dates’ in his life), Dean turns away again to resume his inspection of the kitchen.

“We need milk,” he says after opening the refrigerator. “And beer. Real beer, not this micro crap.”

Sam sighs and rubs his hands over his face. He doesn’t know how Dean can do this—go from having a serious conversation to business as usual at the flip of a card. It’s exhausting.

“If you want to make out a list, there’s a grocery store about a mile down the mountain. I can go—”

“No, I’ll do it,” Dean says, shutting the refrigerator again. The look he shoots Sam’s way is fondly wry. “I love you, man, but you know fuck all about picking decent vegetables.”
Sam’s head is starting to ache from trying to keep up with his brother, but he perks up at that.
"You’re cooking?"

Dean hasn’t cooked for him in ... God, he can’t remember how long. Not since before Stanford, anyway.

“Well, I don’t think Dominos delivers up here, and I’m sure as hell not eating your cooking.”

“Can we have chili?”

Dean’s face scrunches in an expression of annoyance that’s clearly feigned. He takes an excessive amount of pride in his food, and why not? The summer he spent learning not to burn everything he touched—the summer before Sam’s first year of elementary school—was frustrating for everyone concerned, but it paid off.

Not that Dean gets to put this particular set of skills to use that often.

“I’m not cooking chili in a kitchen that smells like Grandma Sally’s Funeral Parlor,” Dean announces, but he’s already taking the pad of paper off the front of the fridge and jotting down ingredients.

“I’ll air it out,” Sam promises.

“’S fucking foul,” Dean mutters, leaning on the counter while he writes.

But he hasn’t touched his scar once since they got here, and he’s drumming his fingers on the countertop in an absent baseline and maybe this wasn’t a completely horrible idea after all.

By the time Dean gets back with the groceries, Sam has finished airing out the place and the lavender scent is all but gone. Dean complains that it isn’t much warmer inside than out now, but he’s already too busy rooting through the bags for the chili peppers to do more than grunt at Sam’s “I put the heat on.”

Cooking always used to put Dean in a good mood, and that hasn’t changed. He hums to himself while he chops and stirs and spends an improbable amount of time fiddling with Becky’s gas stove until he gets the flames where he wants them. Sam sits at the table and watches his brother, but he might as well not be in the room for all the notice Dean takes of him.

Then, unexpectedly, Dean turns and tosses a box of macaroni elbows at him. Sam gets his hands on the box, fumbles it, and then catches it again while Dean turns back to stir the sautéing onions.

“Dean, what—”

“No freelading, Sammy,” Dean tosses over his shoulder before sprinkling more of something powered and red into the frying pan.

“You. Wait, you actually want me to help?”

“Want, expect, and demand.”

Sam isn’t sure how he feels about this. On the one hand, this seems like a Gesture. Like Dean trying to meet him halfway on a playing field where he feels confident. On the other hand ...

“Last time I tried to help you cook, you almost took my finger off with a carving knife.”
“Yeah, well, you don’t salt a man’s meat unless he tells you to.” Dean casts a smirk back over his shoulder. “Cheer up, Sammy, not even you can fuck up pasta.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Actually, it turns out that, yes, Sam can fuck up pasta. Luckily, Dean thought ahead and bought an extra box. The second time, he keeps an eye on Sam and tells him when to dump everything into the strainer and Sam is relieved to see that the macaroni keep their shape instead of slopping out in a congealed, starchy paste.

Dean’s chili, when it’s done, tastes just as good as Sam remembers, but it’s Dean himself who leaves Sam feeling buoyant again. It’s Dean’s easy smile and the flare of pride in his eyes as Sam eats his way through half of the pot. It’s Dean looking relaxed and happy and more beautiful than ever.

Sam makes a mental note to find more time for this when they get back on the road. It shouldn’t be too difficult to manage. After all, they’ve stayed in places with kitchenettes before. It’s just seemed more convenient to eat take out than to go to the store for ingredients and spices.

Sam offers to take care of the clean up, but Dean waves him off and attacks the mound of dishes in the sink on his own. Becky has a dishwasher, but Dean is ignoring it in favor of scrubbing things out by hand, and Sam wonders if that’s just a symptom of his brother’s disdain for unnecessary luxuries or if there’s something about the act of washing dishes that Dean finds calming.

And Dean looks calm in the clean, white gleam of the overhead light. He’s still smiling, and humming to himself under his breath, and Sam is struck with the dizzying urge to go over there and kiss him.

He could. Dean gave him permission. That’s what they’re here for.

But Sam looks at the happiness in his brother’s face and he’s reluctant to sully the moment. He’s reluctant to sully Dean.

God, he can’t decide if it’s better to do this now, when Dean is relaxed, or if he should wait for his brother’s mood to slip again before making his move. After a few minutes of watching Dean scrub pans, though, Sam gets up.

Because there’s never going to be a good time for this, but if they start when Dean is in a good place mentally, then chances are that he’ll have a better reaction.

Dean jumps a little when Sam reaches around and grasps his wrist. The glance he tosses over his shoulder is slightly annoyed, but unsuspecting. “Make some goddamned noise, would you?” he mutters, and then, shaking his hand to indicate that Sam should let go now, turns back to the sink.

Sam doesn’t let go. Instead, he steps even closer, pressing his body against his brother’s. Dean stills as Sam noses at the curve of his neck. The sound of the water running into the sink should be soothing, but it feels more like a distraction, and so Sam reaches out blindly with his free hand to turn it off.

“The dishes,” Dean starts, but his words cut off on a choked noise as Sam bites down—gently, gently—on the unmarked expanse of his brother’s throat. Dean’s hand flexes: the muscles in his wrist moving against Sam’s hold. Sam bites down long enough to swipe his tongue across his brother’s skin and then lets go.

“The dishes can wait,” he says, stroking the pulse point in his brother’s wrist.
Dean is still for a moment longer and then he says, “Yeah, okay,” and turns around and kisses Sam.

Sam is surprised by how quickly Dean folds, and for a few seconds he lets his brother kiss him. He lets Dean thrust his tongue into his mouth in slutty, hungry twists. Like fucking. It feels good—feels fucking wonderful—but it isn’t what Sam is after right now and so he jerks his head to one side and says, “No.”

Dean’s mood changes with the suddenness of a winter storm. “Goddamn it, Sam!” he snaps, trying to pull away.

Sam tightens his grip and steps to the side, corraling his brother back against the counter.

Glarin, Dean barks, “You either want it or you don’t, but either way quit fucking around with me!”

“I told you,” Sam says, keeping his own voice soft. “Not like that.”

“No like— that’s the only way I know how to kiss, asshole. I’m sorry if it’s not up to your standards, but—”

Sam leans forward and covers his brother’s mouth with his own before Dean’s words can tear him up any worse inside. Dean wouldn’t understand his explanation anyway. Not without Sam showing his brother exactly what he means.

Dean is pissed enough to be vicious; he lets Sam kiss him, but he also bites down on Sam’s lip hard enough to draw blood. Sam winces but doesn’t pull back and, despite the hungry pulse in his groin, doesn’t rise to the bait.

Instead, he makes his own mouth soft and supple. Dean struggles for control, lashing out like a wild falcon caught in a snare, and Sam yields. Sam lets his brother fuck his tongue against his while rubbing slow, soothing circles into the inside of Dean’s wrist. He lets Dean shove their mouths together hard enough to bruise while tracing tender lines across the inside of his brother’s lips with his tongue and, gradually, Dean’s vehemence falters.

Sam takes advantage of his brother’s hesitation to gentle the kiss further: coaxing with his mouth instead of demanding, worshiping with his tongue instead of coveting. Dean’s pulse is hammering faster than ever against Sam’s grasp, but all the fight has gone out of him. Sam allows himself a few more seconds with Dean’s mouth and then lifts his head.

Dean is staring at Sam like he’s never seen him before. Like Sam is some strange, unknown thing. Like he’s a threat.

After a moment, he blinks and shakes himself. “I thought you wanted to fuck me,” he says.

Sam lifts his hand and puts his fingertips to his brother’s jaw. Traces them down and over those too- lovely lips, which Dean obediently parts. Sam can tell that his brother expects him to push his fingers inside, but instead he reaches up to brush Dean’s lashes. Dean blinks—tickling flutter against the pads of Sam’s fingers—and Sam skims across the bridge of Dean’s nose and out along his brother’s cheekbone, where he finally tilts his hand and lays it flat against the side of his brother’s face.

He doesn’t touch the scar. Doesn’t want to remind Dean that it’s there.

“No,” he says finally. “Not tonight.”

This time, when Sam leans in, Dean’s lips tremble against his. His brother’s mouth is pliant as Sam
eases his tongue inside. Soft. Sam’s lip stings where Dean bit it, and the tang of copper is almost overwhelming, but that’s okay. After all, Dean has bled for him hundreds of times. Sam can bleed for his brother this once.

He eases back long enough to take a breath—long enough to draw his brother’s shaky exhale into his own lungs. Dean’s eyes are still wide and confused: his lips parted and wet and smeared faintly with Sam’s blood.

“God, you’re beautiful,” Sam whispers, and then kisses him again.

Dean turns his head a little—not trying to get away, just denying the validity of Sam’s words—and Sam takes the opportunity to shift his attention to his brother’s throat. Dean’s skin jumps beneath his lips and tongue: at once fragile and rough with stubble.

“Sam,” Dean breathes. As Sam finds his brother’s pulse and bites down delicately, Dean’s free hand flies up to fasten on his biceps, thumb digging in deep. The choked gasp he makes sends shivers through Sam’s chest and he sucks harder, until he can’t taste the blood from his lip anymore—until he can’t taste anything but his brother’s skin.

Dean’s wrist is shaking in his grasp, and Sam releases him finally in order to reach around his brother’s body. As he cups Dean’s ass and pulls their groins together, Dean lets out a moan and shudders. The hardening bulge pressing against Sam’s cock tells him that Dean’s body is responding just fine to what he’s doing, and he lifts his head to gauge his brother’s emotional state.

Dean’s eyes are closed. His mouth hangs open in a pant: his head is tilted back. He’s flushed. Sinful.

“Look at me,” Sam says, sweeping his thumb over his brother’s cheek. “C’mon, Dean, open your eyes and look at me.”

When Dean still doesn’t respond, Sam tightens his grip on his brother’s ass and pulls him in again, grinding their cocks together through layers of denim. Dean’s eyes flicker open on a moan. His pupils are blown, green irises down to thin, luminous rings. He looks drugged or maybe drunk, but not frightened. When Sam shifts his hand down over his brother’s throat in a gentle caress, Dean tilts into the touch hungrily.

“You like that?” Sam asks, and rubs his thumb against the faint, spit-slicked mark he left over his brother’s pulse.

Dean blinks rapidly, clearly fighting to focus. The way that Sam keeps dragging his brother’s groin against his in little pulses probably isn’t helping, but Sam can’t seem to stop.

Finally, Dean manages, “I t-told you, S-Sam. ’S about as in-interesting as r-reading a fuh-fucking grocery list.”

For a moment, Sam is certain that his brother is lying. Dean’s all but writhing against him, after all. If Sam had his brother’s pants off, he’d be leaking precome all over the place. As it is, Dean’s body is starting to move without Sam’s urging: thrusting against him in needy pumps.

But Dean’s too out of it to be lying. Too dazed. He honest to God doesn’t feel what Sam is doing to him. He doesn’t feel himself coming apart in fits and shuddering starts. Doesn’t feel the arousal stiffening his cock and quickening his pulse. Dean’s body is responsive—amazingly so—but there’s a roadblock between his nerve endings and his brain and any actual acknowledgement of pleasure is getting stuck there.

So many times over the past few months, Sam has thought that he understood what was wrong with
his brother. He thought he understood just how hurt Dean is—how far the damage goes. And each
time he’s had to adjust, that perception has left him thinking, this is it. Now I know. I get it.

But he didn’t get it, not at all. He hasn’t even come close to understanding until this moment, with
Dean’s body thrusting helplessly against him and his head completely disengaged. Dean told him
over and over, but Sam didn’t know what it looked like, didn’t know how it would feel. It’s not that
Dean is bored: he isn’t there. It’s as though his soul somehow slipped out of his body and left Sam
holding nothing more than a responsive sack of meat.

Sam can’t step back quickly enough.

Dean thrusts against the air twice more and then clamps his hands on the edge of the counter and
stops. He’s still shuddering, and breathing in shallow pants, and he should be pissed at Sam for blue
balling him. He should be swearing and shoving his hand down his pants to finish himself off.
Instead he just leans there with his dick an obvious bulge in his jeans and looks at Sam. There’s no
anger in his eyes. No arousal. Nothing.

“I warned you,” he says.

It’s getting difficult for Sam to breathe around the painful lump in his throat, and the nausea in his gut
is only growing, and finally he can’t take it anymore. Turning, he sprints into the bathroom and leans
over the toilet and waits for Dean’s chili to come back up. Although his stomach rumbles and shifts
alarmingly, though, nothing more than a bubble of gas emerges from his throat and suddenly Sam is
clinging to toilet seat and weeping into the bowl.

He can’t do this. He can’t help Dean, he can’t.

Sam cries until his eyes feel swollen and his head aches and then slowly pushes himself to his feet.
The scabbed over cut on his lip breaks open as he rinses off his face and he dabs at with a piece of
toilet tissue until it stops. Then, reluctantly, he goes back into the kitchen.

Dean has finished the dishes and is sitting at the table nursing a beer. When he sees Sam come in, he
puts the bottle down and leans back in his chair. His thumb is fiddling with the label on his beer
bottle and not with his scar, but it’s the scar that Sam looks at. It’s the scar that shifts the weeping,
defeated throb in his chest back into anger.

No, he thinks. Fuck you, you don’t get to have him.

So his first try failed. So what? That’s what Sam gets for going in unprepared: for being so desperate
for a quick fix that he never even bothered trying to figure out what was wrong with Dean in the first
place. It’s a rookie mistake, one that could have gotten him killed on a hunt, but which he can easily
remedy with a computer and the Internet jack in the master bedroom.

“I’m not giving up on you,” he says. “We’re going to fix this.”

Dean’s lips quirk humorlessly. “Ever the optimist, huh, Sammy?”

It isn’t optimism, though. It’s just a statement of truth. And Sam likes the way it sounds, so he says it
again, more resolutely.

“We’re going to fix this, Dean.”

Dean regards him for a moment and then, unsmiling, takes a slow pull on his beer.

Sam goes out to the Impala to get his laptop.
Chapter 14

It’s called dissociative disorder.

Sam’s pretty sure that’s what Dean has, anyway. He spends hours on the cabin’s snail-paced Internet after Dean goes to bed that night and it’s the closest thing to an answer that he can come up with. Unfortunately, if it is dissociative disorder, then all the literature advises the same thing.

Professional therapy.

As if Dean is going to agree to that without someone holding a gun to his head.

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“No way. Absolutely not.” Dean says it before Sam has said more than ‘psychia-’. He doesn’t even bother looking up from his cereal.

“Dean, you said you’d let me try.”

“Yeah, you, Sam,” Dean answers as he pokes around in his bowl with a spoon. “Not some fucking shrink-job like Ellicott. Christ.”

“That’s not fair, man—”

“That’s not fair, man—”

“Tough shit, dude. Life’s not fucking fair, deal with it. I know I have.”

The bitter ache in Sam’s chest sharpens into anger. “You’re not dealing with it, Dean,” he points out, pushing away from the counter. “That’s what dissociative disorder means—”

“Dissociative.”

“—disorder.”

Sam can feel himself jutting his lower jaw out, which Dean always says makes him look like an orangutan with indigestion, but he could give a crap about his appearance right now. “When I touch you,” he says, “How does it make you feel?”

“Like fizzy champagne,” Dean deadpans. “Bells go off when you take me in you arms, Sammy. Oh, the magic.” Then, leaning forward, he shovels another spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

“I’m serious, Dean,” Sam snaps, but his brother just continues chewing and enough is fucking enough. Striding over to the table, Sam reaches out and grabs his brother’s bowl.

“Dude!” Dean protests, making a grab for it.

Sam evades him easily—Dean’s reflexes are a little slow first thing in the morning—and carries the bowl over to the sink. “You’ll get it back when you answer me.”

Glaring, Dean says, “Fine. I don’t know how it feels, okay? Now give me back my Boo Berries.”

Sam nods grimly and sets the bowl of cereal down on the counter. He wasn’t really expecting any
other answer from his brother—Dean has almost no self-awareness when it comes to his emotions—but he figured he’d give it a shot before taking drastic measures. His stomach moves uncertainly at the thought of what ‘drastic measures’ actually means in this instance, but he steels himself and says, “Come here.”

“What? No. I want my goddamned cereal, Sam.”

“Come over here and get it,” Sam challenges.

Dean’s chair scrapes against the tiles as he shoves it back and stands up. Sam watches his brother come closer, so predictable, and then feints to the right. Dean, who was expecting him to do something of the sort, cuts left and runs into Sam’s chest as he corrects from his feint. Before Dean can regain his balance, Sam pushes him backward. There’s a brief struggle where they’re both trying to establish a hold on one another and then Dean’s back collides with the wall and he lets out a surprised grunt. Taking advantage of his brother’s momentary distraction, Sam catches Dean’s wrists and pins them to the wall.

Dean fights the hold, but Sam is more determined to keep him there than he is to get away. After a few minutes of struggling, Dean seems to realize that he isn’t going anywhere and slumps into the hold. His pulse is racing just as much as Sam’s and they’re both breathing hard, but Sam is pretty sure that he’s the only one with a hard on.


In answer, Sam transfers both of his brother’s wrists to his left hand and reaches down inside Dean’s boxers with his right. Dean stiffens minutely and then relaxes. His mouth quirks into a slight, humoring smile. That smile feels like the goad it’s meant as, but Sam does his best to ignore the challenge as he wraps his hand around his brother’s cock.

After the way last night went, he thought that touching Dean like this would make him ill, but the trembling excitement inside Sam’s stomach is as strong as ever. Loosening his hold on his brother’s wrists, he starts to jack Dean’s cock—strokes firm and smooth, the way he likes it himself—and after a couple of seconds feels it start to fill.

“You feel that?” he asks. He means to sound clinical, but he can’t quite keep the arousal from husking his voice.

Dean’s response, on the other hand, is flat and colorless. “Your hand’s on my dick. That’s kinda hard to miss.”

“So describe it for me,” Sam pushes, and rubs his thumb against the sensitive head of his brother’s cock on the down stroke. From the way Dean’s breath hitches, he seems to like that particular maneuver just as much as Sam does. His brother’s eyes have started to glaze—everything Dean in them has started to drift away—and Sam says his brother’s name sharply.

“Dean.”

Dean blinks, clearly struggling to focus.

“Describe it for me,” Sam repeats.

“You’re jerking me off,” Dean mutters and then, when Sam continues to watch him expectantly, adds, “What? It’s a fucking hand job, dude: what do you want me to say?”

“I want you to tell me how it feels. In here.” Releasing his brother’s wrists, Sam rests his hand
against Dean’s chest. It’s odd, watching the blankness in his brother’s eyes war with unease.

“Tell me.”

“I-I don’t know, okay? I can.” Dean’s breath hitches as Sam switches up the stroke on his cock. His hips roll: encouraging. God, Sam wants to fuck him. “‘S like floating,” Dean finally manages. “Like I’m. I’m here, but I’m not—I’m not here. I can—I can feel you, feel your hand, but I c-can’t—S-Sam.”

The emptiness in his brother’s eyes fills unexpectedly and abruptly.

“No!” Dean yells, dropping his hands to shove Sam away. Luckily, the signal Sam’s brain sends to his hand to let go gets through all right and he manages to avoid wrenching his brother’s dick. From the look of things, though, Dean wouldn’t have cared anyway. Not so long as Sam stopped touching him. He’s shaking—pacing with jagged movements and cradling his head in his hands.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “Fuck fuck fuck.”

“Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not fucking okay,” Dean spits. “What the fuck kind of question is that?” But he looks a little calmer now that Sam gave him something concrete to be upset with. He stops pacing, leaning on the wall with his left hand and rubbing his temple with his right. Rubbing that hooked scar.

Sam gives his brother a minute and then, fighting to keep his voice steady, he says, “It’s called depersonalization. It’s a type of dissociation disorder. It’s treatable, Dean. With therapy and medication, you can—”

“Medication?” Dean laughs hollowly, glancing over at Sam without ceasing the worrying motion of his fingers. “Why don’t you just commit me and get it over with?”

“Taking medication doesn’t mean—”

“No, Sam!” Dean breaks in harshly. Then he catches himself, takes a deep breath, and straightens. “No,” he says again. His voice is calmer, but his tone just as firm. “The equipment works, you can use it if you want, let’s just leave it at that.”

“I can’t just use you, Dean!” Sam shouts. Christ, Dean can’t honestly expect Sam to be able to do something like that, can he? Sam gives his own temple a quick push. It’s starting to ache in sympathy from all of the rubbing Dean is giving his own.

Then Dean blinks over at Sam, confusion clear in every line of his face, and asks, “Why not?”

Sam’s chest constricts as he looks into his brother’s puzzled eyes. His ribs, pulled close by grey bands of desolation, press painfully against his lungs. Anger throbs through his skull, alternating with waves of shocked disbelief, and tears burn behind his eyes. It takes him a moment to sort through all that before he can even begin to figure out how to get his voice working again.

Then, finally, he shouts, “Because I love you, damn it!” He’s crying suddenly, and Dean still hasn’t lowered his hand but he’s starting to look more alarmed than pained. “Because you’re worth more than that, and you don’t even—you—you’re everything, and you don’t—”

He flinches at the brush of his brother’s hand on his shoulder. Didn’t see Dean’s approach through the hot flood of tears. Dean’s hand lifts slightly at the flinch, but it returns again, steadier—a solid, grounding weight. Dean is touching him—Dean is comforting him when Sam should be the one

Sam wonders, suddenly, whether Dean is gripping his shoulder with his left hand, or with his right, and a mindless wave of revulsion washes through him. He doesn’t want his brother touching him with the same hand he was just using to massage his temple. Not with the same hand he was just using to rub at that goddamned scar.

Shoving his brother away, he chokes out, “You said you’d try. Fuck you, Dean, you said you’d try.”

“Sammy,” Dean says, and through the near-blinding wash of tears, Sam can see him reaching again. So he does what he does best.

He runs.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It takes him a couple of hours to get himself under control—to bottle all the rage and the sorrow and the futile, frustrated despair back up—and when he returns to cabin, Dean is dressed and waiting for him outside on the steps. Sam regards his brother for a moment and then walks up and sits down next to him. Their shoulders rub together and Sam half expects Dean to pull away but he doesn’t.

“I’m sorry,” Sam says eventually. “I was an asshole.”

“That’s okay, I’m used to it.” There isn’t any actual inflection in Dean’s words, but he bumps Sam’s shoulder as he says them and Sam knows that he’s forgiven. His eyes sting and he stares across the front walk at the forest, blinking rapidly until the crisis is averted.

Then he clears his throat and starts, “I don’t know what to—”

“I’ll see the shrink, but I’m not taking any drugs.”

The unexpected compromise sends a pulse through Sam’s chest. He shuts his eyes, which are burning again, and leans into his brother’s warmth. “Thank you,” he whispers.

Dean is quiet for a moment and then, with a hint of a smile in his voice, he says, “Yeah, well, I don’t want to have to deal with your whining. Figure Mr. Feelgood’s gotta be less of a pain in my ass.”

Sam surprises himself by letting out a weak laugh. “Jerk.”

“Bitch.” There’s a pause, and then Dean stretches and stands up. “Come on, man, I’ll make you breakfast.”

Sam hesitates, reluctant to ruin their tentative peace with nothing more than a vague, groundless suspicion, and then says, “Dean.”

“Yeah?”

“How did you get that scar?”

“What scar?” Dean sounds honestly bewildered by the question, and when Sam twists around and looks up, the confusion in his brother’s voice is mirrored on his face.

“The one on your forehead.”
“Oh.” Dean blinks. “I told you, dude. Poltergeist. Fucker tossed a clock at me and I didn’t duck in time.”

Sam’s stomach twists. “Oh. Yeah, I remember now.”

Dean gives him a smile. “So, you want pancakes or eggs and bacon?”

“You pick.” Sam tells him. He hopes that his own smile looks as genuine as his brother’s. That it isn’t full of the foreboding that’s pulsing through him with every beat of his heart.

“Okay, pancakes it is,” Dean says, prodding Sam with his foot. “Up and at ‘em, Sammy. I’m gonna let you measure the flour.”

“Just, uh. I just need a minute, okay?”

Dean peers at him for a moment and then nods. Sam can tell from his brother’s slight frown that Dean knows something is wrong, but isn’t going to call him on it. He’s going to trust that Sam knows what he needs.

Sam waits until his brother disappears inside and then stares out at the forest, unsmiling. Dean’s voice echoes in his ears.

*I told you, dude: poltergeist. Fucker tossed a clock at me and I didn’t duck in time.*

Only that isn’t what Dean said when Sam asked him about the scar in Hibbing. That isn’t what he said at all.

Sam sits on the steps and stares at the dark line of trees and wonders what happened to his brother. He wonders why Dean won’t tell him. And he prays that that’s all it is: Dean refusing to tell him.

Because he can’t even begin to guess what it would mean if Dean *can’t.*
Chapter 15

To Dean’s credit, he makes it almost all the way through the introductory session Sam manages to set up with a local psychiatrist before striding out with a scowl on his face. He’s shaking his right hand as he goes, and as Sam stands up his heart sinks … and keeps dropping as Dr. Richards-Call-Me-Steve appears in the doorway. The man has a rag pressed to his nose and there’s blood dripping down onto his shirt.

“Michelle!” Dr. Steve shouts. “Michelle, I neeb a ribe to da hosbidal.”

“Fucking pussy,” Dean mutters, grabbing Sam’s sleeve and dragging him along.

Sam doesn’t bring up therapy again.

It takes Sam three days to read everything the local library has on dissociative disorder. The research would have gone by more quickly if Dean hadn’t kept getting underfoot—pelting Sam with bunched up pieces of paper, or blaring the latest episode of C.S.I. *(bunch of fucking hacks)*, or reading out gruesome headlines from the online newspapers they subscribe to. Dean is a distraction even when he’s being good, actually: sitting cross-legged on the couch with grease smeared on his cheek and hands while his fingers slide over guns and knives with fluid, pornographic movements. It’s difficult to concentrate on ‘cognitive therapy’ and ‘macropsia’ while Dean is doing that—worse when his brother really focuses on the weapons and starts chewing on his lower lip.

Then there are all of the moments when Dean grimaces and momentarily presses a hand to his temple, which is distracting in an entirely different way.

Finally, Sam resorts to reading at night. He waits until Dean falls asleep in the bed next to him and then he gets up and goes back out to the living room to research. Midway through the fourth book, Sam gets fed up with trying to translate all of the jargon and calls up his old Psych professor, Jeffrey Radison.

It’s three fifteen in the morning, but Radison always claimed he was a night owl and any guilt Sam feels about calling vanishes when the man spends almost thirty minutes playing an awkward game of catch up before he bothers asking why Sam called. Radison answers all of his questions with clear, simple words and even adds several opinions of his own, once Sam has provided the bare bones of the situation.

When he hangs up the phone at five thirty, Sam isn’t sure whether he feels better or worse about Dean’s chances. Everything Radison told him indicates that medication and professional therapy are the most reliable treatments, and neither of those is actually an option. Oh, Dean might agree to go to another psychiatrist’s office after Sam bullies him for about a month, but after what happened last time Sam is certain that his brother would spend the session fucking with the psychiatrist’s head instead of trying to straighten out his own.

On the other hand, Radison also told Sam that some sufferers of dissociative disorder have had good results with alternative treatments. A couple of months ago—hell, a couple of *days* ago—Sam would have scoffed at some of the methods his old professor listed, but these last few days with Dean have lowered his standards a little.

Which is how Sam finds himself palming a crystal on the end of a short chain and calling his brother
into the living room.

“What?” Dean says when he appears in the doorway. There’s grease on his fingers, which means that he’s been at the guns again. Dean has been getting restless just sitting here—increasingly so as the days pass—but Sam isn’t ready to leave. Not until they’ve at least figured out a plan of attack.

“I need you to sit down for a minute,” he says, nodding at the couch.

Dean gives him a skeptical look. “Why?”

“I want to try something.”

Dean raises one eyebrow and doesn’t move.

Sighing, Sam explains, “I want to try hypnotizing you. If we can get you to face the trauma directly, you might be able to start coping with it without having to resort to drastic measures.”

“There wasn’t any ‘trauma’,” Dean says. He actually uses air quotes.

Sam’s too tense to argue with his brother, and anyway it wouldn’t do any good, so all he says is, “Dean.”

“Whatever,” Dean mutters, but he finally walks over to the couch and drops down into a lazy sprawl. He watches Sam pull over a chair of his own and then asks, “By ‘drastic measures’ you mean the dissociation thing, right?”

Well, that and Dean’s infuriating, sickening fascination with the scar on his temple, yeah.

But Sam only says, “Right,” and holds up his hand. When he lets the crystal slip out of his palm, it swings idly at the end of the chain twined around his forefinger. “Okay, just watch the crystal.”

“Am I getting sleeeeeepy?” Dean asks, smirking.

Sam frowns. “This isn’t going to work if you don’t take it seriously, Dean.”

“Oh, I’m totally serious. Go ahead, Sammy. Make me cluck like a chicken.”

Sam’s already on edge from days of research, and from resisting the near-constant urge to kiss Dean stupid, and from having to watch his brother continually rub at his goddamn temple, and so he snaps, “Stop fucking around and concentrate.”

Dean isn’t fazed at all by the frustration in Sam’s voice. “Oh, come on, man,” he scoffs. “You remember what Dad told us about hypnotism. It’s just a scam.”

Because the sun rises and sets out of Dad’s ass, of course.

Swallowing the irrational surge of anger he feels whenever Dean brings their father up, Sam says, “I saw a hypnotist at Stanford, Dean. He didn’t look like a con artist to me.”

“Wow, that’s a rousing endorsement, Sammy,” Dean responds lazily. “Did he make you cluck like a chicken?”

“No, but he made Jack bleed from one side of his hand and not the other.”

Dean snorts. “So what? That’s just mind over matter crap.”
“What the hell do you think hypnotism is, Dean?” Sam demands, exasperated, and then, before his brother can say anything else, continues, “Look, just. Just try it, okay? If it doesn’t work, you can make fun of me all you want.”

“Oh, I’ll do that anyway.”

“Are you going to let me do this or not?”

Dean leans toward Sam at the question, grin turning sharkish. “Tell you what, Sammy. I play along with you now, and when it doesn’t work you can admit that this whole crusade to ‘fix me’ is a massive waste of time and we can get back to hunting. You know, our job? What we’re supposed to be doing?”

Sam isn’t ever going to call his quest to help Dean a waste of time. He’s never going to stop trying either. But Dean doesn’t have to know that.

“Okay, deal.”

Dean looks at Sam for a minute longer, assessing, and apparently Sam’s nerves hide the fact that he’s lying through his teeth because Dean finally nods and sits back with his mouth set in a serious line. “Okay, dude: fire away.”

Sam runs a nervous finger over the crystal. Now that Dean is cooperating, his heart is pounding in his chest and he’s reluctant to start. He’s reluctant to start because he’s suddenly terrified that it isn’t going to work.

Sam has all the faith in the world in hypnotism as a valid practice, but he also knows that there are people out there who, for whatever reason, just can’t be hypnotized. It’d be just like Dean to turn out to be one of the difficult ones.

“Sometime today, Sammy,” Dean prods.

Biting the inside of his cheek, Sam raises the crystal again and sets it spinning. Then, in a soft, even voice, he says, “You’re going to listen to my voice, and just my voice. You will hear my voice and nothing else.”

Dean’s mouth twitches, but to his credit he doesn’t take his eyes off the crystal and he doesn’t laugh.

“I’m going to count backwards from ten, and when I reach one you’re going to be in a deep sleep. Ten ... nine ... eight ... seven ... six ... five ... four ... three ... two ... one.”

Dean’s expression doesn’t change.

“Dean?” Sam tries softly.

Dean doesn’t respond.

“Dean, can you hear my voice?”

“Yeah.” The word is elongated—sloppy—and Sam realizes that his brother isn’t smiling anymore.

“Are you asleep?” he breathes.


Holy shit, it actually worked.
For a couple of minutes, Sam just sits there staring at his brother. As he looks into Dean’s vacant, sleeping eyes, he finds himself breaking out into a cold sweat, realizing he wasn’t expecting this to work—not at all, and certainly not this fast. He expected to have to fight Dean every step of the way, maybe ply him with alcohol to get him relaxed enough to succumb. But despite his bluster, Dean went under like it was nothing, like this is something he does all the time.

Which maybe isn’t all that far from the truth.

After all, how many times when they were growing up did Sam run beside his brother on a morning jog and, casting his eyes to the side, wonder if Dean was even awake? How many times has he seen Dean going through the self-defense techniques Caleb and their father taught them, moving from one to another without the slightest flicker of self-awareness in his eyes? How many disastrous hunts has he had to call his brother’s name more than once to get Dean’s eyes to focus—to pull Dean free from the barricades he erects between his waking mind and the pain of injury?

Sam always thought that was his brother operating on instinct, and maybe it was to some extent, but maybe it was also a little of this: the deliberate, trained shut down of Dean’s rational mind.

Of course, that doesn’t mean Dean would go this easily for a professional. There has to be a layer of trust for hypnosis to work, and Sam thinks that there are only two men in the world who would qualify. The evidence of Dean’s trust—of his faith—jars Sam and leaves his fingertips trembling, sending the crystal spinning again.

Then he wets his lips and says, “Dean, I want you to open your eyes.”

“They are open.”

“No, I want you to open the eyes inside your mind.”

“Oh,” Dean says, and pauses. “Okay.”

“Are they open?”

“Yes.”

Sam stops the crystal, which he doesn’t actually need anymore, and leans over to put it on the floor. His fingers still feel weak as he straightens, but at least they aren’t trembling anymore.

“Tell me what you see.”

“Dark. It’s dark here, Sammy.” Dean sounds younger all of a sudden: eerily so.

Sam is starting to wish that he had paid more attention to the warnings in the articles he read online. Or maybe brought in a professional, if he could have found a way to get Dean relaxed enough. Maybe he should phone Radison and ask for some advice on how to proceed because he’s mucking around with his brother’s subconscious here and he has no idea what he’s doing.

What if he hurts Dean? Oh God, what if he fucks his brother up even worse trying to fix him? What if—

“Sammy?”

Clearing his throat, Sam says, “Yeah, man: I’m right here.”

“I’m scared.”
Dean doesn’t look scared—eyes blank and mouth slack—but there’s fear in his voice, all right, enough to make Sam’s chest twist anxiously. He wishes that he could risk reaching out and offering his brother a little physical comfort, but he isn’t familiar enough with the mechanics of hypnotism to know what that would do to Dean. The hypnotist at Stanford had no trouble touching the people he put under, but he was also an expert. Better for Sam not to take the chance. Words are a weak second best, especially with Dean, but they’re all he has.

“You don’t need to be scared,” Sam says. “Nothing’s going to hurt you. You’re safe.”

“There’re things in the dark. Dad says so.”

Sam’s mouth floods with the taste of bitter resentment. If he manages to get Dean through this okay, then he’s thinking about leaving behind a post-hypnotic suggestion telling Dean to open his eyes and take a good, long look at the man he’s wasting his hero worship on. He wouldn’t have to do more than that. Dean is smart enough to figure out the rest.

“They can’t get you, Dean,” he says now, fighting to keep the anger out of his voice—to keep his words soft and reassuring.

“I know,” Dean agrees. “I can kill them. Dad taught me.”

“Stop talking about Dad!” Sam snaps.

“Okay.”

Just that and nothing more, but Sam’s arms break out into goose bumps. They say you can’t make people do anything they don’t want to do when they’re hypnotized, but Sam is well aware of just how unfairly Dean’s subconscious scales are tilted when it comes to Dean’s own desires and what he thinks Sam wants from him. Visions of his brother coming out of this and then trying to say Dad’s name and being unable flash through Sam’s head and then lodge in his throat, where they clump together and make it difficult to breathe.

Oh shit. Oh shit what did he just do?

“I didn’t mean it,” he says quickly. “You can talk about Dad if you want to. Dean?”

“Okay.”

Sam shuts his eyes and runs a shaking hand through his hair. Jesus Christ, he can’t do this. He can’t keep fumbling around in his brother’s head like this. He opens his eyes, ready to bring Dean back out of it, and finds himself staring at the tiny, hooked scar on his brother’s forehead. His jaw firms.

“Dean, why are you scared?”

“Because I can’t see you. If I can’t see you, I can’t protect you.” Dean’s brow wrinkles minutely. “You shouldn’t be in the dark with me, Sammy. It’s not safe if I can’t see you.”

Sam wants to tell his brother that it’s okay, that he doesn’t have to protect Sam anymore, that Sam can take care of himself, and then he remembers that flash of panic he felt when he yelled at Dean about Dad and the words stick in his throat. After a few moments of struggling with himself, he realizes that even if he knew how to give the command safely, he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t do it because, as painful as it is, he doesn’t have the right to take Dean’s guardianship away from him.

Clearing his throat, Sam presses on and says, “Then don’t stay in the dark, Dean. Come toward me. Follow my voice. It’s light here. There sun’s shining. You’re standing in a field. Do you see it?”
“Nebraska.”

Sam didn’t mean to focus his brother’s mind anywhere in particular, but he realizes instantly that that’s what happened. He casts his own mind back through his memories, looking for the one Dean just stumbled into, and has to ask, “Can you tell me anything else about where you are? What you see?”

“Blue sky. Autumn. There’s a field. I’m wearing a plaid shirt. Red. You’re with me, and Dad, and Bobby.” His lips ease up into something Sam almost wants to call a smile, and he relaxes a little. At least this is a good memory, whenever it is.

“We’re hunting,” Dean adds.

Sam is still clueless, so he asks, “What are we hunting, Dean?”

“Deer.”

That brings everything into sharp focus. Sam remembers that day. Remembers how disgusted he was with the prospect of killing a harmless animal. And how excited Dean was. Sam sulked the whole drive to the woods while Dean leaned up to the front of the car, asking a thousand questions of Dad and Bobby.

“I’m going to get one,” Dean says into the silence of Sam’s memory. “Clean kill. Bobby’s going to show me how to gut it.” His expression clouds. “I don’t know where you went. You were here, but now you’re not. Dad’s gone too. Where are you? Sam? Sammy?”

Yes, Sam remembers that too. Remembers not being able to hold the sickness in anymore and running off to the tree line to puke because he didn’t want Dean to think he was a baby. He remembers Dad finding him, and hunkering down next to him, and explaining the difference between hunting for sport and hunting for food. He remembers how much sense Dad’s explanation made in the trees, and how little sense it made when Sam helped carry the empty, flopping bulk of the deer’s body back to the car.

He wasn’t able to eat a single bite of the venison steaks Bobby cooked that night.

“Sammy?” Dean says again, sounding not just concerned but frightened.

“I’m coming back, Dean,” Sam says quickly. “Dad and me, we’re both coming back. I’m going to help you carry the deer back to the car.”

“Oh,” Dean says. The furrow of tension across his forehead eases. “Yeah, I see you. Where’d you go?”

*To puke my guts up behind a tree.* But that information isn’t going to make Dean feel any better, and Sam has wandered far enough off the reservation already, so he ignores the question and says, “I want you to come forward in time, Dean. You’re twenty-three. Dad’s hurt. He needs rehab on his leg. You just lost one of your jobs and you need money.”

“I’m in Vegas.”

“Yes.”

Dean frowns. “I don’t like it here. I want to go back to Nebraska.”

“No,” Sam says in an effort to head his brother off at the pass. “I need you here, okay? Sam needs
“Sammy’s gone. He left.” There’s no accusation in the words, although it might have made Sam feel better if there were.

*I came back, Dean,* he thinks, but of course this Dean doesn’t know that. This Dean is alone, and scared, and about to make the stupidest decision in his life.

God, they haven’t even really started yet and Sam is already a heartbeat from crying.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he clears his throat and says, “Ah, you’re at the poker table. There’s a man there. I don’t know his name, but he’s a producer.”

“Felix like the cat,” Dean says promptly. “He thinks I move like a cat. I saw his wallet. He’s loaded. I could lift it if I wanted to, take his money. He’s too busy looking at me to notice.”

Sam thinks about the kind of cash a porn producer could conceivably be walking around with and knows that it’s more than Dean ever could have made on that movie. It’s more than enough to have gotten them through the rest of Dad’s rehab. If Dean had just lifted the guy’s wallet, then he’d be fine right now.

“Well don’t you?” Sam asks. It comes out like an accusation, but of course Dean isn’t aware enough to catch that kind of nuance.

“Too many cameras,” he answers placidly. “And the dealer’s watching. Cops’d be on me before I cleared the front door.”

Of course. “What happens next?”

“Felix gives me his card,” Dean says. Then, eerily, his voice changes: lightens into something smarmy, like a good salesman giving a pitch. “I’m in film—adult entertainment, just so we don’t have any misunderstandings here. You ever want to make some good, quick cash, you call that number there and we’ll set something up.”

Sam has to swallow to wet his throat and then he says, “You call the number.”

“Not yet,” Dean corrects. He’s using his own voice again, thank God. “First I check around, make sure they’re legit.”

“But then you call.”

“Yeah.”

Sam already knows as much as he wants to about the hiring process, so he skips over it by saying, “They offered you a part.”

“It’s gay, but I figured it would be. I don’t mind. It’s just sex. Couple of hours and we’re all set.”

It shouldn’t be possible to lie while you’re hypnotized, but that sounds like a lie to Sam. Frowning, he asks, “It doesn’t bother you at all?”

“No.”

“No it doesn’t or no it does?”

“No it does.”
“You just said you didn’t mind,” Sam points out.

Only Dean could possibly manage to be this annoying when he’s unconscious.

There’s a pause while Dean thinks it over and then he clarifies, “I don’t think I mind but I do. I’m not letting myself think about it. Doesn’t matter if I’m nervous. Dad needs the money.” He pauses for a second and then says, “I can talk about Dad, right?”

Fuck fuckity fuck. Why the hell has Dean, who is so stubborn when he’s awake, decided to be so damned accommodating when he’s asleep? Why couldn’t he just keep being a contrary son of a bitch?

“Yeah, Dean,” Sam says aloud. “You can talk about Dad whenever you want, okay?”

“Okay,” Dean agrees.

There’s a part of Sam—a small but very vocal part—that wants to stop the conversation here and tell Dean to wake up again. Any further into this story and neither of them is going to like what they hear. Then again, that’s the point to this little exercise, isn’t it? To make Dean face up to what happened?

“What happens when you go to the studio?” Sam asks after a few minutes.

“A girl meets me downstairs. Make-up. She says I have a great mouth.”

Sam frowns. I’ll bet she does, he thinks darkly.

“She takes me upstairs and gives me the script to read while she works,” Dean says, and then stops. After almost a minute of waiting for his brother to start up again, Sam prods, “Then what?”

“I can’t—I c-can’t—” Dean’s breath is coming faster, and Sam has seen fear often enough to recognize the emotion when he sees it, even when it’s watered down like it is now.

He leans forward and says, “It’s okay, Dean; you’re safe. You’re not there anymore, okay? No one can touch you. But I need you to tell me what happened. I need you to remember how you felt.”

Either Dean didn’t hear Sam telling him that he isn’t actually at the studio or Sam’s demand that his brother remember how he felt is negating that information because when Dean speaks again, he’s still using the present tense. Sam thinks about correcting him, but Dean looks calm again, and he’s talking, so Sam keeps his mouth shut and listens.

“We shoot the blowjob first. Guy’s cock is big and I don’t like the way it tastes. He’s holding my head and shoving it down my throat. My jaw hurts and I’m having trouble breathing but I can’t remember how to make him stop. He does, though, I think because maybe I was crying? No, not crying. My eyes are watering because I’m allergic to the makeup.”

That’s a load of crap if Sam ever heard one, but he presses his lips together and doesn’t interrupt.

“Keith asks if I need a break. They’re all looking at me, the crew, and I can tell they’re thinking that it’s amateur hour. Pisses me off. Don’t tell me how to suck cock. These lips were made for sucking cock, baby.”

Sam isn’t sure whether to laugh or scream. He can’t tell if that last bit was Dean-as-narrator or Dean-in-the-moment. Doesn’t know which scenario he finds more horrifying.
“I’m ready when we try again,” Dean is continuing. “I’m a fast learner. I do better this time. I can tell
I’m doing better because this time when I gag on it he keeps going. I can’t breathe. Think I might
pass out but I don’t want to call another cut. Not a fucking amateur. I can do this. I can do it good
enough that he’ll come and then we’ll be all set.”

There’s a brief pause and then Dean says, “He comes on my face. Money shot. Dunno why it’s
called that but it is. He makes me lick the come off his cock, but I don’t mind the taste so much
anymore: must be getting used to it.”

Dean falls silent again.

God, Sam feels sick. He feels filthy by association, by virtue of sitting here and listening while Dean
talks about how it felt to deep throat a cock and get a facial. When this is over, if Dean lets him, Sam
is going wrap himself around his brother and stop thinking for a couple of hours.

“Then what?”

“We have lunch. There are mini-quiches. They taste pretty good.”

“What happens when lunch is over?”

“We finish shooting and I go home,” Dean says. There’s a flicker of something deep in his eyes too
instinctive to be called evasion.

Sighing, Sam runs a hand through his hair and says, “I want you to tell me about the rest of the
shoot, Dean. I want you to tell me how you felt.”

Dean is quiet, frowning slightly, and Sam is just beginning to think that he’s going to need
to give the command a second time when Dean says, “It doesn’t hurt. Not at first. But ... everyone’s
watching. They’re watching me bent over with some guy’s fingers up my ass. There’s a girl—she’s
still eating her sandwich. Like it isn’t anything. Like I’m not even fucking there.”

It makes sense—with the kind of shit that people who work in the porn industry must see every day,
they’re not going to treat a little bit of fingering as anything special—but Sam still feels a flutter of
anger that anyone could have been so callous in the face of Dean’s fear. Although, knowing his
brother, Dean was doing his damnedest to hide how he was feeling. And Sam saw the DVD. He
knows Dean better than anyone and he watched his brother get opened up and fucked and he didn’t
catch a fraction of the apprehension that’s clearly audible in Dean’s voice right now.

How can he blame that nameless girl for missing something that even he couldn’t see?

“I don’t think it will but it feels good when he fucks me,” Dean says. His voice is calm again. Bland.
“I like this more than the blowjob.”

That gets Sam’s attention enough that he rouses himself to ask, “Why?”

“I can breathe. And I don’t need to know what I’m doing. And I don’t have to look at him. I can
close my eyes and be somewhere else in my head.”

There’s a masochistic part of Sam that wants to ask where the hell Dean could have gone when a
stranger was busy shoving a cock up his ass, but he pushes the urge aside and says, “So you’re on
the bed and he’s ... he’s ...”

Sam can’t say it so Dean says it for him.
“He’s fucking me.” His voice is breathy with something that isn’t fear—something that makes Sam’s groin heat despite the circumstances. “It feels good,” he continues. “It feels so fucking good, but I don’t know if I’m supposed to like it. If that’s okay. I d-don’t know how I’m supposed to act. I can’t—I can’t remember if I’m acting anymore.”

Unexpectedly, Dean gives a full-bodied jerk and moans, low and hurt.

Sam reaches forward without thinking, only remembering at the last second that he probably shouldn’t touch. Closing his hand into a fist, he asks, “What’s wrong?”

“I f-forgot about the other guy, but he’s getting on the bed. They want me to get on top so he c-can —watching, they’re watching, I c-can’t—Sam, I want Sam but he’s not here, he left, Sammy please —”

Dean is all but vibrating with fear, chest moving with rapid flutter of his breath. Even his blank eyes are beginning to reflect his horror, and his right hand is twitching where it rests in his lap. If Dean’s mind were actually in control of his body right now, that hand would be up at his temple. Rubbing.

Sam doesn’t hesitate.

“Go forward, Dean,” he says. “The shoot’s over. It’s done, okay?”

He expects his brother to quiet again, but if anything, Sam’s words leave Dean even more agitated than before.

“No,” Dean moans. “No, no, no.”

“What’s wrong? Dean, what’s happening?”

“Don’t want to, don’t make me, don’t want to go back into the mirror.”

Time freezes for an endless, suspended moment. Then it starts back up and Sam says, “What mirror?”

Dean rocks minutely back and forth and doesn’t answer. His hand is twitching so violently that it’ll be a miracle if it isn’t sore and cramped later.

Sam has to stop this. He has to bring Dean out. Oh God, Dean looks so scared ...

But this, whatever it is, is inside Dean’s head. They can’t run from it. Dean can’t run from it.

“You have to tell me what’s happening. Where are you? Talk to me, Dean.”

“Bathroom,” Dean whimpers, rocking faster. His hand starts to lift and Sam’s chest gives a wrenching twist.

“Stop moving, Dean.”

Dean stops. Dean goes so eerily, completely still that it makes Sam nauseous to look at him, but he doesn’t take the order back. This, whatever it is, is going to be bad enough without having to watch Dean worry at the scar.

Sam gives himself a moment to breathe—to steady himself—and then, keeping his voice as calm as he can, says, “Okay, you’re in the bathroom. Are you still at the studio?”

“Yes,” Dean breathes.
“What are you doing?”

Dean’s lips purse momentarily and when he parts them a stream of words spills out—all in a rush as though by speaking quickly enough he can race straight through whatever is bothering him and out the other side. “Cleaning up. I’m supposed to clean up. I took a shower, but I don’t feel clean. I feel fucking filthy and my ass hurts. I’m thinking of throwing up again. Puked in the sink. Mini quiches and come. Fucking reeks.”

“Then what?”

“There’s a knock at the door.” Dean raises his voice, like he’s calling to someone. “Just a second!” Then, despite the command to stay still, he twitches and blurts out, panicked, “I’m leaving. I’m going back to Dad, I have the money, everything’s fine, everything’s okay.”

Sam has never felt like more of an asshole in his life, but he still opens his mouth and says, “No. No, Dean, you’re not. You’re in the bathroom. Who’s at the door?”

Dean doesn’t say anything, but after a few seconds Sam realizes that the horrible, whining sound filling the room is coming from his brother’s throat. Fear makes his voice sharp.

“Who’s at the door, Dean?”

“I don’t know,” Dean whispers. “I don’t know I don’t know. I’m not looking. I’m trying to wash the sink. I don’t want anyone to know I puked. Don’t make me, Sammy, I don’t want to know I don’t want to remember please.”

Sam’s chest feels shredded. His hands are shaking violently and he thinks that he’s going to be sick. He thinks that he’s going to be sick because he thinks he knows what Dean is going to say.

Oh please God let him be wrong.


“He’s here,” Dean whimpers. “He’s here inside the bathroom I hear him come inside but I don’t turn around because I was crying and I don’t want him to see. Get out, asshole, are you deaf I said I’m not done!”

Dean’s body jerks again, and this time his head snaps forward as though ... as though someone just grabbed him from behind and cracked his forehead against the wall. Except in the bathroom, above the sink, there wouldn’t have been a wall.

There would have been a mirror.

Dean’s hand flies up to his forehead, to that scar: the memory of that distant violence stronger than Sam’s command. He’s rocking back and forth on the couch wildly now, and sobbing, and digging his fingers into his temple like he can tear the memory out.

Sam knows now, he knows, God help him, and he’d stop Dean if he could but an icy, slick cold grips him and he can’t move. Can’t speak. Can’t do anything but sit there and watch his brother self-destruct.

“He pushes me into the mirror,” Dean is sobbing. “My head. My forehead in the glass and it breaks and I can’t see. I can’t—there’s blood in my eyes and I can’t see I can’t—I can’t move, I can’t—Get off. Get off you son of a bitch, don’t. Don’t. Dad! Sammy!”
Then, terribly, Dean’s voice changes. It’s a whisper, sly and caressing and completely at odds with the tears streaming down his face.

“Sammy’s not here, Dean-o. He went away and left you all alone. Now be a good boy and open up.”

Dean jerks again, making a terrible, choked noise, and it’s that sound—the sound that is surely the same sound Dean made on the floor of that bathroom with the smell of his vomit in his nose and the sound of that sly, caressing voice in his ears and someone, some goddamned bastard raping him—that finally jerks Sam out of his shock.

“You’re safe,” he chokes out, reaching forward to pull Dean into his arms and fuck the danger of touching him right now. His voice is thick with tears and he can’t see clearly but he isn’t crying: he’s too horrified to manage it. “Dean, you’re safe. You’re not in Vegas anymore, you’re not in the bathroom, you’re in Vermont. You’re in a cabin in Vermont and you’re with me—you’re with Sammy—and we’re taking a break.”

Dean goes still in Sam’s arms.

Sam keeps talking for a few seconds before he realizes that Dean isn’t moving anymore and then, dread cold and heavy in his stomach, he eases back enough to look. He has to rub his eyes with one hand before they work well enough to make his brother’s face out, and then relief makes him shudder.

Dean’s eyes are red and there are tear tracks all over his cheeks, but his face is calm. Empty.

Sam wishes like hell that he could turn off his own emotions that easily. That he could forget. A sickening wave of black despair, thick like tar, sloshes through him and his back bows with the force of it. For several minutes, he’s helpless to do anything but cling to his brother with his eyes shut and his muscles screaming in protest, and then, finally, the tide recedes enough for him to slump back against his chair.

“Oh my God,” he whispers.

Dean stares ahead placidly.

“Are you—” Sam swallows thickly and then asks, “Are you okay, Dean?”

“I’m with Sammy,” Dean says. His voice is still a little wet, but the tone says that Sam is asking a stupid question.

Sam leans forward on his knees and presses the heels of his hands against his eyes, choking on the lump in his throat. How the fuck can Dean say that? How can he, when Sam pushed and prodded and begged until Dean agreed to let himself be dragged through Hell a second time?

“Oh my God, Dean, you must hate me.”

“You’re Sam,” Dean says, like that’s an answer, and Sam is left staggering under the sheer weight of his brother’s faith in him, which is overshadowed only by the weight of his own responsibility.

And Sam can’t. He just can’t right now.

Dean is safe in his own mind, and can stay there until Sam is ready to handle him, and so Sam lets
himself go. He cradles his head in his hands and weeps until his eyes ache and he’s lightheaded and there are long, dripping lines of mingled snot and spit and tears dripping down from his nose and mouth. After what feels like hours, he finally takes a shuddering breath and sits up.

Dean is sitting calmly on the couch, just the way Sam left him. The tear tracks on his cheeks have dried, but the skin around the scar at his temple is still red and irritated: not surprising with the way Dean was digging at it. Just looking at the scar makes Sam want to burst into tears all over again, but he just isn’t capable of it. Not right now.

“Okay,” he rasps, wiping his mouth and nose on the sleeve of his shirt. “Okay, Dean, I’m going to count back from ten, and when I get to one, you’re going wake up feeling refreshed, okay?”

As though it has only been a couple of minutes instead of hours, Dean responds instantly. “Will I remember?”

Oh God. Oh—Jesus Christ, what is Sam supposed to say to that?

He drags a shaking hand over his mouth and then asks, “Do you want to?”

“No.” It’s a whisper. Barely an exhale.

Sam opens his mouth to tell Dean that he doesn’t have to remember if he doesn’t want to and then shuts it again. If Dean doesn’t remember, then things are just going to continue down the same, ruinous path they were on before, and Sam would have put his brother through his own private Hell again for nothing.

Oh God, Dean is going to hate him for this.

How can he not, when Sam already hates himself?

“You’re going to remember, Dean,” he says, and he thought he couldn’t cry anymore but it turns out he was wrong because he’s crying now. “I need you to remember everything about the movie and what happened in the bathroom and when it gets bad, I need you not to push your emotions away. I need you to face them head on and if you—if you need it, then I need you to ask for help. Do you understand?”

Dean’s mouth trembles a little, and for a moment Sam wonders whether this is the one thing that will break Dean’s inner scales: if this is the one thing Sam can ask for himself that Dean doesn’t have it in him to grant. But he waits, and eventually Dean breathes, “Gotta remember for Sam.”

“Ohay.” Sam wipes his eyes once more and then, taking a deep breath, counts, “Ten ... nine ... eight ... seven ... six ... five ... four ... three ... two ... one.”

Dean blinks. For a heartbeat, he looks confused—maybe a little groggy but still okay—and then his face crumples. He gets his hands up to cover it, but not before Sam sees the horror in his eyes. Not before he watches the first, fresh tears spill over and down Dean’s cheeks. His brother’s shoulders are moving, his chest hitching in silent sobs, which are so much better than the noises he was making before that Sam’s almost relieved to hear them.

“Dean—” he chokes out, leaning forward.

Sam’s wrist is stinging and he’s left staring at an empty couch before he realizes that Dean has slapped his hand away and bolted. Standing up, he turns to see his brother disappearing into the kitchen.
Sam doesn’t know how he could have expected any other reaction, but his chest still feels bloody and raw as he follows.

Dean is still in the house, at least: leaning against the kitchen counter while he covers his face as best as he can with a single hand. His head is bowed. His shoulders and back trembling.

“Dean,” Sam breathes, moving forward, and Dean takes an awkward, jerking step sideways and offers Sam more of his back.

“Don’t touch me!” His brother’s voice is wet, but clearly understandable. “You fucker. You goddamned son of a bitch.”

Sam’s stomach pulls agonizingly tight, and his chest gives a short, hot pulse. He’s crying again: exhausted, weak tears. “I’m sorry, Dean” he says. “I’m so goddamned sorry that you’re hurting.” He pauses to sniff and wipe his nose on his sleeve. “But I am not sorry I made you remember. This was killing you, man. You needed to face it.”

“No I fucking didn’t!” Dean yells, whirling.

Sam flinches at the wrecked, devastated expression on his brother’s face.

“I was dealing!” Dean rages through his tears. “I was doing just fucking fine! So I wasn’t interested in sex, so fucking what? I told you I was gonna put out anyway, I told you. But that wasn’t enough for the Great Sam Winchester. You had to have everything, didn’t you? You had to go digging around to see what makes me tick—”

“That’s not what I—”

“—and now I—fuck, I can’t—it’s right fucking there—Don’t you fucking touch me!”

Sam freezes, hands raised and palms out, and watches while his brother edges for the door. “Dean. Dean, where are you going?”

“I can’t deal with you right now,” Dean chokes out. “Don’t follow me.”

A moment later he’s gone.
Chapter 16

Dean doesn’t come back until well after dark. He lets himself in with his head lowered and his shoulders hunched—defensive—and strides straight past the kitchen table where Sam has been waiting for the past four hours.

Sam watches his brother’s back disappear down the hall, and a moment later there’s the soft, unmistakable sound of the bedroom door clicking closed. Sam’s chest feels even emptier at being so completely shut out, but now that Dean is back he can at least relax enough to succumb to the bleak exhaustion that’s been tugging at him ever since Dean rushed out the front door.

Sam knows better than to expect anything good from his dreams, tonight of all nights, and he isn’t disappointed. His memories of the movie, which were always unrelentingly vivid, have taken on new colors. They twist through him in jagged flashes, like glints of light off of mirror shards: Dean’s lips stretched around a cock; Dean’s throat working as an unseen man pumps in and out; Dean’s eyelashes fluttering behind the black panther mask; Dean’s back muscles twitching uncontrollably as he’s fucked full and open; Dean’s sore, sloppy hole leaking come.

Familiar, so familiar, but there’s a new soundtrack laid over the breathy moans and grunts that used to be there: a startled, choked noise of pain. It’s the noise that Dean made this afternoon on the couch, the noise that Dean—Sam’s Dean—made on the floor of some dirty bathroom while some nameless, faceless son of a bitch took something he had no right to. Everything is washed over with a sickly, yellow color and fogged with a noxious, gassy smell—like gone-over mustard or rotting eggs, the smell of his brother’s vomit—and Sam just wants to wake up. He prays to wake up.

When the nightmare finally releases him, it’s morning. Sam blinks puffy eyes at the back of the couch and starts to sit up. A bolt of pain rips through his back at the movement and he freezes with a grimace. After a few moments, when the agony has died down to a dull throb and Sam thinks it’s safe enough to roll over, he does.

Dean is sitting in a chair on the other side of the room watching him.

“Hey,” Sam says immediately, and starts to struggle up into a sitting position. His spine feels like it’s made out of rusty nails instead of bones, and his mouth tastes like bad dreams, but it’s his heart that’s the problem. His stupid, stuttering heart.

“How long have you been there?” he asks when Dean doesn’t respond.

“A while.”

The irises of Dean’s eyes are tea green this morning, pale as Sam has ever seen them, but the whites are red and scratchy. The five o’clock shadow on his jaw seems more like it’s going on midnight and his lips look chapped. Possibly because Dean has spent all night chewing on them.

He’s still the most beautiful thing Sam has ever seen.

Closing his eyes, Sam reaches up and rubs at the lids. “Did you sleep?” he asks.

“Some.”

Not well, though, Sam is guessing. He lowers his hand again and Dean hasn’t moved. His expression hasn’t changed either, but Sam’s mind is shaking loose from his nightmare and he reads more on his brother’s face than he did before. There’s a certain set to Dean’s jaw—an unmistakable
tilt to his head.

Dean is sitting there for a reason. He wants something.

Sam really, really wishes that his brother would be willing to wait until Sam has had his first cup of coffee, and possibly another crying jag in the bathroom, but he doesn’t think Dean has that kind of patience.

He’s about to ask what his brother needs from him when Dean opens his mouth and says, “I need you to kiss me.”

It’s possible that that word doesn’t actually mean what Sam thinks it does.

“What?” he manages.

Dean shifts in the chair, leaning back and kicking one leg out in front of him. It’s a deceptively lazy posture. “You heard me.”

Sam’s back isn’t doing more than twingeing at him now, so he could make a run for it. He might manage to make it to the door before Dean got to him. Maybe.

“What’s wrong, Sammy? Chicken?” It’s the same voice Dean always used on Sam when they were kids. Taunting. Infuriating.

Amazing how it has exactly the same effect on him now, even after all that has happened.

It’s a toss up whether Sam’s chest or his voice is tighter as he says, “You hating me isn’t actually a turn on, Dean.”

Dean sits up in his chair again. “I don’t hate you. I’m pissed as hell, but I don’t hate you.”

Sam’s stomach uncurls slightly at his brother’s declaration, which he never expected to hear at all let alone so soon. He watches while Dean tilts his face up in something that’s half dare and half command. His brother’s eyes have regained a little of their color, and the way he’s looking back at Sam says, more clearly than words ever could, that Sam needs to stop stalling and get over there and lay one on him already.

Sam isn’t anywhere near awake enough or stable enough to deal with whatever Dean is angling for, and he knows it. He still feels tender inside from yesterday’s revelation—filled with a sorrow that’s just starting to fleck with rage. He also spent last night dreaming of Dean being debauched and violated; and he’s horrified by that, he is, but there’s still an unrelenting, hungry streak in him that gets off on envisioning his brother’s skin painted with come, no matter what the circumstances.

“Sometime before we both die of old age would be good,” Dean says, unsmiling, and he has no goddamned sense of self-preservation whatsoever, does he?

“I can’t,” Sam says tersely, getting to his feet and running a hand through his hair.

“Sure you can. You just pucker up and—”

“I can’t, Dean!” Sam maybe shouldn’t be yelling at Dean right now, but he doesn’t know how else to get through to his brother. “You have no goddamned idea where my head’s at right now!”

Neither does Sam, for that matter. All he knows is that there’s a thrumming under his skin and the more awake he gets the stronger it becomes. That thrumming is mixed up with his anger, and his
desire, and some part of him that doesn’t feel human at all.

He takes a deep breath, trying to center himself, and then says, “Dean, if I. If I kiss you right now I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop.”

“You’ll stop.”

“You don’t know that!” Sam yells, rounding on his brother.

Dean looks up at him, cool as ever, and doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t need to. All of his certainty is clearly visible in his eyes.

Sam lets out an incredulous little laugh as he ducks his head to pinch the bridge of his nose, but the rage in his chest has snuffed out. It can’t stand in the face of his brother’s unflinching faith.

After a few moments, he lifts his head again and says, “I need to brush my teeth first.”

Dean stands up, raising one eyebrow and quirking his mouth in something that’s almost a smile. “Dude, I’m not a chick: I’m not gonna complain about a little morning breath. Now get your ass over here already.”

It isn’t like Sam hasn’t known that, but this is the first time that he finds himself noticing the difference in their heights in a distinctly unbrotherly way. Dean isn’t a small man by anyone’s calculations, but as Sam looks down at him he’s painfully aware that he’s still taller and stronger than his brother. If Dean wrapped his legs around Sam’s waist, Sam could hold him up as they fucked against the wall. If Sam wanted to, he could push Dean down in bed, hold him there—he could fuck into Dean whether Dean wanted him to or not.

God, he should be sick to his stomach, thinking something like that after yesterday’s revelation, and he is, but his groin is also pulsing and he feels flushed. Dean is standing there looking up at him like he’s safe, like Sam wasn’t just thinking about how nice it would feel to hold his brother still and push right in, like he wasn’t imagining warm, twitching velvet around his cock, and Sam still wants. God help him, he wants so much that it burns.

“You gonna lay one on me or what, Sammy?” Dean asks.

Yes, Sam thinks with a violent, hot pulse, and then he hears that sound in his head—choked cry of startled pain—and flushes with shame. Christ, he’s no better than Dean’s rapist. No better than Dad.

“I’m—I’m just gonna brush my teeth first,” he fumbles, starting for the bathroom. He just needs to splash some water on his face—needs to cool down until he can approach this kiss rationally. Before he’s taken more than two steps, though, Dean grabs his wrist and jerks him back into a kiss.

Dean kisses Sam like they’re at war, a clash of chapped lips and blunt teeth that’s awkward and uncomfortable and a little painful. It jars Sam out of his guilt and self-pity and leaves him nowhere at all: standing there blankly while his brother all but mauls his mouth. Then realization creeps in and he understands that this isn’t Dean’s way of trying to get back at Sam for making him remember. It’s his way of trying to bluster through whatever shit he’s using this kiss to work out.
It’s the same old story—Dean is scared, and determined not to give in to it, and so he’s plastering on this bold, brash front to use as a shield between him and his fear. For someone who knows him, though—for someone like Sam, who knows Dean better than he knows himself—that front is transparent as glass.

Now that his mind is working again, Sam can practically taste his brother’s fear pouring slick and cold down his throat. Dean’s apprehension tastes bitter and chalky beneath the waxy cherry tang of the Chap Stick he’s wearing, and Sam would almost prefer the sulfuric taste of his dream.

Almost.

It’s impossible for Sam to stand by and do nothing when his brother is sending up smoke signals and distress flares, and so he brings his right hand up to cup Dean’s cheek and he tilts his head to fit their mouths together more smoothly. His left hand—the one Dean is still clenching in a death grip—moves forward to close around his brother’s hip. Dean’s t-shirt is worn and soft beneath Sam’s fingertips, but it isn’t what Sam wants so he pushes up under the shirt to rest his hand on skin. Despite the early morning chill in the air, Dean is warm to the touch and silken smooth.

Sam finds the crest of his brother’s hipbone and traces it with his thumb, reverent, and Dean’s breath stutters into his mouth. His grip on Sam’s wrist clenches for a heartbeat and then slacks, falling away. The painful pressure of his mouth eases, turning supple beneath Sam’s.

Like the ocean after a storm, Dean calms.

That’s it, Sam thinks as he smoothes his tongue over his brother’s rough lips. The cherry taste pops in his mouth—not sad anymore, just intriguing—and he tugs Dean’s lower lip into his mouth and sucks on it while he eases his hand further around his brother’s body to rest at the small of Dean’s back. He can feel the dip of Dean’s spine beneath his fingertips, and when he drops his hand just so he finds the faint, rising slope of his brother’s ass.

Sam doesn’t remember why they’re kissing anymore. There’s no room in his head for anything but Dean—no room for anything but cataloguing every taste touch smell—but he knows he likes it. And he knows that he wants more of this, more of Dean, so he releases his brother’s lip and pushes his tongue into Dean’s mouth instead. Dean makes a noise at that—some soft exhalation of breath that isn’t quite a moan—and Sam, greedy for more, steps forward to crowd up against him.

It’s odd, but it feels like Dean is receding instead of coming closer, so Sam steps forward again, and again, and finally Dean lets out another, slightly louder grunt and comes to a stop. Sam’s hand is caught between his brother’s warm, flexing back and something cool and unyielding—the living room wall—and he likes the way their fronts are pressed so snugly together but he doesn’t like not being able to touch, to explore, so he tugs his hand free and pushes it up beneath Dean’s shirt along his stomach instead.

Dean’s hands are on Sam, both of them hanging onto Sam’s biceps like he’s afraid Sam is going to flip at any moment and run. As though that’s an option. As though Sam would remember how to breathe without his brother standing in front of him to show him how.

He can’t stop kissing Dean long enough to reassure him verbally (Dean wouldn’t like that anyway, hates words, he’s word-a-phobic) so instead Sam does his best to show Dean with his body. Twisting his hips slightly, he manages to force his leg between his brother’s and fixes his thigh nice and firm up against Dean’s cock. His own erection presses against Dean’s hipbone, and Sam is pretty sure that it would only take him a few thrusts to get himself off this way, with Dean’s mouth at his disposal and Dean’s scent infecting his blood and Dean’s body so warm and firm and strong.
But Dean isn’t hard. Dean isn’t hard at all.

Show him, Sam thinks desperately. *If I can show him, if I can make him feel it, feel so good ...*

He drops his hand from his brother’s stomach to palm at Dean’s cock through his jeans. It’s difficult to feel anything through the stiff material, though—difficult for both of them—so he tears himself free from his brother’s lips long enough to look down and open up Dean’s pants.

“Sam,” Dean starts, breathless, but Sam’s name turns into a muffled sound as he catches his brother’s lips again. Dean makes another, louder noise as Sam pushes his hand into the opening and gets it around his brother’s cock (*so soft, feels so delicate and fragile*) and starts stroking. There’s no immediate response so he tugs harder, tightening his grip and jackings Dean’s cock in short, hard bursts. As his caresses continue to have no effect, his kisses grow desperate and rough.

“Come on,” he mumbles between bites and licks. “Come on, feel so good, want you to come for me.”

But Dean’s cock still isn’t so much as twitching and Sam realizes with a feeling like falling that Dean’s hold on his arms has changed. Dean isn’t holding him in place anymore, he’s trying to push Sam off, and as soon as that information filters through his aroused haze he drops Dean’s dick like it’s on fire and steps back.

Dean’s a mess.

Sam doesn’t know how long his brother has been like this, doesn’t know how he missed Dean falling apart on him. Dean is leaning against the wall and shaking uncontrollably. Not tiny tremors, either, but full-bodied *shakes* like he’s in detox. His breath is coming in hard pants—panic, not passion, because his cock is small and limp and pathetic where it hangs out from his jeans. There are tears tangled in his lashes and more moisture on his cheeks and when Sam licks his lips he tastes salt.

“Oh God,” he breathes. “Oh God, Dean, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Are you fucking happy?” Dean spits, tucking himself away with sharp, rapid movements. His hands are trembling and it takes him several tries to get the zipper back up.

As Sam watches his brother fight with his button, he starts to work through some of his horrified guilt and remembers that Dean asked for this. Maybe not the end of it, not Sam’s hand on his cock trying to force him to arousal, but he asked for the beginning of it. And Sam warned him, he fucking warned Dean that he wouldn’t be able to stop. He’s still too guilty to work up much anger, but he can sense it there, fluttering indignantly around the edges of his vision.

“You told me to kiss you!” he blurts.

“As a test, Sam,” Dean shouts back, giving up on the button. His right hand lifts up to his temple: fingers trembling. “I wanted to find out if I could still—if I could—”

He realizes what he’s doing and, with a grimace of disgust, puts his hand down. His face scrunches a second time, as though he’s fighting a sneeze, and then he’s crying again: weak and defeated. Sam wants to reach out to his brother and doesn’t dare. Thankfully, Dean gets himself back under control quickly: pinching the bridge of his nose and blinking rapidly until the tears stop.

“Then, in a subdued tone, he says, “I can’t stop thinking about it. Every time I close my eyes he’s there, and his voice, it.” He grimaces, jaw working, and then he looks at Sam. His eyes have undergone another one of those fey sea changes and are now bottle green. Bottle green and miserable.
“You didn’t want me faking it?” he says, lips drawing into a tight smile that can’t decide whether it wants to be angry or sad. “Fine, now I fucking can’t.”

A solitary tear slips from his left eye and this time Sam can’t keep himself from reaching out. “Dean—”

Dean punches him.

When Sam’s eyes have stopped watering enough to see again, Dean is gone and the front door of the cabin is banging shut.

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Dean comes back an hour later, silent and stormy. His bare feet are grass-stained and red from the cold and if Sam had any room in him for another worry then he’d be concerned about frostbite. Right now he’s too full up for more than a faint pang that’s relieved moments later when Dean pulls on a thick pair of socks and his shoes and covers the reddened flesh up.

Sam sits in the kitchen, out of the way and silent, as his brother bangs through the cabin packing all of their stuff. He isn’t quite sure whether he’s supposed to come with or if this is Dean leaving him, and the uncertainty leaves an acidic, biting taste in his mouth. His stomach feels like it’s full of eels, slipping and writhing around each other. There are moths fluttering in his hollowed-out, shadowed chest.

When Dean is done loading everything into the car, he comes back one last time and stands in the doorway. His left shoulder props open the door while he toys with the keys he’s holding in his right hand, thumb moving over the serrated bits of metal and jangling them together. So many keys for a life spent on the road—key to the Impala, key to the toolbox, keys to various safety deposit drops around the country, skeleton keys for breaking into locked offices when they can’t be bothered to dig the lock-picking tools out of the trunk.

When Sam lived in Stanford he had one key for his apartment and one for his bike lock and that was it. If Dean leaves him here now, he won’t even have that much: both keys were lost in the fire and of course there was no point in replacing them after. If Dean leaves him now, he won’t ... God, he won’t have fucking anything.

Dean isn’t looking at Sam. His head is twisted around toward the cabin’s front drive and the road away. Somewhere in the line of trees Sam can just make out past his brother’s chest, there are birds calling to one another: heralds of the returning spring. It’s still cold here, though. Still winter.

“There’s a job in New Jersey,” Dean says finally.

Sam doesn’t know what to say to that except, “Okay.”

Dean squints at the woods for a moment longer and then his jaw pulls tight and he says, “You need an engraved invitation or what?”

The rush of relief leaves Sam dizzy and he stumbles a little on his way past Dean and outside. He wants to thank his brother, but the threat of violence is still evident in the set of Dean’s shoulders and he knows better than to offer something Dean can’t accept.

The ride to Jersey is hellish: Dean is mute and seems disinclined to turn on the radio the way he normally does. He drives with his window rolled up and the heater on and from time to time he lifts a hand to worry at the scar at his temple. Then he catches himself at it and scowls, lowering his hand to the wheel and hanging on with white-knuckled determination.
Until he forgets again and the cycle starts back up.

Sam leans his own forehead against the window. The sun burns against his closed eyelids like fire, but he’s still cold.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It’s like living with a hurricane.

Dean is vicious and then calm again in turns—completely composed one moment and raging the next. The barbs he flings are double-edged, cutting them both, and when Sam reaches out to try and soothe his brother’s wounds, Dean snarls and lashes out like an injured animal. He pops painkillers like candy, trying to ward off the persistent ache in his head, but there aren’t enough painkillers in the world to touch what he’s trying to numb, and he keeps reaching up anyway.

The one time Sam brings his brother’s attention to it instead of waiting for Dean to notice on his own what he’s doing, Dean tears a light fixture out of their motel room wall and hurls it through the mirror hanging over the dresser. He’s puking before the glass has settled, right in the middle of the floor—stumbles for the door as soon as he can manage it and all but collapses on the curb outside. Sam smooths it over with the motel attendant who comes running, charging the damage to one of their credit cards, and then packs their things hurriedly and joins his brother in the car.

He’s careful not to mention the scar after that, but even during Dean’s calm periods, when they stand at the eye of the storm, they’re still painfully out of step.

In Cedar Falls, Pennsylvania, Sam manages to botch what should have been a simple interview with the grieving widow and gets chased out of the house while the woman hurls insults and curses at his back.

In Canton, Kentucky, Dean almost gets caught swiping records from the local coroner’s office. Sam has to break a couple of car windows (setting off the alarms and getting the cop’s attention) in order to give his brother time to squirm back out of the window and get away.

In River Junction, Tennessee, what should have been a two-day job takes them two weeks, and when they finally locate Josiah Fields’ grave, they nearly get themselves killed before they manage to light the poor son of a bitch’s remains.

Afterwards, sore and bruised and exhausted, they limp back to the motel room in silence. Dean takes the first shower like he always does, while Sam sits on the edge of the bed and stares at his hands and wonders whether it’s ever going to get any better. The question doesn’t make him sad anymore: just angry. It just fills him with a hopeless, directionless rage that makes him want to strap his knife to his ankle and drive out to Vegas and cut his way through every single person who had anything to do with Dean’s movie.

Because one of those people wasn’t satisfied with watching Dean get fucked open by two cocks at once. One of those people—a grip or a best boy or, fuck, one of the PAs—followed Sam’s brother to the bathroom for a follow-up performance. Dean didn’t see the guy’s face, though, so the only way for Sam to know for sure that he’s taken care of business is to castrate every last fuck with a dick who works there.

He isn’t quite far gone enough to actually *do* something like that—not yet—but that doesn’t stop him from imagining ten different kinds of bloody retribution.

Dean doesn’t take long in the shower—he never does, doesn’t like bathrooms all that much these
days—and then Sam takes his brother’s place and lets the lukewarm water wash the sludge of anger from his skin. By the time he turns off the shower, his rage is banked down to nothing more than an echoing reverberation of the dull, aching throb in his chest.

When he emerges several minutes later, Dean is already in bed and Sam figures he’s sleeping.

Then Dean says, “Well, that was fun.”

He’s facing the wall so Sam can’t see his face, but Dean’s voice is blunted, so this probably isn’t the opening sally of yet another attack.

“Yeah,” Sam sighs as he pulls back the sheets on his own bed.

“On the bright side, you managed not to get choked this time.”

For Dean, it’s an apology and a request for forgiveness and a peace offering all in one. Sam is too tired to stop the first tear from falling, but he manages to blink back the second before he really gets going.

“Yeah,” he says after a moment. “Looks like I’m on a roll.”

Dean shifts in the other bed like he’s thinking about turning over. “Guess lady luck decided to stop being such a bitch.”

For the first time since they left the cabin in Vermont, the weight on Sam’s chest eases slightly and he takes a relatively pain free breath.

“Guess so.”
Chapter 17

After that, things aren’t perfect by any means, but they are better. Like two gears out of alignment, Sam and Dean have been grinding uselessly against thin air, but they’re finally beginning to slot into one another’s rhythms again. Instead of eating separately, they share a booth in roadside diners and discuss possible leads on jobs. When their eyes meet, if Dean doesn’t smile, then he doesn’t immediately scowl and look away either. And the radio makes a reappearance on their drives. Sam has never been so relieved to hear mullet rock.

But Dean still won’t touch him. If Sam accidentally brushes against him in the morning when they’re getting ready to go, Dean flinches away. He’s so fucking obvious about sitting out of reach in diners and motels and even in the car—where he drives leaning against the door—that Sam might as well have LEPER stenciled on his forehead.

Sam never knew until Dean stopped just how tactile his brother was. In the absence, though, he remembers the deliberate stream of brushes and pats, as if Dean needed the constant reassurance that he was there. Dean would clap Sam on the arm in greeting; he’d bump their shoulders together as they walked down the street. Their fingers used to brush when Dean passed Sam a gun, or a credit card, or the runny bottle of ketchup at a gas station condiment station. Dean used to rest his hand on Sam’s shoulder when he leaned over to read what was on the screen.

That’s all over now, and there’s nothing but Sam’s memories to say that those touches ever happened in the first place. The lack—the isolation—makes Sam’s skin ache. He thinks more seriously about leaving his brother for a couple of days and driving himself out to Vegas. He thinks of calling Dad up on the phone and asking if he wants to come along for the ride. Thinks of flushing the man out of hiding with the news of Dean’s defilement and finally ripping into him the way he has longed to for so long.

On the good nights, when Sam sleeps he dreams of deserts, and stone, and lonely, high places, and wakes with tears on his cheeks.

On the bad nights, he sleeps and dreams of panting moans, and broken, twinkling shards of glass, and blood-slicked skin, and wakes with a terrifying mix of desire and fury burning in his veins.

The good nights, predictably, are few and far between.

Midway through Iowa, Dean starts acting cagey. Their progress slows to a crawl, despite the fact that there’s a probable job waiting for them in North Dakota. First Dean ‘doesn’t like the way his baby sounds’ and so they spend five hours parked by the side of the road while he tinkers under the hood. Sam wishes he could say that he’s annoyed with that delay, but he spends the whole time sipping on a beer and watching his brother grow increasingly sweat-slick and grease-streaked. He jerks off that night in the bathroom, frustrated and remembering the way that his brother’s t-shirt clung to his lower back. Remembering how the sun gleamed off his skin.

The next day, Dean stops them in some podunk town Sam doesn’t even know the name of, claiming that he read a newspaper article online about odd goings-on here. Only thing is, Dean hasn’t been near the computer for weeks. He also, suspiciously enough, can’t give Sam any details about the ‘weird crap’ his investigation turned up. After hours of finding nothing stranger than a man with a handlebar moustache who raises sheep out behind his barbershop, Dean finally mentions with false casualness that he might have gotten the name of the town wrong.
travel any further, so they spend the night at the local Holiday Inn.

In the morning, Sam catches his brother having a whispered conversation on his cell, but when he asks over breakfast whom Dean was talking to, Dean just shrugs and tells him it was a wrong number. A wrong number he talked to for thirty minutes. Right.

Sam’s stomach is starting to hurt from tension, but the really strange thing is that Dean doesn’t seem quite as moody as he has been. Oh, he’s keyed up alright—taps his fingers on the steering wheel nonstop while he drives with Zeppelin 2 on loop—but he isn’t as tense and when his fingers start to lift to his scar as they set out on the third day, he catches himself before he actually touches it.

It’s the first time he’s been able to manage that since Sam made him remember.

So when Dean pulls into a motel just after noon on the third day—still in Iowa, which Sam remembers being smaller than this—he doesn’t say anything. He even lets Dean leave him in the room while he ‘takes care of some business’ without protest, although almost as soon as his brother shuts the door behind himself Sam’s chest goes anxious and tight. He spends the rest of the afternoon waiting for Dean to come back while he flips through the motel’s four TV channels.

When Dean finally calls around seven o’clock, Sam is anxious enough that he answers his cell before it finishes its first ring. “Dean?”

“I need you to meet me at four fifty-seven Hutchens Street.” Dean’s voice is tight; his words clipped and hard. It’s close to how he sounds when he’s angry, but anger isn’t the emotion that Sam is catching right now.

Fear.

Oh fuck, Sam knew these last few days were too good to be true.

“Are you okay?” he blurts without thinking.

It’s stupid for a couple of reasons, the least of which is that Dean is never, ever going to give Sam an honest answer to that particular question.

“Peachy,” Dean grunts. “Just get your ass over here. Call a cab or something.”

He hangs up before Sam can respond, but not before Sam catches the slight waver to his brother’s voice. That nervous little flutter that means Dean is in some kind of pain—emotional or physical—and while Dean didn’t use their code word to indicate that he’s in immediate danger, Sam will be damned if he’s going to wait around twenty minutes for a cab.

He grabs directions off the Internet and then hotwires a car from the parking lot of the Laundromat two blocks over and races across town. It isn’t difficult to locate 457 Hutchens: in part because the Impala is parked out front next to a ratty pick-up truck, and in part because it’s the biggest building around. As he pulls into the parking lot, Sam gets a look at the building’s front and it’s actually a restaurant—The Little Sparrow, according to the lettering on the windows and the sign over the door. Despite the orange wash of the street lamps, he can tell that the awning and signage have been done in a red, white and green color scheme. An Italian restaurant, then, and a fairly sketchy one at that, judging from the drawn, thick curtains covering the windows.

As he parks the car next to the Impala and jumps out, Sam wonders frantically if Dean was ever stupid enough—ever desperate enough—to get involved with the mob, and then he wonders what the mob would be doing way out here in the first place. On the other hand, if there were any mafia members hiding out in Iowa, then God knows that Dean would be the one to find their hornet’s nest,
shake it up, and stick his hand inside.

And Dean is in trouble: the distress in his voice when he called told Sam that much.

Sam’s palms are sweating as he first checks his gun and then pushes it into the back of his pants, untucking his shirt to hide the bulge. What he’d like to do is burst in there with the weapon already out, but he doesn’t want to make things worse than they already are, and that calls for caution. He feels exposed as he crosses the mostly-empty lot to the restaurant’s front door, his skin crawling with the sensation of being watched and his shoulders slightly hunched in anticipation of an attack.

Steeling himself for whatever kind of bloody confrontation is waiting on the other side, he opens the door and steps inside.

And stops.

The interior of the Little Sparrow is nicer than it looked from the parking lot. The rug is thick and dark and, although the burgundy and evergreen might be masking marinara stains, Sam thinks it’s actually fairly clean. The furniture and walls have all been fashioned from some dark, cherry-hued wood. There’s a full-service bar against one wall: mirrored back reflecting the hundred pinpoints of flickering light from the candles ringing the room. There are candles in sconces on the walls, candles littering the surfaces of polished wooden tables. There are even a couple tall, white pillars burning atop the bar stools.

A flicker of motion draws Sam’s eyes from the soft, bewildering light to his brother as Dean steps forward. Sam has seen Dean in firelight hundreds of times, but the sight never ceases to stun him. Fire softens the few harsh lines Dean has. It accentuates the lush curve of his lips and the cat-like brilliance of his eyes. It catches in his hair and turns it black with golden highlights. It paints his skin with amber warmth, leaving him a thing of fire and darkness: too dangerous to touch, but too beautiful not to at least reach for.

It takes Sam a couple seconds to look past the effects of the candlelight to his brother’s clothing, and then he’s left winded all over again because Dean is wearing a suit. It’s the same suit he’s worn time and time again whenever they need some official credibility, but for once it has been ironed and pressed, and the accompanying shoes polished to a high sheen. He’s holding a single, long stemmed rose.

Part of Sam thinks that he should be making sense of this, but he can’t seem to manage it. Candles. Italian restaurant. Dean in a suit. Rose. Each piece is fine on its own, but when he tries to put them together he feels like he’s trying to translate from Chinese to Swahili.

Dean in a candlelit Italian restaurant, wearing a suit and holding a rose.

Error. Does not compute. Please reboot and try again.

“You found the place,” Dean says finally, shifting his weight and smoothing his tie with his free hand.

“Dean, what’s—what’s going on?” Sam asks. He manages to take a step forward with a little effort, and the next is easier than the first, and in a few seconds he’s standing next to his brother. He notices the table behind Dean for the first time: set with a white tablecloth and gold silverware and a bottle of wine.

“Here,” Dean mutters, ignoring the question, and holds out the rose.

Sam stares at him.
“You’re gonna start hurting my feelings in a minute, Sam,” Dean says, still holding out the flower. He’s joking but then again he isn’t and Sam belatedly reaches out to take the rose. He’s beginning to understand what’s going on and he doesn’t think he’s ever felt so awkward. He considers walking out and returning the car he stole and pretending that this never happened, but he already has the rose in his hand and what the hell does Dean think he is, anyway, a girl?

“Is this supposed to be a date?” he says, and immediately wants to take it back as his brother’s eyes fall.

“No,” Dean lies, shifting his weight and tugging at his tie. He clears his throat while glancing surreptitiously at the set table, obviously searching for a plausible explanation. Sam realizes that his brother is sweating slightly, that his lips are thin with nerves, and his chest tightens violently.

“Hey,” he breathes and, when Dean doesn’t look at him, reaches out to touch his brother’s shoulder. Dean doesn’t punch him for it, miracle of miracles, so he takes a chance and moves his grip from his brother’s shoulder in order to still Dean’s hand on his tie. Dean’s fingers twitch nervously as Sam twines them with his own and lowers their hands.

“You didn’t have to do this,” he says.

Dean hesitates for a moment, perhaps considering whether he still has any plausible deniability, and then shrugs and mumbles, “Wasn’t a big deal. Carl owes me and we were in the neighborhood.”

Yeah, they’re ‘in the neighborhood’ because Dean spent the last three days dragging his heels in a state that they should have blown through in seven hours. Even if Sam weren’t smart enough to see just how long Dean has been planning this, the fact that his brother is nervous enough that he actually sounded like he was in pain during their phone call tells Sam that this is a big deal. It’s a very big deal.

It’s also ridiculous, of course: at once so out of character and so completely Dean that Sam doesn’t quite know what to do with himself. The fact that Dean cares about him enough to set something like this up with everything he’s going through right now is ... it’s amazing is what it is. It’s breathtaking. But it’s also, Sam is slowly realizing, heartbreaking.

It’s heartbreaking because Dean is clearly out of his element here: fumbling around in the dark in an unfamiliar room. There’s an air of desperation in the way that Dean’s pulse is racing against Sam’s fingers: in the way that he’s so nearly frantic to get everything just so, just the way that Sam likes it. As if he thinks Sam is going to leave him if he doesn’t do everything exactly right.

In his head, Sam hears the shifter’s voice—love’s what other people give you as long as you give them what they want—and knows exactly how he can be at once both so happy and so goddamned wretched.

“You don’t need to do this, man,” he says, rubbing his thumb along the side of his brother’s hand. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s really—” he wants to say ‘sweet’ and can’t because he knows how Dean will react “—awesome, and flattering, but I don’t need any of this.”

Dean glances at him once, anxious, and then drops his eyes again and says, “I wanted to make it up to you. Y’know, being such a dick. I know I haven’t been, uh. I know I’m not exactly a barrel of laughs these days.”

It’s what he says but it isn’t what he means. Not really. What he means is, ‘I’m sorry I’m fucked up, I’m so sorry, please don’t leave me’.
And Sam doesn’t understand how Dean can be so stupid. Hasn’t he heard anything Sam has been saying over the past nine months?

Apparently not.

“Dean, you don’t have anything to apologize for.”

“I—”

“Shut up and let me finish.” Dean glances up again at that, and the flash of annoyance Sam sees in his brother’s eyes makes him feel a little better.

“You—what you’re dealing with, I don’t expect you to be okay with it. You’re a human being, not a robot, and you’re hurting. And yeah, it’s tough for me because it hurts like hell to see you like this. But I don’t expect anything different, and I’m not going to split just because you’re not walking around singing that the hills are alive. And you don’t have to bend yourself into knots trying to make me happy because you already make me happy, Dean. Not candlelight dinners and all this romance crap. You.”

“Yeah, I’ve been making you a regular ball of sunshine lately,” Dean says, pulling his hand free. “That’s why you almost clocked that desk clerk for asking if we wanted a king or two queens. Cause you were just as happy as a clam.”

Sam doesn’t remember that. “What? When?”

“Fisher’s Mill.”

Oh. Yeah, okay. He might have gotten a little short with the guy from the Motel Six in Fisher’s Mill, but only because the son of a bitch was looking at Dean like he was wondering how much Dean charged by the hour.

“I’m upset because I love you, man, and it hurts to see you in pain,” Sam explains. He keeps his words slow and clear in the hopes that they will be more understandable to his brother. “That doesn’t mean I want to leave, and it doesn’t mean that you don’t make me happy. Dude, you know me. You can’t honestly think that this is what I want from you!” He gestures around at the candlelit restaurant with the rose.

“You deserve nice things,” Dean says, his voice colored by a strange combination of stubbornness and the usual reluctance he displays when they wander into ‘chick flick’ territory.

Exasperated by his brother’s chronic inability to hear him, Sam lets out a short sigh. “You want to know what I want from you, Dean? You want to know what it’s gonna take to make me stay?”

Dean’s mouth tightens with annoyance at Sam’s tone, but the eyes he raises are filled with a painful mix of hope and dread. Hope that Sam will give him an ultimatum he’ll be able to handle. Dread that Sam is going to set conditions he won’t be able to meet. It’s both infuriating and depressing.

“I want you to make jokes about my hair and my eating habits,” Sam says. “I want us to eat greasy, crappy food together and watch whatever movie-of-the-week is on TV. I want to be able to go to sleep with you in the room and wake up with you there and I want you to bitch at me when I try to change the station on the radio. I want you to be happy, Dean, but I know you can’t manage that right now and that’s okay. As long as you don’t shut me out and pretend that everything’s fine. And as long as you get it through your thick head that I’m. Not. Leaving.”

“You deserve someone better,” Dean maintains, frowning. “You deserve someone who—who
knows how to do this whole wining and dining thing. And don’t try to pretend you don’t like this ‘romance crap’ because I saw you with Jess and I saw you with Sarah.”

It’s the closest Dean has come to admitting to keeping an eye on Sam when he was at Stanford, which is something Sam doesn’t want to get into now. Hell, he doesn’t know if he ever wants to have that conversation.

“You’re right,” he agrees. “I don’t mind romance. And one of these days I’m going to indulge my romantic streak and you’re going to let me. When you’re ready for it. When we’re both ready for it.”

Dean just looks at Sam and Sam thinks, for a single, shining moment, that he finally got through. Then his brother says, “You looked ready for it with Sarah,” and Jesus Christ, Sam thought they already dealt with this.

Dean’s hand lifts up and he rubs at his temple briefly before lowering his hand again. Sam doesn’t think his brother even realizes that he moved. “We can swing back that way,” Dean suggests. “See how it goes. I bet she’d love to hear from you again.”

“Well, that’s just tough for Sarah then because I’m not in love with her. I’m in love with you. This is what I want, Dean. This is all I want.”

“Wasn’t good enough for you before,” Dean responds without hesitating and then, almost instantly, presses his lips together like he didn’t mean to let the words escape his mouth.

Stunned and a little angered by the rapid left turn the conversation just took, Sam says, “I never left you. I left Dad. I left hunting. I didn’t leave you.”

Dean’s mouth works for a few seconds as he struggles with himself. Sam can pinpoint the exact moment his brother loses the battle. It’s the moment when Dean eyes go flint cold and he opens his mouth and says, “Not how it looked from where I was standing.”

“Yeah, because you were standing right where you were always standing: right in the man’s shadow!” Sam hauls himself up short before he can add anything else along that train of thought—Dean is already giving him a hurt, slapped look that he probably isn’t aware of—and then, in a slightly calmer tone of voice, he continues, “But I didn’t want to leave you, Dean, and I’m not going anywhere. I swear to God.”

Dean turns to pace away, raising one hand to his head. Sam is relieved when his brother just runs his fingers roughly through his hair as he says, “You say that now, but sooner or later you’re gonna get tired of playing monk, and I don’t know if I can—”

“If you can’t, then you can’t,” Sam interrupts before Dean can work himself up any more. “I’m still not leaving.”

“Yeah, well maybe I don’t want to do that to you, Sam,” Dean says, turning around again. “Ever think of that?”

“Do what to me?” Sam responds incredulously.

“Turn you into one of those blue balled priest types.”

“Jesus Christ, man, it’s not a big deal. All I need is my right hand and some halfway decent porn.” He says it without thinking and only realizes afterwards, when Dean’s face contorts into a grimace as he grabs convulsively at his head, that bringing up porn of any kind probably isn’t the best idea. Rushing the few feet to his brother’s side, Sam grabs his shoulder.

“Fuck,” Dean mutters, squeezing his eyes shut and pushing his fingers more firmly against his scar.

Remembering that it worked once before, Sam moves his hand from his brother’s shoulder to the back of his neck. He only has to massage the pressure points for a few seconds before Dean’s breathing eases and his muscles unclench. He keeps his hand up by his scar for another minute or so, fingertips brushing it gently, and then, cautiously, lowers it and lifts his head.

“Better?” Sam asks, still working at the nape of his brother’s neck.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s—” Dean lets out a shaky breath and nods. “That’s good.”

For the first time in what seems like forever, there’s an expression on Dean’s face that borders on pleasure, and he’s letting Sam touch him. He’s actually pushing back into Sam’s hand. Before Sam knows he means to do anything, he leans forward and lays a brief, chaste kiss on his brother’s cheek. Dean stiffens—not frightened exactly, more startled—but he still doesn’t pull away. Sam shifts his grip on the back of his brother’s neck, easing up to caress the soft, bristling line of Dean’s hair.

“You gonna hit me?” he asks.

Dean looks at him for a moment longer and then closes his eyes and licks his lips. It’s an invitation. Sam is sure he’s reading that right. But he’s also sure Dean doesn’t know what he’s offering.

So instead of pressing his lips to his brother’s, Sam drops his head forward and rubs their noses together. When Dean’s eyes flutter open in surprise, they’re so close to Sam’s, and so green, that Sam’s pulse stutter.

“What—Sammy, what are you doing?” Dean asks. His voice is soft, but the ‘you freak’ at the end of it is clearly audible and it makes Sam laugh softly. Maybe they can salvage tonight after all.

“Nothing,” he answers, nudging his brother’s nose one last time before straightening and taking his hand again.

Dean blinks down at their entwined fingers with an odd expression. Like maybe he forgot over these last few weeks what human contact feels like and is perplexed by the sudden influx of stimulus. Sam gives his brother a few moments to decide whether he’s okay with this or not and then, when Dean’s expression settles and he leaves his hand where it is, smiles and pulls him toward the door.

“Come on. You want to go on a date? We’ll go on a date.”

“I’m pretty sure that ‘going on a date’ actually implies that you ‘go’ somewhere,” Dean says as Sam snaps on the TV. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed with the top three buttons of his dress shirt open and his shoes off. His jacket and tie are both draped on the arm of the chair in the corner where he tossed them, and his right foot is turned sideways on the floor, the sole pressed up against his opposite ankle.

Sam can’t decide whether it’s hot as hell or just really, really adorable.

“What’s the point?” he says, grinning. “I have everything I want right here.”

It sounds corny, but it makes Dean blush so Sam counts it a win and starts flipping through the channels. There’s a Spanish talk show, footage from a Holy Roller convention, an old rerun of I
Love Lucy, and an advertisement announcing that the Friday Night Movie will begin in a few moments.

Sam stops there and gives the TV a couple of whacks until the fuzz on the screen evens out. Then, after a brief detour to retrieve the pizza and the six-pack of beer from the table, he sits down next to his brother. “This,” he announces, handing the six-pack over, “Is called pizza and a movie.”

“This,” Dean says, mimicking his inflection, “Is really fucking lame.” But he looks relaxed as he pulls two beers free and puts the other four on the floor beside him, and Sam doesn’t think for one moment that his brother is doing anything but enjoying himself right now.

“You love it,” he says, keeping his voice casual, and flips the lid open on the pizza carton. Rotating the box, he offers it to his brother. Dean reaches in readily enough, and there’s no missing the approval in his eyes when pulls out a slice with his usual pepperoni and sausage.

“Do you even know what’s on?” he asks, juggling the pizza and his own drink to hand Sam the other beer.

“Guess we’ll find out in a second,” Sam answers. He leans over and retrieves the remote from his own bed and turns the volume on the TV up just as Veronica Bennett starts to sing, The night we met I knew I needed you so.

“Oh, hell no,” Dean says.

“Nobody puts Baby in the corner,” Sam replies, straight-faced.

“Dude, no. It’s a chick flick!” Dean says it the same way someone else might say, ‘Don’t eat that; it’s dog shit!’ and Sam privately agrees with him. But Dean sounds more like himself than he has in months, and Sam can’t stop himself from stringing his brother along a little in an attempt to prolong the moment.

“Sorry, Dean. Motel rules clearly state that the dude with the remote picks the show and I have the remote. See?” Holding it up, he waggles it at his brother. Dean glares at him. “And I’m in the mood for some Swayze,” Sam continues lazily. “So I guess you’re just gonna have to deal.”

He isn’t surprised at all when Dean drops his beer (but not the pizza, can’t loose the precious food of course) and tackles him off the side of the bed.

Sam gets pizza sauce in his hair in the ensuing wrestling match, and one of them steps on a can of beer, which promptly explodes and sprays alcohol all over Sam’s duffle, so he’s going to smell like a drunk until they stop to do laundry again. When Dean emerges triumphantly with the remote and takes a victory lap around the motel room, though, it’s totally worth it.
Chapter 18

Three days later, they’re in Wichita and up to their eyebrows in sparkling, sticky dust.

“Fucking pixies,” Dean mutters, sucking on the tender stretch of skin between his thumb and forefinger where one of the pests (small and razor-toothed and foul tempered) bit down and latched on. Sam had to burn the thing off with his lighter.

“Let me see,” Sam says, stepping forward. His foot crunches down on one of the pixie’s bodies with a wet, snapping noise and releases a noxious, sparkling cloud.

Little known fact about pixies: their blood reeks. Sam makes a mental note to add that information to Dad’s unhelpfully sparse entry.

“S’ fine,” Dean says, but he holds out his hand anyway, flexing his thumb to keep the blood flowing.

Things have been much more comfortable between them these past few days, but Dean is still leery of physical contact so Sam is careful not to touch his brother more than he has to. As he closes his hand around Dean’s wrist, though, Sam’s fingers brush against his brother’s pulse and Dean’s hand gives a single, uncontrolled twitch. Sam considers apologizing and then decides that it’d be better not to call any attention to the slip.

Adjusting his grip, he tilts his brother’s hand up toward his face and peers at the bite. The wound is still bleeding sluggishly, but considering how many pixies were in this nest and how fast the little bitches were, Sam’s pretty sure they got off lightly.

“You’ll live,” he says, stepping back.

“Awesome,” Dean mutters. As he turns around to head back to the car, he rubs absently at his wrist where Sam’s fingers were a moment before. “Dibs on first shower. Fucking pixie dust itches.”

They’re halfway back to the room when Sam realizes that they may be in more trouble than he initially thought.

“Uh, Dean?”

“Yeah?” Dean grunts without looking over.

“You’re sparkling.”

Dean snorts humorlessly. “Hate to break it to you, princess, but you look like a My Little Pony crapped all over you too.”

“No, I mean. You’re sparkling.”

Dean scowls, but he slows down and tilts the rearview mirror so that he can see himself. A moment later, Sam is gripping the dashboard as Dean yanks the Impala over to the side of the road. The engine dies with a spluttering cough and then Dean is jumping out of the car, swearing and swatting at his skin. Sam gives himself a few seconds to process the fact that they didn’t crash and then climbs out himself.

“Dean,” he says, walking around the front of the car toward his brother.
“Get it off me!” Dean shouts. He’s given up slapping and is now rubbing at his skin in between pushing up his sleeves and jerking up his shirt to see how far it’s spread.

As far as Sam can tell from the brief flash of his brother’s abs before Dean drops the shirt again, the answer is *everywhere*.

“It’s not *on* you, dude,” he says, trying to keep his own voice calmer than he feels.

Dean shoots Sam a glance that’s half panicked and half pissed and Sam doesn’t say anything else. From the expression on his brother’s face, Dean would probably be happier if Sam didn’t look at him anymore either, but he can’t help himself. The faint glimmer that he first noticed in the car has become a full on shine in the moonlight, as though someone crushed diamonds and dusted Dean’s skin with the dust.

If, y’know, diamonds were pink.

“Fucking pixies!” Dean yells as he stomps back to the car.

Sam scrambles to get back in himself, and before he can finish putting on his seat belt Dean is peeling out ... in the opposite direction from the motel.

“Uh, Dean?” he chances after a moment.

“What?” At least that’s what Sam thinks Dean says. It’s kind of hard to tell when the word comes growled between his brother’s teeth like that.

“Where’re we going?”

"Back to the nest."

"Why?" Sam asks, already sure that he isn't going to like the answer.

"Cause I'm gonna rip the wings off those overgrown fireflies and then burn their sparkly asses. And then? Then I'm gonna piss on their fucking ashes."

“Don’t you think that’s a little—”

Dean cuts his eyes over and oh. Oh *wow*. Sam has always thought that his brother’s eyes glowed, but now they actually *are* glowing: like green foxfire. The color sets off the pink nicely, and Sam really shouldn’t be thinking about how pretty Dean looks right now. Something has clearly gone wrong here, even if it doesn’t seem to be harmful, and he should be trying to figure out how to fix it—not musing about Dean’s lips, and how the sparkles there are darker, more red than pink, and shit, is that *cotton candy* he’s smelling?

“I’m calling Bobby,” he announces, reaching for his phone.

“What? No!”

“Dean, you’re *pink*. And you’re starting to smell like cotton candy. We’re calling Bobby.”

Dean slams on the breaks for the second time in ten minutes. When the Impala has finished skidding to a stop, he thumps his fist against the steering wheel. Interestingly, the impact leaves the black plastic glowing faintly for a moment. Dean drops his head down, shoulders shifting as he heaves in rough breaths, and Sam waits for him to start rubbing at his scar the way he always does when he gets this agitated. But instead, his brother just sits there. Breathing.
Finally, after Sam has begun to shift awkwardly, Dean mutters, “Fine. Call him.”

To Bobby’s credit, he doesn’t—quite—laugh when Sam describes the problem. There’s just a suspiciously long moment of silence and then he asks, “What color were their wings?”

“That’s not supposed to be a stumper, Sam.”

“I know, I just.” Sam runs a hand through his hair and shoots a glance over at his brother, who is now resting his forehead on the steering wheel and muttering inaudibly to himself. “It was dark. I think they were purple maybe? Or pink?”

Bobby grunts something about idjits, but Sam misses the exact message because his brother picks that moment to call, “Sam?” There’s something off about his voice—something wrong—and Sam’s pulse kicks up a notch.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, looking over again.

Dean’s head is still down against the steering wheel. His eyes are shut. “Ask Bobby if they’re poisonous.”

Oh God. Sam knew it. He fucking knew that it wasn’t just a pigmentation problem. No way either of them was going to get off that easy.

But he can’t help repeating it, like maybe he heard wrong. “Poisonous?”

In his ear, Bobby asks, “Dean feeling funny?”

Dean moans softly and Sam’s stomach flips. “Dean, what’s wrong?” he asks again, not quite daring to reach out.

“M head’s spinning,” Dean mutters. His voice has gone loose and sloppy.

“He says he’s dizzy,” Sam relays, and his own voice sounds just as panicked as he feels.

“What’s his temp like?”

Sam could ask Dean if he feels hot, but it’s faster to reach out and see for himself and so Sam puts his hand on the sliver of exposed flesh at the back of his brother’s neck. Dean shivers a little and tightens his grip on the steering wheel. He feels overheated, skin radiating warmth like a space heater.

“Hot,” Sam says. “Is that bad?”

“And he’s pink.”

“Yeah. Bobby, what’s going on? Do I need to get him to the hospital?” Although, God, Sam doesn’t know what the doctors—civilians—are going to do against something so clearly supernatural in origin.

On the phone, Bobby bursts out laughing.

Sam is instantly both annoyed and relieved. More relieved than annoyed, though. Bobby wouldn’t laugh if this were in any way serious.
“He’s laughing at me, isn’t he?” Dean mumbles, tilting his head to the side and cracking one eye open to look up at Sam. Dean’s skin shifts beneath Sam’s palm with the movement and the sensation reminds Sam that he’s still touching his brother. He takes his hand back reluctantly and his fingertips are glimmering hot pink from the contact. As he rubs them together, they fade back to their normal shade.

On the other end of the line, Bobby has gotten himself back under control, and he clears his throat before he says, “Those weren’t pixies, Sam. They were sprites. They’ve got a kind of narcotic for a venom, gets you high for a couple of days. It’s kinda like being drunk, only without the alcohol.” He pauses and then adds, “You boys have got to be the luckiest sons of bitches I ever met.”

Yeah. Lucky. They’re both real lucky. Especially Dean.

Swallowing the swelling, bitter lump in his throat, Sam asks, “What about the, uh, the other thing?”

“What? The fact that your brother’s a pretty, pretty princess?” Bobby returns, and chuckles at his own wit. Sam looks at his brother’s miserable, frustrated face and thinks that it’s a good thing Bobby isn’t on speakerphone. “Shouldn’t last more than twelve hours.”

“You sure?”

“Do I sound senile to you?” Bobby answers, and Sam can’t help smiling slightly. The man never did like having his knowledge questioned.

“No,” he says. “Thanks, Bobby, we owe you one.”

“I’ll add it to your tab,” Bobby says. Sam isn’t sure whether that’s meant to be metaphorical or literal. Although if Bobby kept a book of favors owed to him lying around, he’d never be able to find it in all the mess. “Try to figure out what you’re hunting before you attack it next time, kid, okay?”

“Will do. Thanks again.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Bobby mutters, waving it off, and then Sam is left listening to dead air. As he lowers the phone, Dean sits up and rests his head on the window to his left. The steering wheel sparkles for a couple of seconds and then dulls.

“Well?” Dean grunts. “Am I dying?”

Sam can’t tell whether his brother is serious or not. If he is, then he doesn’t sound all that upset by the prospect.

“You’re going to feel drunk for a few days,” he says as he slides his phone back into his pocket. “The sparkling should go away sooner.”

“How sooner?” Dean groans, reaching up and putting a hand to his head. For a moment, Sam thinks he’s touching the scar, and then he realizes that Dean is just rubbing his eyes.

“Twelve hours.”

Dean’s breath huffs out in a humorless laugh. With a slight shake of his head, he drops his hand back down into his lap. “Fanfuckingtastic,” he mutters, and then reaches for the ignition.

“Woah!” Sam protests, leaning forward to cover his brother’s hand with his own. Dean gives him a bleary, indignant look but doesn’t flinch away.
“What?”

“Drunk, Dean,” Sam reminds him. “You’re not driving.”

Dean frowns at Sam while his venom-swaddled brain struggles to processes Sam’s words and then, as comprehension smooths out his forehead, his mouth purses petulantly. “I hate pixies,” he mutters, pulling his hand out from beneath Sam’s and reaching for his door.

“Actually—”

“Sam.”

“Nevermind.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Turns out that when Dean is drunk on sprite venom, he forgets that he doesn’t like to be touched.

Sam figures out that important fact when they get back to the motel and his brother literally pulls him down into the bed on top of him. Sam makes what could probably be considered a girly noise of surprise, which would be mortifying under normal circumstances, and especially with Dean as a witness. Only Dean is too busy wrapping himself around Sam like a damned boa constrictor to pay attention to any noises he might be making.

“Dude,” Sam tries, but it’s a weak protest at best and a moment later his brother’s leg hooks up over his hip. The new position snugs Sam’s rapidly swelling cock up against Dean’s limp one, but Dean doesn’t seem to notice. Making a contented little sound, he gets a hand in Sam’s hair and drags his head down so that Sam’s nose is mashed up against the side of Dean’s jaw. This close, Dean doesn’t smell quite as much like cotton candy—or not just cotton candy. Instead, he smells the way that Sam imagines sugar would, if it were spun out and sprinkled with sunlight.

Sam probably shouldn’t be wondering what that would taste like—shouldn’t be wondering if the sprite’s bite has changed the flavor of Dean’s skin as well as its appearance and scent—but he is anyway.

Man, this feels good. Too good. Sam has to untangle himself before the bulge of his erection actually penetrates Dean’s venom-addled mind. He at least has to try to get away because when Dean sobered up he’s going to be pissed as hell if Sam didn’t put up any kind of fight.

“Dude, I gotta go turn off the light,” Sam tries. Blindly, he reaches up behind his head in an attempt to find his brother’s hand where it’s still tangled in his hair.

“Leave it on,” Dean slurs. “Jus’ wanna lie here.” He shifts, bumping his crotch against Sam’s, and Sam’s breath stutters out.

This is so fucking unfair it’s ridiculous.

In a strangled, desperate voice, he says, “You realize this counts as cuddling, right?”

“Why?” Dean all but yawns the word, drawing it out as slow and thick as taffy. “You insecure in your masc—mascoo—manhood, Sammy?” He’s started to massage Sam’s scalp, which sends confusing waves of warmth through Sam’s skin, and Sam redoubles his efforts to grab his brother’s wrist.

“This from the sparkly pink dude,” he grunts, although he supposes that he’s looking pretty pink
himself right now, the way Dean is clinging to him.

“Gotta be a man to wear pink,” Dean responds drowsily.

Sam is pretty sure that his brother would be singing a different tune if their positions were reversed, but there’s clearly no point in arguing with Dean when he’s like this. He gives one last, blind flail and then gives up trying to get at his brother’s hand as well. He’s at the wrong angle for it and besides, all the wriggling and straining is rubbing their cocks together and doing cruel and unusual things to Sam’s libido.

Resting his hand on Dean’s side, he swallows and then says, “I just don’t want you to kick my ass later for letting you do this. You know, once you’re not high anymore.”

“Won’t,” Dean promises, and then rubs against Sam like an overgrown cat.

Sam’s head is starting to spin from the smell of his brother’s skin. Or possibly the sprite venom is a contact narcotic and it’s making him a little high himself. Or possibly it’s just Dean. Just Dean flooding Sam’s head and heart with all of the touches he’s been withholding for the past few months.

“S nice,” Dean announces. “Wanted to—wanted to do this so long. Wasn’t sure you’d let me.”

Sam’s surprise gives him the impetus he needs to push away enough to see his brother’s face. “You what?”

Dean leaves off massaging Sam’s scalp in favor of patting at his cheek. “Like knowing where you are,” he says.

Sam lifts his own hand from Dean’s side and rests it on top of the hand Dean is using to paw at his face, stilling his brother’s drunken fumbles. “God, Dean, of course I’d let you. All those times you called me a girl and you thought I didn’t like cuddling?”

If Dean were sober, he would have shrugged it off. But he isn’t. For all intents and purposes, he’s drunk off his ass, and so the truth comes spilling helplessly out of his mouth.

“’S like teasing,” he mumbles, dropping his eyes. “If I—if I give you this, but I don’t want any more, s’like. I don’t wanna be a cocktease.”

Sam’s breath catches. “Dean, is that—is that why you’ve been avoiding me?”

Dean doesn’t answer, but when he blinks there’s moisture shining in his eyes. Another blink and there’s a shining pearl of salt-water running down his cheek: green at first and then changing to a pale, watery rose color. Sam drops his forehead against his brother’s and Dean shuts his eyes: mouth pursing.

“It’s not teasing,” Sam says, shifting his hand from his own cheek to his brother’s. “Not all touching has to be about sex.” He feels a little hypocritical for saying that with his cock pulsing the way it is, but that doesn’t make the statement any less true. Doesn’t make his heart ache any less for his beautiful, damaged brother.

“You can touch me, Dean,” he whispers. “You can touch me.”

“No take backs,” Dean says weakly through his tears. “No take backs, Sammy.” He slides his hand around to cup the back of Sam’s head, like he’s afraid Sam is going to pull away.

“No take backs,” he promises, and risks laying a gentle kiss on his brother’s mouth. Dean’s lips tremble beneath his, their breaths tangled, and then, tentatively, press back.

Sam lies in bed with his brother and, like a reverse Prince Charming, kisses Sleeping Beauty asleep.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

In the night, Sam startles awake (don’t know what he sees in you) from a dream (gonna take you for a spin) he can’t quite remember (try out sammy’s toy). Dean is still curled around him, and in his slumber he moves automatically to comfort: hands drifting on Sam’s back and tugging him closer. Sam is shivering (feel that sugar) and sweating (sammy isn’t here), and there’s a bad taste (open up good boy good little whore) in his mouth—like blood and sulfur—as he nestles his head into the crook of his brother’s shoulder.

“S’okay, Sammy. M’here,” Dean slurs. “I got you.” And then he’s out again.

Sam shouldn’t. He knows he shouldn’t.

But that phantom copper taste (went away and left you) is clinging to his mouth and he can’t (tighten up for me dean-o) seem to get warm and he tilts his head up and presses a sloppy, open-mouthed kiss to the vulnerable line of Dean’s neck. Sugar floods his mouth—sugar faintly flavored by roses and strawberries—and chases the last vestiges of the dream away.

Sam is steadier now, which means that he should close his eyes and go back to sleep, but Dean tastes good. Dean tastes good and he smells even better, and instead of doing what he knows he's supposed to, Sam mouths at his brother's throat again, scraping Dean's skin with his teeth.

In his sleep, Dean's face pulls tight and he makes a tiny, lost sound—a whimper. He isn't trying to get away, not yet, but that sound shoots straight into Sam's chest and, trembling violently, he makes himself stop.

Jesus Christ, what the hell was he doing?

Resting his forehead against his brother’s damp skin, Sam stares down the length of Dean's body. Sam is hard again, dick pressed up against his brother’s hip, and he eases his crotch carefully away from Dean and takes deep breaths to try to calm himself down. His heart is pounding out a demanding pulse of Dean want mine, but it’s his head that’s the real problem.

His head that won’t stop wondering whether all of Dean is that wondrous, glittering pink, and whether he’d taste like candied rose petals if Sam sucked him down.

It’s hours before he’s relaxed enough to sleep again, but if there are any more dreams that night, then Sam can’t remember them.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The sparkling actually takes sixteen hours to wear off. As soon as it’s faint enough to be mostly unnoticeable, Dean decides to celebrate by going out for a drink.

“You’re already drunk, Dean,” Sam protests as his brother leans on him in an effort to steady himself while pulling on his boots.

“No. ‘M pixie fucked. Couple of hours with Jack and then I’ll be drunk.”

Sam’s pretty sure adding actual alcohol to whatever the sprite venom is doing to his brother’s system
isn’t a great idea, but when he calls Bobby for confirmation, Bobby turns around and gives Dean a green light. Something about the damage being done and Dean’s system being too tied up by the venom for anything else to really affect him.

Sam hangs up, feeling cornered and slightly betrayed, and Dean immediately says, “See? No problem. Told you so.”

Sam sort of wants to lie and tell his brother that, actually, Bobby said to tell him to stop being such an idiot, but despite his worry he understands. Dean drinks for very specific reasons, and he’s aware enough of his own limits that he only ever gets drunk when he wants to be drunk. It must be incredibly disconcerting for him to feel like this without having touched a drop: must be making him feel even more powerless than he usually does these days.

If it’s going to make Dean feel more in control to pretend that he’s drunk because he decided to be, then Sam isn’t going to stand in his way. What he is going to do is make sure that his brother doesn’t fall on his face while he’s drowning himself.

The Boot and Spur (where do the owners think they are, Texas?) isn’t going to win any prizes, but it isn’t the worst place they’ve been either. There isn’t any sawdust on the floors, for one, and it looks like it’s been hosed down sometime within the last year if not the last month. Sam helps Dean make his uncoordinated way to a table by the wall—no bartender is going to serve Dean when he already looks as out of it as he does—and then goes up to order a couple of beers. There’s an advertisement for Spur’s Famous Hot Wings sitting on the bar and, on impulse, he orders a basket of those as well.

Dean starts to perk up when he takes his first sip of beer, and when a waitress brings the wings over a couple of minutes later he practically beams at her. Sam watches his brother make yet another conquest without even meaning to and isn’t sure whether the sparkles haven’t completely worn off after all or if this is just what Dean looks like when he’s happy. He can’t remember—doesn’t have a recent or a clear enough memory to compare to this moment —and while Sandy-call-me-Sands tells Dean to holler if he needs anything else, Sam’s chest starts up with that old, familiar ache of failure.

Normally, he would drown the ache with alcohol, but one drunken Winchester is enough for the night. So, just like he has ever since he found out just what’s wrong with his brother, he resists the urge and curls his hand more tightly around the only bottle he’s going to allow himself to drink out of tonight.

As far as Sam can see, the addition of alcohol to the sprite venom doesn’t do anything except make Dean chatty. While Dean works his way through six beers and three baskets of wings, he tells Sam about hunts he missed out on while he was at Stanford. Ghost in Colorado, nixie in Oregon, some kind of overgrown bat with acid blood that his brother doesn’t have a name for in Wyoming. Sam drinks in the missing parts of Dean’s life the way he wants to toss back shots and does his best not to look at the hooked scar at his brother’s temple, which is a tangible reminder of another, darker time that Dean doesn’t speak of.

Oh, Dean thinks about it often enough—Sam can follow his brother’s thoughts by keeping track of his hand—but he won’t talk about it. He won’t reach out to Sam for help: hasn’t once opened up and said, ‘I’m in pain. I feel helpless and dirty and lost and I don’t know what to do. Help.’

Until Dean mans up and admits to how deeply he’s hurting, he isn’t going to get any better, and that knowledge puts a bitter edge on the relief Sam feels to see his brother enjoying himself so much. He can’t quite work out how he should react to this new version of Dean, who rattles on about things Sam wouldn’t have been able to pry out of him with a crowbar just last week. Who knocks their knees together under the table with a regularity that can’t be accidental. Who holds out a chicken wing like he’s expecting Sam to let Dean hand feed him and actually looks hurt when Sam reaches
out to take the wing with his fingers.

It’s wonderful to see Dean looking so relaxed and happy. Wonderful and joyous.

But it isn’t real and it isn’t going to be real until Dean talks to him—until he deals with the rape instead of running from it and letting it corrode him from the inside out. Dean isn’t high on life, he’s high on sprite venom. This is an artificial peace, and a fleeting one at that.

After another day or so, this Dean will dry up and fade away like sea foam in the sunlight.

Sam is going to be so screwed when that happens because he’s already addicted to this version of his brother, and the thought of having to go to sleep in his own bed again is physically painful. But he isn’t strong enough not to want the illusion, and so he smiles across the table and laughs when Dean tells him about a will o’ the wisp hunt that left him covered in mud from head to toe, and he doesn’t even fume when Dean mentions Dad.

Not much, anyway.

Although Sam spends the evening nursing his single beer, he had a couple of sodas back at the motel and eventually it’s a question of find the bathroom or embarrass himself at the table. Pushing his bottle toward his brother, he stands up and says, “I have to pee. I’ll be right back, okay?”

Dean is too absorbed with his fourth basket of wings to do more than wave a hand, which kind of makes Sam want to stay despite the urgent (and increasingly painful) need for release. Dean has this tendency to lick the sauce from each and every one of his fingers, and he’s completely unaware of how sensual it makes him look. Sam may already have seen the show countless times tonight, but he’s never going to get tired of it.

Then Dean glances up and, around a half-chewed mouthful of chicken meat, says, “You gonna drain the snake or what?”

Yeah, okay, that was just the sight Sam needed to get going.

On his way to the bathroom, he hears the same, meaningless snatches of conversation that he always does in places like this. One group of guys is talking about ‘that ball buster Harry’; another is bemoaning the ‘bleeding heart liberals who are ruining this country’. Sam catches drunken musings about women, cars, horses, and music—just your usual, run of the mill topics—and so he’s not concerned at all when he enters the bathroom.

He isn’t concerned until he comes back out four minutes later and sees three men—strangers—surrounding their table and blocking Dean from sight. Sam’s warning system might not have been working a few moments ago, but it kicks into overdrive now and, even as he moves forward, his mind is flicking back to the snippet he caught from those three men on his way to the bathroom and of fucking course they weren’t talking about riding horses. He heard the name—that stupid, fucking name—and he was dumb enough not to connect it to his brother and now Dean is paying for it.

Four minutes, he thinks resentfully as he pushes a man in a chambray shirt and cowboy boots aside. I was only gone for four fucking minutes.

Sam can smell them even before he reaches them. They’re standing in a haze of alcohol stench, as though they just finished taking baths in a vat of whiskey. They’re drunk off their asses—of course they are, normal people don’t do shit like this: not unless their judgment is seriously, fatally impaired.

The men are closed in tightly around Dean, hemming him in place and keeping the rest of the bar from seeing what they’re doing, but Sam is tall enough to see his brother over the nearest man’s
shoulder. Dean’s head is lowered. The muscles in his jaw are working overtime and tension radiates from his skin. He’s clutching at his scar so tightly his knuckles are white and his hand is shaking, trembling like an old drunk’s.

Sam takes another step and suddenly anger is crowding out his fear.

They’re touching him. The son of a bitch standing with his back to Sam has his motherfucking hand on the back of Dean’s neck.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Sam demands.

Dean’s eyes come up immediately at the sound of Sam’s voice and search for his face. There was a part of Sam that had been wondering why Dean didn’t just tell these men to go fuck themselves when they first wandered over, but now that he can see his brother’s face he understands.

There’s nothing but terror in Dean’s expression. Nothing in his eyes but pleading and pain.

For as long as Sam can remember, his brother’s instinctive response to fear has been to twist the adrenaline around until the blood pounding in his head is screaming for fight and not flight. The violence of Dean’s response is directly proportionate to his terror, which means that he’s at his most dangerous when he’s the most panicked.

Normally.

But as Sam looks into his brother’s fear dazed eyes, he belatedly realizes that he shut down that safety valve when he ordered Dean to remember. When he ordered his brother to face his emotions head on instead of pushing them away.

Oh God, this is all his fault.

“S-Sam,” Dean manages, and then Hands steps forward, cutting off Sam’s view of his brother.

“We’re just talkin’, buddy,” he says, smiling at Sam drunkenly. Like they’re friends. Like he wasn’t just molesting Dean.

“You need to leave,” Sam growls. “Now.”

Dean makes a tiny, choked noise, and Sam shoves Hands aside to see that one of the other two men—a dark-haired asshole in a black t-shirt and jeans—has tilted Dean’s head back and is touching his lips. The hand that Dean was pressing to his temple is now clutching at the man’s wrist, but he can’t seem to pull himself together enough to do more than hang on weakly.

Sam has a split-second of crystal clear thought where he understands that it’s a good thing he isn’t armed right now and then everything is drowned out by a flood of red. The only thing stopping him from shoving that fuck’s head through the pool table is the fact that he’s too furious to remember how to move.

He hears himself speak, as though from a great distance. “Get your fucking hands off him.”

“Take it easy, buddy,” Hands says, clapping a hand on Sam’s shoulder. “We’re gonna pay him.”

Sam thought he couldn’t get any angrier, but turns out he was wrong because now it feels like his skin is on fire with it.

“He’s not a whore.” His voice comes out quietly: almost rationally. Dean knows what that means—
Sam can see dawning awareness battling with the fear in his brother’s eyes—but these other bozos have no idea. None at all.

Sam’s pretty okay with that.

“Yeah right,” the third guy—graying hair, beer belly hanging over the waistband of his jeans—laughs. “He’ll take money to fuck on camera, he’ll take money to fuck off camera.”

“Or we could set up our own recording studio back at my place,” Black T-Shirt puts in. “I got a camcorder. You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Sammy?”

It’s the sound of his borrowed name that does it.

One moment Sam is locked in place by the force of his rage and the next he’s grabbing Hands’ hand off his shoulder and snapping the man’s wrist. His consciousness rides the cresting fury long enough for him to see his fist crash into Beer Belly’s nose and then red fogs everything over. Hands melts into Dad into Black T-Shirt into Dad into Beer Belly into Dad again. Eventually, the shifting mess in Sam’s mind settles on his own face: that stupid, selfish Sam who left Dean to get raped. That son of a bitch. That fucking bastard.

It’s Dean who brings Sam back to himself. Dean pressed up against his back with one arm flung around Sam’s chest and one hand clutching his shoulder as he fights to pull Sam backwards.

“Stop!” Dean’s yelling. “Jesus Christ, Sam, stop!”

Sam looks down and the guy (not his Stanford self at all, but Black T-Shirt) is curled up into a small, protective ball. For a moment, Sam doesn’t think the man is alive, but then Black T-Shirt uncurls slightly, and moans. Beer Belly and Hands are on the floor as well, unconscious, and he can’t tell if Beer Belly is breathing, and God, Hands’ right hand is a mess. Sam doesn’t remember any of the fight clearly, but you can’t fuck someone’s hand up quite that thoroughly without stomping on it, so he must have.

His own hands ache, and when he looks down, his knuckles are bloodied and swollen. Aside from Black T-Shirt’s low groans and Sam’s own breathing and Dean’s whispered, repetitive, “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” the bar is eerily quiet, and Sam, stumbling a little against his brother, looks around to find that they’re the center of attention.

Some of the bar’s patrons have cell phones out, which means that the police are on the way, of course they are, Sam just assaulted these guys, might have killed one of them, who knows, he fucking deserves to get caught, deserves to go to jail. His eyes, slipping back and forth over the crowd, find their waitress’ face, and Sands is crying silently with one hand pressed to her mouth.

“Come on,” Dean mutters, pulling at Sam. He sways uncertainly with his own vehemence, still too drunk to move well. Sam isn’t sure how his brother managed to get up from his seat and over here in the first place. “Sam, come on, we have to get out of here!”

But Sam isn’t going anywhere. He doesn’t deserve to get off Scot-free for this. He doesn’t deserve to get off Scot-free for what he let happen to Dean.

“Sam!” Dean insists, tugging harder. “Please, Sammy, come on. Don’t you fucking do this to me, you promised you’d stay, you fucking promised.”

As Sam turns his head to look at his brother, he hears the first, faint sound of approaching sirens. Dean’s eyes are still wide. He looks panicked. Looks more frightened than he was when the guy currently moaning on the floor was touching him. Looks fucking petrified that the cops are going to
come and arrest Sam and lock him up.

Part of Sam is desperate for that to happen, but most of his attention is already turning from the men on the floor to his brother. To Dean, who isn’t going to shake this drunken blur for another day at least. To Dean, who is cut up deep inside and who isn’t even going to bother trying to staunch the blood flow on his own. To Dean, who needs him.

“Okay,” Sam breathes. When he unclenches his hands, his knuckles crack painfully. “Okay.”

“C’mon,” Dean demands again, and this time Sam obeys.
Chapter 19

They stop back at the motel long enough to get their things from the room (Sam changes while his brother packs: there’s blood on his clothes, blood everywhere) and then drive south. Dean falls asleep in the passenger seat almost immediately, but Sam keeps driving until daybreak, when he finally pulls over and checks them into another motel. The clerk, obviously unused to having to handle the night shift, looks at Sam’s hands with puffy eyes and doesn’t ask questions. Not that it would have mattered if he did. The bar fight wasn’t noteworthy enough for news to have traveled this far south.

Dean is still sleeping when Sam returns to the car—slouched up against the passenger door with his mouth hanging open. When Sam opens the door to get his brother out, expecting the seat belt to keep Dean more or less upright, Dean drops out. Apparently, he wasn’t alert enough to strap himself in when they left and Sam didn’t think to check on him.

Sam is half-stunned by the knowledge that his brother would have gone right through the windshield if there had been an accident, but he still manages to catch him, and that’s how Dean wakes: brought up short from his fall by Sam’s chest. Sam waits for his brother to panic at the unexpected contact, but Dean just blinks up at him for a moment and then lets his weight rest more firmly in Sam’s hands.

Sam’s bloodied, bruised hands that don’t deserve that kind of trust.

“Dean,” Sam says. If his voice comes out sounding a little choked, then Dean is probably still too drunk to notice. “We’re here. I need you to help me get you into the room.”

“Yeah,” Dean sighs and then, after a brief hesitation, gets himself moving. He’s a little steadier on his feet than he was back at the bar, and moving around seems to revitalize him further. Once they’re inside the room, he’s actually awake enough to insist on looking at Sam’s hands.

Sam would rather clean himself up in private, but his brother seems to be rapidly sobering up (Bobby’s information on the venom’s half-life was obviously a little off) and he has always been mulishly stubborn about being the one to patch Sam up when he gets injured. It would take more energy than Sam has at present to talk Dean out of playing medic, so he sits down on the bed across from the one his brother took and holds his hands out.

Dean mercilessly pokes at Sam’s knuckles and moves his fingers around for him, which hurts like a bitch, but Sam doesn’t protest. While he doesn’t feel quite as bleak as he did back at the Spur, he still recognizes that he deserves a little pain. Dean pauses in his inspection, frowning, and then lifts Sam’s left hand toward his face and squints at it. A moment later, he’s picking something small and white out of the skin between Sam’s second and third knuckles.

Part of a tooth.

Dean lets the bit of bone fall to the carpet and then leans back, releasing Sam’s hands. “Nothing looks broken or dislocated, but you should probably ice those.”

Sam nods in assent and thinks about getting up to wash the blood off. Once he gets past the initial sting, all that cool water will feel good against his abused skin. And Dean’s right: he needs to ice his hands to keep the swelling down. But in the end he’s just too damned tired to move.

After a few minutes of numb silence, Dean says, “You scared me in there.”

Sam’s too worn out to feel adequately guilty for that. His “I’m sorry” comes out sounding flat and
They weren’t actually doing anything,” Dean adds, actually sounding *puzzled*, and deep inside of Sam that continually burning pilot light of anger flares a little.

“They were touching you. They don’t get to touch you.”

He can’t even begin to describe how their drunken presumption made him feel—how Dean’s obvious panic made him feel. He isn’t sure he even remembers just how insanely furious seeing Dean hurt like that made him. The emotion was just too intense to properly recall.

“Sam—” Dean starts, leaning forward and scrubbing his face with his hands.

“I want to kill him.”

The words are out before Sam realizes he’s going to say them, flat and toneless. For a moment, he’s confused— why the hell did he pick *now* of all times to bring this up?—and then he realizes that it’s because this is the only way he can say what he has to without completely losing it. Only now, when he’s exhausted enough that the anger that would normally be a towering inferno feels no worse than a sullen burn.

“What?” Brow furrowed, Dean lifts his head from his hands. “Who?”

“The guy who—” Fuck, Sam can’t say it. Bad enough he has to think it. “—who hurt you. In Vegas.”

Dean goes stiff.

“I think about it all the time,” Sam continues. “About going there and—and finding him. Or about burning the whole damn studio to the ground. It. Sometimes it scares me, how much I want to—the things I want to do to him. For touching you. For *daring*. It makes me sick to think about it. It makes me—Fuck, I’m so fucking angry.”

Sam is. Even now he can feel it—that slow-burning wrath that makes him think about knives and blood. It flares higher as he focuses on it, as though his attention is a fuel-soaked log he tossed into the flames.

“At me?” Dean asks, sounding subdued.

Sam isn’t sure what Dean is talking about. Pulling himself from his thoughts, he looks at his brother and says, “What?”

“Are you angry at me?” Dean asks again. While his voice is dull and accepting, his expression is timid: that of a dog that has been kicked one too many times to expect anything else.

“No,” Sam breathes out, wishing he could exhale the sudden bloom of pain in his chest as easily as that word. “God, *no*, Dean. With that sick asshole. And—and with Dad.”

The fear on Dean’s face disappears immediately at the mention of their father. Instead he’s frowning, disturbed by the perceived *(and meant, oh yes it was)* accusation and defensive on behalf of his hero. The way that he should have been on his own behalf and wasn’t.

“Dad didn’t do anything wrong.”

Sam’s anger gives a hiccupping pulse and rouses further, giving him the energy to push to his feet.
“Jesus Christ, Dean!” he yells. “Stop making excuses for the man.”

“I’m not!” Dean protests as he looks up. “It’s not Dad’s fault he got hurt, Sam.”

“It’s his fault you were there at all,” Sam snaps back, definitive.

For Sam, any question of guilt is always going to come down to that. To the fact that, instead of sending them to live with their Aunt and Uncle out in Ohio when Mom was killed, Dad decided to toss both of them in the backseat of the Impala and drag them along on his unswerving quest for vengeance. It’s always going to come down to the fact that the man chose to raise them as soldiers instead of as his sons. It’s going to come down to the fact that he forced Dean to grow up fast, and hard, and didn’t seem to care what kind of damage he did by putting so much responsibility on such young shoulders.

“I don’t want to have this talk again, Sam,” Dean says, sounding tired. “I don’t want to fight with you about Dad anymore.”

A few moments ago, Sam would have sighed and agreed with his brother, but now that his anger has reawakened he feels testy enough to say, “Fine. Say you’re right. Say it isn’t Dad’s fault he got hurt. Well, you know what, Dean? If you were that strapped for cash, then he should have called Bobby or Pastor Jim for help. Hell, even Caleb could’ve lent a hand. You know that guy’d give Dad the shirt of his back if he asked!”

In the face of Sam’s anger, Dean colors a little and looks away. He should be jumping to his feet and shouting back. Should be slamming Sam into the wall and telling him to stop being such a dick. If he doesn’t have the energy right now to manage that, then he should at least be quietly fuming. It’s infuriating how goddamned docile he’s being.

“He didn’t know how bad it was,” Dean mumbles, picking at his jeans with his fingers. “I didn’t—I didn’t tell him.”

Of course he didn’t. Sam shouldn’t have expected anything else from his noble, loyal, stupidly self-sacrificing brother. But Sam knows—he knows—that telling Dad wouldn’t have changed anything for his brother because Dad wouldn’t have cared. Dad would have done what he always did when things got tight: yelled at Dean for complaining in the first place and then told him to take care of it. Which would have put everything right back to square one. By not telling Dad about the problem, Dean just skipped a few steps in the natural process and saved himself an unnecessary rebuke.

“It’s not his fault,” Dean says again, and Sam doesn’t know whether to throttle his brother or pull him into a hug and not let go.

Instead, he sighs and sits down on the bed next to him. “It isn’t your fault, either.”

“I know that,” Dean scoffs, but he waited a shade too long for the claim to be believable. Sam looks at the profile of his brother’s face and knows exactly what he’s thinking because this right here is textbook Dean Winchester.

Should’ve been smarter, faster, better. Shouldn’t have let him get the drop on me. Should have fought him off.

Dean’s making everything his own fault, just like he did when Sam was ten and broke his leg falling out of a tree. Just like he did when Dad used the last of their ready cash to buy himself a bottle of Johnny Walker and there wasn’t anything left over to buy dinner.
It’s always Dean’s fault in his own mind. *Always.* Sam could take his gun into the bathroom right now and shoot himself in the leg and Dean would still find some way to take the blame for Sam’s injury. It’s frustrating. Frustrating and so very goddamned depressing to hear the confirmation that Dean has been blaming himself for getting raped.

Swallowing around the lump in his throat, Sam says, “You were already hurt, you were distracted by what you just went through, and you weren’t expecting to be attacked there. It wasn’t your fault, Dean.”

There’s new tension in the line of Dean’s jaw: a warning sign that Sam is happy to see because it signals the return of his brother instead of the rundown machine he was talking to before. He pauses—both because he doesn’t want to have to say the rest out loud and because he wants to give Dean a chance to respond—and then says, “You didn’t ask to be raped.”

Dean’s calm breaks like a wave against a rocky cliff face and he pushes to his feet to stride away from Sam with agitated steps.

“And you goddamned well know it. And I’ll tell you something else, Dean: the rest of the assholes at that studio are really fucking lucky that I’m too busy trying to help you to do anything about them right now because, to be honest, I’m not feeling all that generous toward them either.”

There’s a minute shift in Dean’s eyes, a flicker of some emotion that isn’t quite visible enough for Sam to get a read on. Then, still in that dull voice, he says, “They were just doing their jobs.”
“No they weren’t!” Sam yells. He knows that raising his voice isn’t going to get his point across any better than talking rationally would, and might actually shut Dean down further, but he can’t help himself. He’s too angry.

“Their job is to look out for their actors, damn it!” he continues. “They’re supposed to make sure that no one involved has any doubts about being there. I watched your audition tape, man. You obviously weren’t comfortable with what they wanted from you, but they hired you anyway. They’re supposed to make sure that they’re offering a consensual piece of adult entertainment, but they took one look at your face and your body and they signed you right up because they knew they’d make a shitload of money.”

“Hey, I picked up the phone and called them, Sam,” Dean says, jerking a thumb at his chest. His face is still a little stiff, but he’s thawing, thank God. He’s coming back out. “I decided to go to that audition, I decided to take the job. I decided, Sam. That makes it pretty damned consensual.”

“You can’t make a choice when you don’t have any other options,” Sam maintains, pushing. “And there was no way you were going back to Dad without that money. You’d cut your own arm off before you let him down.”

Dean laughs, harsh and a little wild. “Only you would make that sound like a bad thing.”

“He isn’t worth it, man! He’s not worth that kind of blind devotion. Not when all he’s ever done is treat you like some wind-up soldier.”

They have had these conversations before—had them almost every night before Sam left for Stanford—but Sam doesn’t think he’s ever going to stop feeling relieved when he actually says those words out loud instead of inside his head. One of these days, damn it, he’s going to get through to his brother. He’s going to say the words and have Dean believe him.

But that day isn’t going to be today. He can tell from the hard edge to his brother’s gaze even before Dean says, “We’re not doing this now, Sam,” and turns away.

Sam isn’t going to let his brother sidestep this entire conversation because of a technical foul. Jogging forward, he steps into his brother’s path and says, “Fine. We won’t talk about Dad. But I want you to tell me why you’re so goddamned desperate to exonerate everyone but yourself.”

“Because it’s my fault,” Dean growls, angling to push past him. He sounds angry but his eyes are too wide for that. His breathing is labored.

Sensing that he’s beginning to get somewhere, Sam takes a step sideways and puts himself in his brother’s path again. “Not good enough,” he says. “Why can’t you admit that you didn’t do anything wrong?”

“And I did, damn it! I fucked up, it’s my goddamned fault. Now leave it alone, Sam. Jesus Christ.” Dean turns around, not so much walking in the opposite direction as fleeing in it, and Sam darts out a hand to stop him.

“You don’t blame the people we help, Dean. You don’t blame them for being attacked. Why is this different?”

And Dean breaks.

“Because I’m not a fucking victim, Sam!” he yells, wrenching his arm free and turning to face him. “I’m not—I’m not a goddamned—” He’s crying—tears spilling hot down his cheeks and face
contorted in mingled pain and anger—and now he gives Sam his back again and walks over to sit down on the bed and put his face in his hands.

Stunned, Sam stands in the middle of the room and watches his brother weep. God, he should have known. Should have remembered how much pride Dean used to take in his strength—should have remembered that Dean saw himself as a soldier and not a civilian. Not ever, for all his insecurities and flaws, as someone who could be victimized.

Dean takes a slow, shuddering breath and lifts his head. He’s still crying, and the eyes he turns on Sam are desolate. “I can’t do that, Sammy,” he says thickly. “If I’m—I can’t be that. I can’t.”

Finally, Sam works through his shock enough to do what he should have done from the start and follows his brother over to the bed. Dean watches him come, and his expression is wrecked and pleading and mistrustful, but he doesn’t flee and he doesn’t flinch when Sam sits down next to him and puts an arm around his shoulders.

For several, tense seconds, he resists the draw, but then he folds: turning and pressing his face against Sam’s neck and weakly groping at his shirt. Dean’s skin is feverish and damp from his tears, and his shoulders shake under the weight of Sam’s arm as he begins to cry in earnest. Sam runs his hand up and down his brother’s far arm while he cries, and makes soothing noises, and waits for Dean to become calm enough to hear him again.

When his brother’s sobs have trickled off to sniffles, he says, “Being hurt doesn’t make you any weaker, Dean. It doesn’t make you a victim.”

Dean lets out a disbelieving scoff against Sam’s shoulder.

“No one can make you a victim,” Sam repeats. “Not unless you let them.” He hesitates for a moment—doesn’t want to set his brother off again—but in the end he can’t let the chance pass him by and says, “But right now, that’s exactly what you’re doing.”

Dean immediately pulls against the circle of his arms and Sam, after a moment of arguing with himself, relaxes his grip to let his brother go. He expects Dean to storm outside or maybe just circle the room as he restlessly searches for a way to escape from the memories inside his head. Instead, when Dean stands up, he doesn’t move further than a few, slow steps away. His hand is up at his scar, but for the first time since the cabin, Dean isn’t trying to run from himself.

“What else am I supposed to do?” he mumbles after a moment, eyes downcast.

Stop touching your scar, for starters, Sam thinks, but doesn’t say. He’s learned his lesson on that count, anyway. Instead, he says, “You’re supposed to fight this. You’re supposed to let me help you.”

“I am.”

“No, you’re tolerating me, Dean. And yeah, things are going more smoothly than they were, but you aren’t—you can’t get through this without talking, and that’s the one thing you refuse to do.”

“You never asked, Sam!” Dean yells. “I’ve been waiting for you to do your thing and ask, but you were too busy being pissed off to get your head out of your ass!”

“I—” That can’t be true, can it? Sam would have asked. He must have asked.

Only now that he thinks of it, he doesn’t actually remember bringing it up.
Swallowing, he nods. “Well, I’m asking now.”

“Okay,” Dean says. His voice is still sharp, but he breathes out, slow and measured, and when he speaks again he sounds a little calmer. “Okay, but not tonight. I’m fucking wasted, man.”

Privately, Sam agrees. He’s worn out as well—by the fight and the drive and this conversation—and he wants to be able to think in a straight line when Dean finally opens up and talks to him. But he also doesn’t want to leave them with a vague ‘someday’ because then it would be far too easy for Dean to stall and postpone and squirrel himself back away behind his walls.

“Tomorrow,” Sam suggests.

Dean nods again, more decisively this time, and lowers his hand from his temple. “Yeah, okay. Tomorrow.”

Sam ices his knuckles while his brother showers and then, when Dean comes out, takes his own turn under the spray. The warm water feels good on his muscles, which have gone painfully stiff, and as his body relaxes his thoughts begin to fuzz out around the edges. It’s like trying to think through a thick towel, and he ends up stumbling through the rest of his nightly routine of floss, brush and gargle in a semi-stupor.

Dean is already in bed with the lights are off when Sam comes back out. After a quick glance to make sure that his brother is resting all right, Sam heads over to the other bed and pulls back the sheets.

“What’re you doing?”

Sam jumps, startled by the voice, and then looks over his shoulder to find his brother sitting up in bed on one elbow and watching him. That muzzy, sleepwalking feeling has receded some thanks to his scare, and he’s awake enough to be leery of the studied non-expression on his brother’s face.

“Uh. Going to sleep?” he tries.

“Thought we said no take backs.”

Despite his new return to alertness, it takes Sam a moment to figure out what his brother is talking about. Then he flushes with warmth. He never actually thought Dean would still want this once the venom had worn off, and especially not now, when he must still feel so raw and awkward and exposed. But when he takes a tentative step toward his brother’s bed, Dean edges back to make room for him and lifts the covers up.

As far as Sam can tell, his brother is wearing boxers and that’s it.

Oh God.

“Dean, I—I want to, but I don’t know if I can—”

“I can deal with a little wood, Sam,” Dean says. “Just don’t grope my ass and we’ll be good.”

Sam’s pretty sure that he isn’t (quite) desperate enough to go around groping people in his sleep, and he wants this, wants to be able to sleep with Dean’s warmth radiating into his skin, and so he carefully climbs into the bed next to his brother and lies down on his side. The mattress shifts slightly as Dean pulls the covers back up and then shakes as he moves forward to press himself up against
Sam’s back.

“Let me?”

As if there was ever a question.

“Yeah,” Sam sighs.

The word has barely left his lips before Dean is shoving one foot between Sam’s ankles and forcing an arm beneath his shoulders. When Dean’s other arm drapes over his side, Sam leans back into the solid warmth of his brother’s chest and takes a deep, steadying breath.

“I love you,” he whispers.

Dean is silent for a moment and then, with the hint of a smile in his voice, he says, “You’re such a girl.”

It’s depressing how much it makes Sam’s chest ache to hear those familiar, teasing words from his brother. When he breathes in, the ache intensifies, and when he exhales it moves from his chest up into his throat and lodges there heavily. He has to swallow a few times before he’s finally able to say, “This from the guy who’s treating me like an oversized teddy bear.”

“Yeah, well, you’re playing the oversized teddy bear,” Dean mutters back, but his voice is already trailing sleep and Sam can tell from the slight shift in his brother’s breathing that he’s out seconds later.

He exhales, placing his hand over Dean’s where it rests on his chest, and follows.
Chapter 20

Neither of them brings it up during their separate but paralleled morning routines. Or over breakfast. Or when they check out of the motel. Or as Dean pulls them out onto the interstate again, this time heading east.

They don’t stop for lunch, which doesn’t much matter because Sam isn’t hungry. He actually regrets eating as much as he did at breakfast: the pancakes are sitting uneasy in his stomach and the orange juice tastes sour on the back of his tongue. When Dean finally pulls off the highway and starts speeding down back roads, Sam doesn’t ask why.

Instead, Sam rests his head against the window and tries to calm himself down by reminding himself that he already knows what happened to Dean. Things can’t possibly get any worse. Except this is Dean, who seems to attract sorrow like the gleam of gold attracts magpies, and Sam can’t shake the fear that it can get worse. It can actually get a lot worse.

By the time Dean finally pulls over, on the edge of a wide field miles from any recent human habitation, Sam is anxious enough that he’s sweating. He can’t seem to stop his leg from bouncing, no matter how much he concentrates on it. Dean turns off the engine and gets out without looking over, walks around to the hood of the car and leans against it. Sam looks at the sturdy outline of his brother’s back for a moment—broad shoulders, built to bear loads but never this jagged, diffuse weight that hasn’t settled on them but in them, inside Dean’s very bones—and then makes himself follow.

Sam has spent his life traveling dusty back roads just like this isolated stretch that Dean finally settled on, and so he knows how empty America can be when glimpsed from the right angle. It never stops surprising him, though. He keeps expecting the world to look smaller now that he’s grown, and instead it’s gone and expanded at an exponential rate until Sam is both sitting here beside his brother and stranded miles away. He casts his eyes over to Dean’s profile and Dean seems to recede further—remote as a distant, pale star.

But it isn’t the physical space that’s bothering Sam. It’s the time. The sordid, bruising combination of years and long miles.

Sam turns his face away as he settles down more firmly on the hood. He mimics Dean’s stance: feet planted solidly in the dust and hands shoved into his pockets. He keeps his head up and his eyes out on the long grass in the field in front of them, green and growing with the return of spring. There are birds singing somewhere—maybe in the few trees dotting what must have been farmland at some point. Maybe they’re ground birds, though, hidden in the rustling grass. The sun is warm on Sam’s skin, like false promises of safety and happiness. He shuts his eyes and breathes.

“I don’t know how to do this,” Dean says.

Sam opens his eyes again and chances another look to his left. Dean glows here, beautiful, but he doesn’t seem any closer than before. His scar is a white, glaring imperfection at his temple.

“I don’t know how to start,” Dean adds when Sam doesn’t say anything.

“Wherever you want to,” Sam says finally.

Dean is silent for almost a minute and then he says, “It smelled like vomit and rotten eggs. From the quiche, I guess.” The corner of his mouth twitches. “Tasted better going down than it did coming.
Taking a deep, shaky breath he continues, “That’s what I was thinking about when he knocked. I was—I could get the vomit out, but I couldn’t figure out how to get rid of that smell. I think I was—maybe I was gonna check under the sink to see if there was any cleaner I could use. And then the door opened and I—I could have looked. In the mirror, I could have looked, maybe seen the fucker’s face, but I was crying and I knew he’d see me back so I was staring down at the sink instead.”

Dean’s crying now. Not horribly—not enough for it to seep into his voice—but soft, almost gentle tears that make his cheeks and eyes shimmer in the sunlight. It feels wrong somehow to be watching Dean like this, feels like a violation, and Sam shifts his gaze away.

“I told him to get out, but he just—he grabbed the back of my head and he slammed my face into the mirror. It didn’t hurt for a few seconds—I think because I was trying to figure out what the fuck was going on—but then the cut stung like a mother and my skull was fucking pounding. He didn’t even have to push me down on the floor, I just—all he did was let go of me and I couldn’t, my legs weren’t working anymore and I just kinda went.”

Sam thought it was bad listening to this the first time, but he hadn’t been aware of how much the hypnotic trance was shielding him: shielding them both. Because that Dean had been in the moment, too confused by what was happening to give a coherent account. This Dean has had time to turn those memories and sensations over in his head and is able to fill in blanks that Sam really wishes could be left vague.

But as much as he doesn’t want to hear it, Dean needs this. And that’s always going to trump any of Sam’s own reservations.

“It—I dunno, I think maybe I wasn’t fighting back at first because I didn’t know what was going on. I mean, I felt him push me over on my stomach and—and p-pull my pants down, but I—wasn’t until he was i-inside me that I realized wh-what he wanted, and th-then I c-couldn’t. I d-don’t know, I couldn’t re-remember how to fuh-fight or something. All I c-could do wuh-was l-lie there.”

He stops, and when Sam glances over, he finds his brother grimacing in pain and massaging his temple. He remembers what happened the last time he pointed that out, but he can’t let it pass right now. Not when Dean is in enough pain already, reliving the nightmare.

“Does it still hurt?” he asks.

“What?” Dean asks, glancing at him without taking his hand down.

“Before I put you under, I asked you about the scar and you—you told me it hurt. That you touched it because it hurt.”

Dean looks surprised, and then confused, and then—as he realizes why Sam is asking this now—nauseous. But he doesn’t flip out the way he did when Sam pointed it out last time: only brings his hand down to clutch at his thigh and nods.

“Yeah,” he whispers. “Yeah, it hurts. Fucking aches.”

“Can I—” Sam starts, and then hesitates. There’s a difference between sharing a bed at night and asking for permission to touch Dean when the memories of his violation are so fresh and vivid in his mind.

“It’s share and care time, Sammy. Just spit it out.”
“It helped before, when I massaged your neck.”

Dean blinks as though he’d forgotten, which is quite possible. The first time Sam used that trick Dean was drunk off his ass. The second time, Dean wasn’t exactly in a coherent frame of mind. After a couple of seconds, Dean swings his face away and leans there without moving. He hasn’t given Sam the go-ahead, not exactly, but Sam doesn’t think Dean is capable of doing that right now. This—the equivalent of a dog baring its throat—is the closest he can come.

Tentatively at first, in case he isn’t reading his brother correctly, Sam lays a hand on Dean’s neck. Dean flinches minutely, but he doesn’t pull away and he doesn’t yell at Sam for touching when he has no right to, and so Sam slowly starts to rub at the pressure points with his thumb and forefinger. He can feel the exact moment it starts to work because Dean’s neck muscles go loose under his hand and his brother’s head sags.

“Better?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Dean breathes. “Where the fuck did you learn to do that?”

“Massage class. I wanted to surprise Jess for our anniversary.” Had, too. God, those had been some good weeks.

“Oh.” Silence falls between them for a moment and then Dean says, “I called for you.”

Sam’s fingers stutter to a stop without his permission.

“I’m not telling you this to hurt you, Sam, but you—you said I should talk, so I’m talking. And that’s part of it.”

“Okay,” Sam manages. If his voice sounds a little hoarse, then Dean isn’t going to call him on it.

“Can you—with your fingers, can you keep—”

Sam’s chest pulses with conflicting pride and pain at the request. On the one hand, this is the first time Dean has willingly asked for something for himself. On the other, the fact that the pain is bad enough to push his brother to that is nothing less than crushing.

“Yeah, sure,” he agrees hoarsely, and starts up again.

“Anyway, since I couldn’t—since I couldn’t move, it was all I could think to—no. No, never mind. I wasn’t thinking, I was just—I wanted someone to stop him. I wanted someone to come save me. So I kept calling. You and Dad, mostly. I think, couple of other people. Bobby, maybe. Maybe Mom.”

Jesus Christ. Sam is seriously rethinking his own ability to listen to this.

“Fucker didn’t seem to care about the noise. He just.” Dean’s breath hitches and Sam can hear his tears now, thick and wet in his voice. “He just kept going. And then he started—started talking to me. Messing with my head while he fucked me. Told me Daddy couldn’t help me and that you—you’d left me alone.”

The thought of that son of a bitch taking Dean’s cries for help and spinning them around into weapons makes Sam’s gut burn. He’s grateful for the anger, which is far more comfortable than his horrified sorrow, and clings to it.

“Then he s-started c-calling me a wh-whore. Said he was gonna ‘take me for a spin’. That I wasn’t anything but a t-toy.”
Sammy’s toy, Sam thinks for no reason at all, and shudders. His hand stills again on his brother’s neck, but Dean is too lost in the past to protest.

“Fucker kept saying my name, only he was—like you and Dad used to call me, when I was a kid, and he was—fucking hurt, like, I don’t know, I thought it hurt before, when we were shooting, but it, it felt—”

But Sam isn’t listening anymore. He’s too busy kicking himself in the ass for not realizing sooner: for not picking up on it when Dean first told Sam what happened to him when he was in that trace.

Saying Dean’s name. Dean’s childhood nickname.

When everyone on the movie set only knew Dean as Sam Stallion.

Sam moves suddenly, stepping around to Dean’s other side and gripping his shoulders. Dean’s face is a mess—splotchy and tear-streaked—and his eyes are red. There’s a part of Sam that wants to let this go until later, when Dean is more grounded, but the startled, coiled rage constricting his chest forces him to say, “Your name? Dean, are you sure?”

Dean shakes free of Sam and strides away while wiping at his face. “Yes, I’m fucking sure. I wish like hell I wasn’t, but I—every fucking syllable, Sam. Thanks to you, I remember everything.” It comes out angry, and while Sam doesn’t blame him and would have apologized if this had been any other time, this is too important to ignore.

“He called you Dean.”

“Yes!” Dean spits without turning around. “Why the fuck are you so hung up on that? It’s my goddamned name, Sam.”

“But they didn’t know that. The people at the studio, they all knew you as Sam Stallion. Unless—unless you told someone your real name for insurance or billing or something?”

But Dean is turning around now, and his expression is nothing but stunned. “No, I—I used another name. I didn’t want Dad to ... to ...” Eyes widening, he scrubs his hand across his mouth.

“Forget it,” Sam says, and Dean’s shoulders shake once and then he turns around and throws up.

Sam scrambles over to his brother’s side as quickly as he can, crouching next to him and resting a gentle hand at the small of his back. When Dean finally stops puking, he spits, trying to clean the taste from his tongue, and then wipes at his mouth again while he mutters, “Fuck fuck fuck fuck,” under his breath.

“Shh,” Sam says. “Shh, Dean.”

He tugs at his brother’s shoulder, trying to get Dean to face him, but Dean jerks away from him to fall on his side in the dirt.

“Okay,” Sam says instantly, holding his hands up with his palms facing outward. “I’m not going to touch you, okay?”

“Just—just gimme a few minutes. Christ.”

“Okay. I’m gonna see if there’s any water in the car.”
Sam isn’t sure how he feels as he rifles through their things—whether he’s more angry or sad or betrayed because anyone Dean knows well enough to be familiar with that childish nickname, Sam knows as well. This isn’t a spur of the moment crime anymore: it has malicious, hungry intent. Someone either followed Dean to Vegas or ran into him there. Someone—someone trusted—caught Dean in an uncharacteristic moment of weakness and used it to take something they had been wanting from him.

For how long? Years? Since he was the kid that nickname belonged to? The possibility is enough to make Sam feel like puking as well, but he manages to hold it together for his brother’s sake. He isn’t going to do Dean any good by falling apart right now.

Eventually, Sam finds a flask of holy water in the trunk and brings it back around to the front of the car. Dean is still on the ground, but he’s sitting up and he looks a little more in control of himself. His hands shake slightly when he accepts the flask from Sam, but then again Sam’s hands aren’t too steady either.

Dean grimaces at the first pull—the water can’t taste too good after sitting in their trunk all this time—but it still has to be better than the taste of vomit. He sloshes the water around for a while, spits, and then takes a second swig. When he spits out this second mouthful, he puts the cap back on the flask and holds it up to Sam. Sam slips the flask into his back pocket and then holds out his hand again. Not demanding, just asking. Testing the waters.

Dean just looks up at him dully and doesn’t move.

Sam gives his brother a couple of moments to think it over, but when it becomes clear that Dean either doesn’t want to or isn’t capable of accepting the offer, he starts to lower his hand back to his side. Unexpectedly, Dean’s hand shoots out and catches Sam’s forearm. Something deep in Sam’s chest loosens as he closes his own hand around his brother’s wrist and pulls Dean to his feet.

“I can’t believe I didn’t think of that,” Dean says as he dusts himself off.

“You’ve had other things on your mind.”

Dean’s mouth quirks humorlessly. “Yeah.”

Sam chews on the question for a few moments—this is bound to upset Dean—but in the end he isn’t capable of dropping it. Not when he’s so fucking close to having a target for his rage.

“Dean, who knew you were going to Vegas?”

“Just Caleb,” Dean answers wearily. “I needed some stake money.”

Caleb. Caleb with his easy-going smile and his closet of guns and his easy way around a knife. Caleb, who taught them both everything he knew about close contact fighting while John looked on, evaluating their every move. Caleb, who used to take them out for ice cream, and whom Dean looked up to: whom Dean admired and respected.

Sam’s going to kill him.

His murderous impulses must show on his face because Dean shakes his head. “It wasn’t Caleb.”

And Sam wants to believe that, he does, so he says, “Okay, then who did you run into in Vegas? Who saw you there?”

“I didn’t see anyone while I was there, but there has to—there’s some other explanation.”
God, Dean’s stubborn expression hurts. “Look, man, I don’t want to believe it anymore than you do, but Caleb’s the only one who—”

“It wasn’t Caleb,” Dean maintains.

“How do you know, Dean? You never saw his face!”

“Because Caleb’s practically bald, Sam!” Dean shoots back. “Always has been. I got my hand on this fucker’s hair: pulled hard enough to tear some out. It wasn’t him.”

Sam frowns against the growing anxiety in his stomach. “When?”

“What?”

“When did you grab his hair?” Sam clarifies. Because Dean just said he was on his stomach: said he couldn’t move. There was no way he was going to be able to get a firm enough grip on his attacker’s hair to rip some out.

Dean’s face brightens with comprehension and then smoothes out again deliberately as he looks away and says, “The second time, he—”

“The second time?” Sam can barely get the words out through his horror, but somehow he manages it.

Dean’s jaw works, but he doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t look at Sam. Out in the field, somewhere, the birds are still singing.

“How many times were there?” Sam demands finally. He isn’t sure that he wants to know—scratch that, he knows he doesn’t want to know—but at the same time, he knows he has to ask. He never suspected this, not when once was bad enough. Not when once was way too fucking much.

“Dean!” Sam barks when Dean doesn’t answer, and his brother flinches. A pang of guilt stabs through Sam’s chest, but he ignores it to repeat, “How many times were there?”

“Three or four, maybe.”

“Three or four, maybe?” Sam repeats. He’s shouting, he knows he is, but he seems to have lost control of his voice. He’s too furious to control it—not at Dean, and God, he hopes Dean knows that, but he’s raging all the same. His hands ache with the need to rend and cut. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t remember exactly.”

“You don’t remem—”

“I blacked out, okay?” Dean shouts, tears streaming from his eyes. “Sorry I can’t give you a fucking play by play, but I blacked the fuck out!”

Sam’s anger deflates and he reaches out. “Dean, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t!” Dean snarls, twisting back. “Don’t you. You want all the nasty details, Sam? Fine. He fucked me.” Holding up one hand, he counts them off on his fingers. “On my stomach on the floor. On my back on the floor. Up against the wall. I came that time, which is when I blacked out for a while. When I came back around, I was bent over the edge of the bathtub. He finished and he made me come again and then he left.”
Sam’s crying himself now, hard enough that it’s getting difficult to see to reach for his brother. “Dean,” he whispers.

Dean slaps his hand away. “Fuck you, Sam. You fucking left me to that, you—”

“I’m sorry,” Sam says again, and it feels like his ribcage is crushing his lungs and heart. “I’m so fucking sorry.” He tries for Dean again—needs to feel that Dean is still here, still miraculously in one piece—and this time he gets a hold of his brother’s jacket. Dean pushes at him as he steps in, but only weakly, and when Sam manages to get his arms around him Dean gives up fighting and clings back.

Sam loses track of time as they stand there, both of them weeping and hanging on to one another desperately. He does know that Dean somehow quiets first—maybe because he’s used to having these memories by now, maybe because he’s just stronger than Sam and always has been. For whatever reason, Dean quiets first and then his grip shifts on Sam, one hand reaching up to stroke his hair while Sam buries his face against Dean’s shoulder and weeps.

“Shh,” Dean murmurs. “S’okay, Sammy. S’okay, I’m here. We’re gonna be okay.”

And maybe that’s all Sam has been waiting for to really let go. That statement of faith from his brother: the sign that, somewhere inside, Dean is still whole enough for hope. He’s sobbing now, expelling months of useless rage and pain while his brother holds him. It’s backwards and wrong and he knows it—knows that he should be comforting Dean and not the other way round—but at the same time the world finally feels like it’s spinning correctly again.

This is what he remembers. Dean holding him, strong and sure and so very, very steady. Dean wiping away his tears and promising him that it would be okay, that they were going to leave the bullies behind and the next school would be better, that Dad was coming home, that they both were.

But there’s a part of Sam that knows that those days are past, and understands that that’s right and natural and good: that he can’t keep leaning on Dean’s borrowed strength. And so he fights for control of his own emotions: fights to shove them back into their proper, restrained places. It takes him a while, but he finally manages to lift his head. He kisses Dean’s cheek—means it to be a brief, light press of lips before he disengages and steps back. Before he can manage that, though, Dean turns his head and catches Sam’s lips with his own.

There’s nothing sexual about it. There’s too much salt between them right now—the revelations are too fresh and raw. No, this kiss is all about comfort and promises. This is Dean’s way of apologizing for his earlier anger, and his accusation. It’s his way of saying, I love you, I still love you, always and forever. Sam kisses him back and tries to meet him vow for vow. He isn’t sure he manages it—it’s all but impossible to match the devotion in Dean’s trembling lips—but from the warmth in his brother’s eyes as he finally eases back, he does well enough.

“I’m sorry,” is the first thing out of his mouth.

“Sorry looking,” Dean replies immediately.

Sam reads it for the acceptance it is and doesn’t push his luck.

“I’m going to kill him,” he says instead. “I don’t give a fuck if it turns out to be Bobby. I’m gonna tear the son of a bitch’s dick off.”

Dean laughs at that—weak, but genuine. “Aw, that’s sweet, honey. You gonna wrap it up in a little red bow for me too?”
Sam doesn’t say anything—can’t—but he lets the seriousness of his intent show on his face and Dean’s smile dies.

“I don’t want you to do that,” he says after a moment. “Not you.”

“He has to pay, Dean,” Sam insists, and is slightly mollified by his brother’s nod.

“Yeah. But you’re not gonna turn into that person, dude. Not for me. Not over this. I’d rather let that bastard fuck me every day for the rest of my life, do you hear me?”

The set of Dean’s mouth tells Sam that his brother means it and his rage flutters inside of him, looking for some way past the boundary Dean just set. He searches for some way to explain to his brother that he needs this, needs that vengeance as much as he needs air, and can’t come up with anything. Finally, he has to turn away, jaw clenching and unclenching convulsively.

Dean immediately steps up behind him and slides an arm around Sam’s stomach. Sam tenses—the last thing he wants when he’s this angry is for his brother to be touching him—but he doesn’t push Dean away. He isn’t sure he knows how to push Dean away.

“I’m not saying you can’t have your pound of flesh, Sam. But neither of us is killing anyone. We don’t cross that line. Promise me.”

Sam swallows thickly and doesn’t say anything.

“Promise me, Sammy.”

“I promise,” he mumbles, and wishes he didn’t mean it. He wishes Dean weren’t so good at reading him—wishes Dean didn’t know exactly what to do and say to trap his rage behind a barrier of love.

Dean is silent for a moment more, probably weighing the truth in Sam’s promise, and then he says, “I went to a clinic.”

Sam stiffens. “You—”

“Wear a condom? No. So if you think you’re ready to handle yourself, we can go find out what they know.”
Three hours later, Sam is sitting in the passenger seat waiting for Dean to finish gassing up when Dean’s phone beeps in his discarded jacket. Sam leans over the seat back to paw through sun-warmed leather and finds the phone and pulls it out. When he flips it open, he sees that it’s a text message from Dad.

The man sent them coordinates.

To another asylum, maybe: so that Sam can try to violate his brother again. Or to some hick town where Dean can be offered up as a sacrifice. Or maybe the coordinates lead to some other childhood fuck up that Dad can slap Dean in the face with when he’s already down.

If Dean sees this message, then no matter how willing at present he is to hunt down the bastard who raped him, he’s going to put his own issues on the back burner and run off on whatever wild goose chase Dad wants to send them on. If Dean sees this, then he’s going to insist on going, even though neither of them is in any shape to hunt right now. They’re both bloody and raw inside, and Sam can’t seem to get a grip on his anger, and it would be a complete and utter disaster.

After a quick glance to make sure his brother is still staring off at the horizon, he quickly texts back, - fuck you asshole-, and then turns the phone off and opens his door just wide enough to drop it on the asphalt. With any luck, Dean will think he left it at the last motel, or that he lost it when they were having their heart to heart in the middle of nowhere. And then Sam will suggest that his phone will be good enough for a couple of days, and Dean will agree, and he’ll have bought them both some breathing space.

Dean gets back in the car and Sam hastily shuts his own door.

“Getting some air?” Dean asks.

“Yeah,” Sam answers. He’s surprised by how steady his voice is. “It’s getting warm again.”

Dean nods. “You wanna drive with the windows down for a bit?”

It’s probably still a little too cold for that, but Sam smiles at his brother and answers, “Sounds good.”

And then they’re off again, chasing the sunset toward Vegas.
Chapter 21

Sam was right about the ‘clinic’ being a hospital. Desert Springs Hospital, to be exact. It’s less than ten blocks from the studio where Dean shot the movie.

Sam was worried he was going to have to convince Dean to let him do this on his own, but Dean just parks in one of the hospital lots and pushes his sunglasses higher on his nose and says, “I’ll wait here.” Sam suspects that his brother’s reasons for waiting in the car are different from his own, which are purely logistical. If anyone recognizes Dean as the rape victim who staggered in to get patched up and then wandered out again before the police could take his statement, then the whole F.B.I. agent thing is going to fall right through the cracks on them.

Sam has seen far too many emergency rooms in his day, and he’s familiar enough with them to be able to tell the difference between out-of-control busy and ‘we’ve got this’ busy. When he steps through the electric doors into the air-conditioned, pristine waiting room, it doesn’t take more than a glance to see that today, thankfully, it’s the latter.

There are a handful of people waiting to be seen—a man who has sliced his hand open; a lady with pale skin and a damp cloth covering her eyes; a kid sitting in his father’s lap (the kid looks like he might have a broken foot, the father looks like he might start breaking heads if his son isn’t seen in a couple of minutes); a man who’s either going through withdrawal or is very, very sick; a scattering of other people who must be waiting for friends or family members—but the scene is missing the sharp edge of haste that would have made Sam feel guilty about walking up to the intake desk and flashing his fake badge to get some attention.

Not guilty enough to have stopped him, not where Dean’s concerned, but still.

“I’m Agent Angus—” He manages, barely, to say the name without grimacing: next time he’s making the badges. “—and I need to ask a couple of questions about a possible sexual assault victim who was treated here a few years ago.”

The girl behind the desk—long dark hair, too-straight nose, slightly bulging eyes—looks up at him with her mouth hanging open. It makes her look more than a little slow. Then she blinks and says, “March fifteenth two-thousand and two.”

She doesn’t seem old enough to have been working here then, but from the speed that she rattled that date off, Sam can tell that she was. This plain, dull-looking girl was maybe sitting right behind this very counter when Dean stumbled through the doors.

If his brother’s entrance was memorable enough for Sam’s vague statement to elicit such an immediate response, then it’s a very good thing that Dean’s waiting out in the car, instead of standing in here where she can get a good look at him.

Sam very carefully doesn’t think about what his brother must have looked like to warrant that kind of instant recall. Instead, he slips Agent Angus’ smile—serious and a little sad—onto his lips and nods. “That’s the one.”

“Is he okay?” the girl blurts. “He isn’t—he isn’t dead, or in trouble or anything?”

Sam’s first, instinctual reaction to that question is unblinking, proprietary jealousy. This girl doesn’t have any stake in Dean’s life, damn it. She doesn’t get to look up at Sam like that: like her entire world hinges on his answer. Hinges on Dean being okay.
Then rationality rushes back in.

God, Sam should be thanking her. He should be grateful that someone was looking after Dean on that day. He can’t even remember what he was doing on March 15th, when his brother was ripped apart so thoroughly and mercilessly.

The girl is still looking up at him desperately and, in addition to feeling bad about his jealousy, now Sam is shamed by his initial, unintentionally cruel thoughts about her appearance. He didn’t come prepared to tell anyone anything—was planning on sticking to the tried but true ‘that’s classified’—but he can’t deny this girl an answer. Not when she looks as though Dean has been troubling her dreams for the past four years.

“He’s fine,” he admits. “But I can’t tell you more than that.”

“Oh thank God,” the girl exhales, and then, unexpectedly, bursts into tears.

Crap.

“Oh, hey, don’t—Miss?” Sam glances around for help from the people in the waiting room, but although they’re watching with interest, none of them seem inclined to get involved. Thankfully, when he turns back to the weeping girl, help is finally arriving in the form of an older, heavyset black woman wearing nurse’s pinks.

“Emma?” the woman calls. “Emma, honey, what’s wrong?”

“He’s okay!” the girl—Emma—sobs through her tears. “H-he’s okay.”

The fact that the nurse doesn’t look confused by that announcement tells Sam that he has stepped into something more complicated than he thought. Stupid not to have expected it, really, because Dean is involved and nothing is ever as simple as it should be when it comes to his brother.

“How about you go on into the bathroom and calm yourself down,” the nurse—Claire, Sam reads on her nametag—suggests. “I’ll get James to cover the desk for a few minutes while I assist—” She glances at Sam with one eyebrow raised.

“Agent Angus,” Sam offers, flashing his badge again.

“—this young man.”

Emma sniffs and nods, but she insists on thanking Sam and hugging him clumsily over the desk before she allows herself to be herded away. Half a minute later, a sour-faced male nurse slumps over to her station to glare at Sam in a manner that he’s beginning to think he deserves.

He knew it was bad—everything Dean has told him made him painfully aware of that—but he obviously doesn’t have a clear enough picture of just how bad it was. Not if the mere mention of his brother is getting this kind of reaction.

God, how messed up was Dean when he stumbled in here, anyway?

Between Mr. Cheerful, the waiting room filled with over-curious family members and Sam’s own increasing guilt, he’s more than a little grateful when Claire finally returns to bring him somewhere private so they can talk. He expects to be taken to an office, or possibly an empty curtain. Instead, she hustles him into a room marked ‘Supplies’ and slams the door behind her.

Sam’s pretty sure that he’s in trouble.
“Okay, buddy,” Claire announces, standing between Sam and the door with her arms crossed beneath her overly ample breasts. “Who are you? And this time you can leave your crackerjack badge out of it. You want to try lying, you try it with someone that ain’t trying to raise three boys on her own in the middle of Vegas.”

As Sam opens his mouth to protest, she adds, “And you even think of lying to me again and I don’t care how handsome you are, I’m siccing the police on you.”

Sam shuts his mouth again, turning over possible responses in his head. On the one hand, if he tells Claire the truth, then she’ll be within her rights to turn him in for impersonating an F.B.I. agent. But Sam doesn’t think she’s kidding about calling the cops if he doesn’t admit to the lie either, which leaves him damned if he does and damned if he doesn’t.

When he continues to hesitate, searching for a path that won’t include the authorities, Claire turns around to reach for the door handle.

“Wait!” Sam blurts, reaching after her.

She glances over her shoulder—a question that turns into a warning when she sees that he’s trying to grab her arm. He immediately takes a step back and shoves his hands into his pockets, where his healing knuckles throb and ache.

“He’s my brother,” Sam admits, throwing himself on her mercy and praying that he’s doing the right thing.

Claire’s stern expression melts. Turning around to face him again, she breathes, “Oh, honey. I am so sorry.”

“I didn’t—he just told me about it about a month ago, and he didn’t—he doesn’t want to go to the police, but I just—I can’t let that son of a bitch get away with it.”

There’s enough truth in the words not to set off Claire’s internal lie detector, and she reaches out to lay a hand on his arm. Sam isn’t sure whether the attempt at comfort makes him want to break down crying or lash out.

Taking a deep breath to center himself, he says, “He told me you might have done a kit.”

Claire nods as she takes her hand back. “I was here when they brought him in—me and Emma and Henry and a couple of others who’ve moved on to greener pastures. Emma and I ran the kit. He didn’t seem to want any of the men near him, not that I blame him.”

That’s already more than Sam needs to hear—he already feels enough like a voyeur: invasive, prying at things he’s sure Dean doesn’t want him to know—but the question is out before he can stop himself. The question, after all, is the reason that Sam insisted on coming here first instead of going straight to the cops.

“How bad was it? He won’t—he won’t tell me.”

Not that Sam has bothered asking. He knows better than to ask Dean that question, which is at once so starkly practical and painfully unquantifiable. The stiffness in his brother’s posture whenever they have come close to skirting the issue has been warning enough to keep his mouth shut on the subject.

Claire bites her lower lip as she hedges, “I don’t know that it’s my place to say if your brother doesn’t want you to know, but I think you can guess from Emma’s reaction that he wasn’t a pretty sight.”
“Please,” Sam urges. His throat has gone tight and his stomach is reeling unpleasantly.

This isn’t going to be easy to hear and he knows it. None of it has been anything close to easy. Dean’s going to kill him if he ever finds out that Sam grilled the nursing staff like this, and Sam knows that too. Sam knows both of those facts and he’s still pushing, which makes him both a bastard and a masochist.

But he doesn’t have a choice. He has to ask because he needs to know exactly how much pain and suffering he needs to take out of that raping son of a bitch’s hide. He needs to know how much payment is due so that he can calculate proper interest and pay the fucker off in full.

Sam made a promise to his brother four days ago by a nameless field but, unlike Dean, he’s broken promises before. With each second that has passed since he stepped through the emergency doors, it has become clearer and clearer to him that he’s going to break this one as well.

Claire is still regarding him doubtfully, so Sam adds, “Please, he’s—he’s hurting inside, and if I don’t know how bad it was, I won’t know how to help him.”

He forces his face into the expression that always makes Dean cave: the one that used to make Jess laugh and shove him out of bed and tell him he’d have to try a lot harder than that to impress someone who grew up with four younger brothers. It’s one of the few differences between the two loves of Sam’s life, but then again Jess didn’t have Dean’s Prime Directive ground into her until it was a mantra beating at the back of her mind with every pump of her heart.

*Keep Sam healthy keep him happy keep him safe.*

Sam half expects Claire to tell him to save the eyes for someone who isn’t raising three boys in the middle of Vegas, but instead her expression softens again and she sighs.

“He was a mess,” she admits. “We see a lot of messed up shit in here, but I don’t blame Emma for getting shook up like she did over him. When he walked hisself in, I wasn’t sure how that boy was still upright. All rights he should’ve been unconscious, amount of blood he’d lost—and not from that nasty cut on his forehead either, if you follow.”

Sam follows all right. He follows better than he wants to. Silently, he curls his hands into fists inside of his pockets. One of his healing knuckles pops.

“We stopped the bleeding, put a couple more pints of blood in him and stitched him up. Then Emma and I ran the kit while Harold called it in. Your brother was out cold by the time the police got here, no small mercy, so they said they’d wait out in the waiting room until he woke up. Emma volunteered to sit with your brother so that he wouldn’t be frightened when he did come around. People who have been ... attacked ... can sometimes react poorly to waking up alone in strange places.”

Sam nods. He’s seen that himself—not with Dean but with civilians, with the people they’ve saved just a little too late. Sometimes, when those survivors wake up, they remember the nightmare first and see the world around them only as a pale afterthought.

“She told me he came out of it around midnight,” Claire continues. “He seemed fairly lucid; asked if she’d get him some water. Emma said she didn’t like the way he looked, but she thought he was too beat up to do anything, and anyway someone had to fetch the officers, so she went down the hall. She couldn’t have been more than a couple minutes, but when she got back he was gone.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t know how in God’s name he got past the police in his condition, but
Emma’s been sick with guilt over it: she was certain your brother went and threw himself in front of a car or off a bridge. Or maybe went back to the bastard who put him in here.”

She’s looking at Sam like she expects answers, and as much as he’s struggling to process what she just told him—to force rational thought through the warring grief and rage—Sam supposes she deserves them.

“He didn’t,” he says hoarsely. “He went back to our Dad and he—he blocked it out. For a long time. He just remembered about a month ago. We—we’re dealing with it.”

Claire nods once, pursing her lips. Then she says, “If you have some sort of vigilante revenge idea, **don’t**. You go ahead and call the police, and you ask if they got anything off the kit we sent over. You even go ahead and tell them to press charges if they haven’t yet—your brother shouldn’t need to testify: we got more than enough evidence from him when he dragged himself in here. But you **do not** go after him on your own.”

“I already promised my brother I wasn’t going to do anything,” Sam responds, which isn’t precisely a lie.

But Claire shakes her head, glowering at him.

“I could give a rat’s ass if someone put a bullet in the back of that animal’s head,” she announces fiercely. “But you didn’t see your brother. You don’t do something like that to another human being if you’re sane. This man, whoever he is, is nothing more than a rabid dog. You’re a big guy, buddy, but you go looking for him and you’re gonna get hurt.”

“I can take care of myself,” Sam announces. His voice is soft, but something in his tone catches Claire’s attention and she peers at him more closely.

“You’re going to do it anyway,” she accuses.

“He’s my brother,” Sam replies. It’s the only response he has. The only one he needs.

Claire sighs, crossing herself, and then says, “You go after him and you shoot to kill. Right here.” Going up on her tiptoes, she manages to poke Sam in the middle of his forehead with one finger. “You take him out quick and clean, just like any other rabid dog.”

But Sam doesn’t think he can do that anymore. Coming here—asking these questions—was a bad idea. They should have done what Dean wanted to do and gone straight to the police station. But Sam wanted to look into the eyes of the people who were there. He wanted a chance to ask the question he asked Claire, the question he’s never going to be able to ask his brother: **how bad was it?**

Well, now he knows. And he has a feeling that the son of a bitch’s end is going to be miles distant from ‘quick and clean’.

“I’ll be careful,” he says.

Claire regards him darkly. “You do anything to put your brother back in that animal’s sights and I will hunt you down and shoot you myself.”

Sam hasn’t thought of that, actually. Hasn’t considered that this quest for vengeance might be dangerous to Dean. It makes him hesitate for all of three seconds and then his determination firms. When they find the bastard, Sam will just leave his brother in the motel room while he handles things himself. And if Dean seems like a flight risk, then Sam will handcuff him to the toilet seat. Hell, he’ll drug his brother if that’s what it’s going to take to keep him safe.
“I won’t let him get hurt again,” he says, and wishes he could make it true. He wishes that he could use the words to bind Dean to himself and move them both far from the line of fire. But Dean is never going to submit to that—is never going to give up hunting, which is more dangerous by far than their current quest—and Sam has to admit that there’s a part of him that wouldn’t want him to.

Hunting is part of what makes Dean Dean. It makes him the man Sam loves. And as much as it kills Sam to watch his brother continually put his neck on the line, he isn’t going to be the one who takes that away from him.

But he thinks the words again anyway, like a talisman. Like a prayer.

*I promise I won’t let him get hurt. I promise I’ll keep him safe.*

*And I promise that I’m going to gut that son of a bitch and feed him his own goddamned cock before I let him die.*

*Amen.*

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Thanks to modern technology, Sam doesn’t have to go through the dog and pony show at the station to get a look at the case files. All he has to do is hack into the LVPD database from the motel room while Dean feigns disinterest on one of the beds.

Although they have been sleeping together since Wichita, they still ask for two queens at check in. Maybe because neither of them feels secure in their tentative arrangement yet. Maybe because the second bed is damned convenient for storage and weapon cleanings, which is what Dean is currently using it for. Normally, the way that his brother is all but fondling their guns would be a distraction for Sam, but right now he’s too focused on slipping past the LVPD’s firewall to pay much attention.

He smiles grimly as he finally manages it and announces, “I’m in.”

“What do you want, a medal?” Dean mutters, exchanging the Taurus for his favored Colt. But Sam can hear the nerves in his brother’s voice.

It takes a few minutes to figure out the idiosyncrasies of this particular system and from there it’s smooth sailing. Sam locates the search engine and selects the File By Date option. Types in 03-15-2002 and hits Enter. A few seconds later, the server kicks back over three hundred different entries from that day. Sam sorts by type and there are three first-degree sexual assaults listed. One outstanding, two closed. Sam checks the outstanding case first, but the victim was a twenty-three year old stripper from a bar off the main strip.

Heart hammering in his chest, he clicks on the first of the closed cases. Another girl.

The third file is Dean’s.

Sam skims it, letting bits and piece of information wash over him. *Unknown Caucasian male, approximately 20 to 25 years of age ... admitted to Desert Springs Hospital at 7:24 p.m. ... laceration to the right temple ... concussion ... severe trauma to the anal tract congruent with forced penetration ... torso covered with abrasions ... possible bite marks ...*

And there, towards the bottom of the report, is the name that Sam has been looking for.

*Frank Hanson.*
For an instant, Sam’s world narrows to a blinding, burning pinprick of triumphant rage.

Then he reads further and deflates. All of his strength, all of his determination and confidence, run out of him like blood and leave him hollow. His insides ache. He feels empty. Burnt out. Ruined.

He doesn’t even realize that he has started to cry until Dean’s hands close on his shoulders.

“Hey,” Dean says, kneading his muscles. “Hey, it’s okay. Wh-whomever it is, we can—”

“You don’t—” Sam chokes on his tears, swallows, and then tries again. “He’s dead. He’s no one at fucking all and he’s already fucking dead.”

The most difficult part of Sam’s plan is untangling himself from Dean’s arms without waking his brother up, but even that isn’t too tough to manage. Dean’s worn out from his own tears: from the emotional wasteland in which they have both been left stranded after gearing up for a confrontation that’s never going to come.

Frank Hanson.

It’s a normal enough name. Unexpectedly unfamiliar.

Dean thinks that he might remember the man, vaguely, from set. Some nervous, twitchy prop wrangler who stuttered and blushed when their hands accidentally met while he was handing Dean a cock ring.

As Sam fishes the keys out of his brother’s coat pocket and lets himself out of the room, he wonders yet again whether Dean is remembering the right man. Maybe, maybe not. The nerves make it unlikely, but they also could have been nothing more than an act meant to lull Dean into a false sense of security. Then again, Dean could honestly be confused. After all, that day wasn’t wine and roses for him even before Hanson shoved him headfirst into the bathroom mirror and scrambled his brains.

Reading through the file more carefully has only left Sam with more questions than answers. Hanson’s last known place of employment is, in fact, listed as Moon Media. He was thirty-five years old when he raped Dean. Still thirty-five at the time of his death, which trailed that act of violence by no more than four days. He went quietly in his sleep: the officers sent to bring him in for questioning in the sexual assault and subsequent disappearance of an unidentified Caucasian male are the ones who found his body.

Sam has no goddamned clue how the son of a bitch found out Dean’s name. He supposes that tossing that “o” onto the tail end could have been an accident of coincidence, but the name itself... that’s more troubling. Troubling enough that Sam doesn’t know whether the sick knot in his chest—the knot telling him he has unfinished business—stems from the mystery surrounding his brother’s name or if it’s just the normal frustrated rage anyone would feel after being denied retribution.

A heart attack, of all things. A fucking heart attack.

It’s too late for Sam to do anything that will satisfy his bloodlust—and really, to call it anything else would be lying—but he has to do something or he’s going to snap.

Hence, the plan.

Putting the Impala into neutral, Sam pushes it far enough away from their room that he feels confident his brother won’t be able to hear the engine. Dean can sleep through a hell of a lot of noise,
but when it comes to his baby he’s on a hair trigger. It’s a lesson Sam is pretty sure he helped teach his brother.

Shout obscenities at your father and Dean mutters to himself and turns over. Business as usual.

Get into the habit of pushing your father into leaving for the nearest bar, though, and Dean learns pretty fucking fast to jerk awake at the first growl of the engine.

Even though he has moved the Impala a good distance from the room, Sam watches their front door nervously as he turns the key in the ignition. He’s going to tell Dean about this excursion, of course, but not until it’s done. He isn’t sure Dean would approve of this and he needs it. He needs something.

When he pulls up in front thirty minutes later, the graveyard looks like any other graveyard. When he reaches it six minutes after that, the grave looks like any other grave. It’s only Sam who is made different by the frustrated, furious strain in his muscles as he digs.

It takes longer without Dean here to help, which Sam didn’t plan on. He’s too used to having his brother there to back him up to have factored in his absence, and what he guessed might take two hours instead takes three and a half. Finally, though, he brings the spade down and is rewarded with the welcome thunk of wood.

Sam discards the shovel to wipe clear the last bit of dirt with hands that are shaking in mingled exhaustion and rage. The revealed casket is locked, but the shovel is easy enough to retrieve and a few blows from the business end crack the hinges loose and then Sam is yanking the lid open. The smell hits him immediately—gassy stench of decomp that has been trapped in here for years. The body itself is mostly bones and parchment skin wrapped in a dapper suit. The eye sockets stare up blindly.

This is everything that’s left of Dean’s rapist. This is what’s left of the man who took Sam’s beautiful, bright brother and shattered him. This is the man who damped Dean’s instinctual joy and zest for life. This is the fucking son of a bitch who died before Sam could send him screaming to Hell.

Without thinking, Sam reaches out and twists the bastard’s head around so that he doesn’t have to look at those empty, mocking sockets or that too-wide skeletal grin. Then, wiping his hand off on his pants, he clambers back out of the grave and retrieves the gas can he left by the tombstone.

The gas goes down first, leaving a faint, wet shimmer over the remains. Then, after a quick glance around to make sure that he’s still alone, Sam unzips and lets loose. It isn’t anywhere near enough, drenching the man’s body in gasoline and piss and, in a few moments, burning the whole sorry mess, and Sam realizes that he’s crying weakly as he tucks himself away.

“You son of a bitch,” he mutters. “If I could—if I knew how to bring you back, I would.”

It isn’t really a question of knowledge, of course, but of Dean’s willingness to go along with something like that. Sneaking away for a little grave desecration is one thing, but Sam doesn’t think he could get away with performing black magic under his brother’s nose.

Groping in his jacket pocket, he finds the book of matches he brought along and pulls it out. His hands are trembling so violently that he fumbles the first match, almost burning himself in the process. The second lights successfully, but snuffs out before it hits the body. Before he can try a third—and Sam’s going to burn through as many matches as it takes, damn it—a familiar voice makes him freeze.
“Sam.”

Still crying, Sam shuts his eyes. He doesn’t move as strong hands close around his and take the matches away. When Dean’s voice comes again, he’s farther away: up by the headstone.

“This him?”

“Yeah,” Sam breathes. “Dean, I—”

“Shut up.”

Dean’s voice is toneless and Sam opens his eyes again in an attempt to gauge his brother’s mood. Dean is turned toward him, but he isn’t looking at Sam: he’s staring down into the open grave. His face is at once clearly visible and yet completely unreadable. Sam has no clue what’s going on behind his brother’s flat eyes.

After a few seconds, and still without looking up, Dean says, “I get that you’re pissed, but this is mine, Sam. This is mine.”

Somehow, Sam never considered the fact that Dean might need revenge just as much as he does. Might need it more, actually: he lived through it.

Sam wipes at his eyes with the back of one hand. “Yeah,” he manages. “Sorry. I wasn’t—I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, you weren’t,” Dean agrees, and then his jaw firms. A single tear slips down from his right eye: shines as bright as his scar in the moonlight. He opens his mouth and shuts it again. Opens it once more and then, swallowing thickly, clenches his teeth together and gives his head a shake.

There aren’t any words for something like this, not really.

Bowing his head for a moment, Dean takes a deep breath. Then he takes out a fresh match—hands steady and sure—and lights it. The flame casts flickering shadows across his face, making the scar at his temple seem to writhe. When Dean drops it, the match stays lit and Hanson’s body goes up like a dry piece of timber.

“Give me the shovel,” he rasps, holding out his hand.

Sam doesn’t know what his brother wants the tool for, but he retrieves it and brings it over anyway, glancing down at the flames while he walks around the grave. Dean takes the shovel and hefts it in his hands for a moment, as though considering its weight. Then, without warning, he spins and slams it into the headstone.

Sparks fly from the granite and there’s an echoing clang—too loud for this hour of the morning, even in the middle of a graveyard. Sam reaches for his brother’s arm.

“Dean, someone’s going to hea—”

Clang.

As Dean winds up again, Sam gives up on trying to get him to stop and ducks back out of the way to avoid being struck himself. Dean brings the shovel down on the headstone three more times. On the final blow, he strikes the stone hard enough that the shovel’s head flies free and tumbles off into the grass. There are deep grooves on the headstone now: rough, gouged wounds in the granite that obscure Hanson’s name.
Dean stands there breathing deeply for a moment and then, dropping the broken shovel handle, turns around and finally looks at Sam. He’s crying freely, not even trying to hide it, and Sam moves without thinking to pull his brother into a hug. It might be a stupid idea—he has no way of knowing whether his brother has worked out enough of his frustration on the stone—but Sam’s instincts are good and Dean grips the back of his jacket tightly to hold him close.

He shakes in Sam’s arms, breathing gone ragged and pained, and Sam closes his eyes against the flickering glow of fire from the open grave. Turning his head, he presses his forehead against the side of his brother’s face and holds him tighter as Dean scrambles for a better hold on his jacket.

Dean is solid and warm in his arms, but Sam knows how close his brother came to not being here, how close he came to bleeding out in some filthy bathroom with the smell of his own vomit in his mouth, and he can’t seem to get a firm enough grip either.

Sam doesn’t know how long they stay there before reality intrudes, but eventually he realizes that they’re standing next to a desecrated grave and that, sooner rather than later, the police are going to show up. He still can’t make himself let go, but he does manage to open his mouth and say, “We should get going. Someone might have heard that and called the cops.”

For a few seconds, Dean doesn’t seem to have heard him. Then, reluctantly, he loosens his grip. Sam has to remind himself that he can’t actually spend the rest of his life holding onto Dean before he can do the same.

“I’m driving,” Dean announces, wiping his eyes.

Sam nods. He doesn’t bother asking Dean how he got here—neither one of them is above stealing a car when the need arises—or how Dean knew where to go—it probably took his brother all of ten seconds to figure out where Sam was when he woke up alone. He just digs the keys to the Impala out of his jacket pocket and hands them over.

“Feel any better?” he asks, kicking the shovel handle into the grave to burn along with Hanson as he follows his brother toward the road.

“No really, no.”

“Yeah,” Sam sighs. “Me neither.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Back at the motel, Dean makes Sam shower before he lets him into bed. Once Sam finally slides under the sheets, though, his brother snakes out an arm to pull him close, chest to chest. That much is business as usual these days.

The way that Dean bites gently at the side of Sam’s neck isn’t business-like or usual.

“Dean,” Sam starts, gripping his brother’s shoulders with the intent to push him off.

“No,” Dean insists, holding on. “No, I want this. I’m not letting that son of a bitch take this away from me.”

He bites down again, a little harder this time, and Sam shudders.

“He won’t,” he promises wildly. “Dean, he won’t but you need more time, you need—”

“Don’t tell me what I need, Sam,” Dean growls, nipping at Sam’s collarbone hard enough to make
him give a full-bodied jerk. “You get bucked, you get back on the horse.”

“H-how much horse are we talking about here?” Sam manages, but his hands are already moving, sliding over Dean’s shoulders and down the curve of his back. When his hand brushes the waistband of his brother’s boxers, Dean stiffens and stills against him.

Sam freezes as well, but doesn’t move his hand. “Dean?”

“Not that much,” Dean says, and then swallows thickly. “Can we—I just want to try making out for a while. That okay?”

Sam wants Dean more than he’s wanted anything before in his entire life. More than he ever wanted Stanford. More than he ever wanted to be a normal kid with a safe, boring life. He wants to hold his brother down and fill him up and show him how good sex can be when you’re with someone who loves you. But he still feels more relieved than disappointed by his brother’s answer.

Sam can’t turn Dean down, but he also knows that it would make him sick to touch his brother with the scent of burning flesh still so strong in his nose. It would tarnish this moment—tarnish them.

“I think we can try that,” he says gratefully, moving his hand back up into safe territory and tugging Dean closer.

His brother’s lips taste warm and faintly bitter—Dean must have taken a few swigs of alcohol to calm himself down while Sam was showering. He lets Sam take the lead, keeping his mouth pliant and his body supple.

Fully conscious of the magnitude of his brother’s trust, Sam starts with short, almost chaste kisses while he strokes Dean’s back through the thin fabric of his t-shirt. In response, Dean tentatively slips his own hand up beneath Sam’s shirt to touch his skin. Encouraged by his brother’s initiative, Sam carefully increases the pressure of his mouth. His tongue first traces and then parts Dean’s lips.

Dean’s breathing stutters a little as Sam’s tongue starts to dip into his mouth, and Sam pauses to ask, “You okay?”

“Yes,” Dean growls. He sounds annoyed rather than afraid, with a hint of something that Sam wants—badly—to believe is arousal.

Sam kisses his brother briefly to placate him, and then says, “If it gets to be too much, just tap me three times, okay?”

“Yes, Christ, just kiss me already.”

That isn’t an order Sam needs to hear twice (except for how, yeah, he sort of did) and he moves in again, more confidently this time. The kiss is deeper as Dean tilts into it, but still as gentle as Sam knows how to make it. Mindful of what happened the last time Dean tried one of these experiments, Sam holds himself back as best as he can: concentrating on his brother’s reactions rather than his own. He thinks he’s doing pretty well until Dean jerks his head back.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asks, starting to lift his hands from his brother’s body.

Then Dean’s hand pushes down into Sam’s boxers to cup his ass. Sam’s dick goes from languidly enjoying itself to overexcited in point six seconds and he gasps. Dean looks a little guilty—probably over starting something he isn’t going to follow through on—but the annoyance furrowing his brow is stronger.
“I’m not gonna break,” he growls, and Sam lets himself go.

He’s still mindful enough to roll over onto his back and drag Dean on top of him rather than crushing his brother into the mattress, but this time he doesn’t so much kiss Dean as he fucks his tongue into his mouth. Dean’s back muscles bunch as he kisses back, and Sam can’t seem to get enough of the way his brother feels, warm and flexing against him. Then Dean shifts positions, letting one knee drop down between Sam’s legs, and Sam makes a helpless moan into his brother’s mouth as Dean’s thigh pushes up against his cock.

Dean, the fucker, laughs into the kiss.

It’s enough of a goad that Sam thrusts up without thinking about it, and when Dean doesn’t seem to mind, his second thrust is more deliberate. His brother makes an encouraging noise into his mouth—and if Dean isn’t hard, then he isn’t panicked either—so Sam drops his hands down to his brother’s hips and holds Dean against him while thrusting up. They’re both panting in between kisses now, and Dean has started to shudder, and Sam is so overloaded with sensation that it takes him a few seconds to realize that Dean has stopped responding and is frantically slapping his shoulder.

Immediately, Sam opens his fingers and Dean rolls over and off, pinching the bridge of his nose with his left hand and pressing the heel of his right against his scar.

Goddamn it.

“Sorry. Fuck, Dean, I’m sorry.”

“S’okay,” Dean answers, tension gravelling his voice. “Not your fault, I just—guess I’m not ready for that.” He bites his lower lip and then rolls onto his side, facing away from Sam and mumbling into the pillow.

Sam is distracted enough by the return of the suffocating weight in his chest that it takes a few moments for his brother’s words to penetrate. Then, not sure that he heard right, he asks, “What?”

“Can you do your neck thing?” Dean says again, louder this time.

“I—sure. Yeah.” Rolling onto his side himself, Sam starts to massage the nape of his brother’s neck and Dean slowly relaxes. Sam waits until his brother has quieted, until his own rapid heartbeat has slowed, and then asks, “Was it good until I held you in place?”

Because that’s what set Dean off: has to be.

“Yeah,” Dean breathes out. He sounds better now: voice lazy with sleep. “I like kissing you when you aren’t holding back like a pussy.”

Sam laughs at that, the way that he’s supposed to. “Jerk.”

“Bitch.”

They’re quiet for a few minutes and then, when Sam realizes Dean is in danger of drifting off, he whispers, “Dean?”

“Mmm?”

“Can I hold you?”

It isn’t the way they normally do this—Dean doesn’t like feeling restrained these days, as their recent
make-out session just demonstrated—but Sam has to ask. Nothing is going to dull the ache in his chest, but going to sleep with the solid weight of his brother is his arms might ward off the nightmares at least.

Dean is quiet long enough that Sam is beginning to wonder whether his brother already fell asleep and then he says, “Okay.”

Hardly daring to breathe, Sam eases closer. Dean shifts up long enough for Sam to slide an arm beneath his body and then lies down again. When Sam drapes his other arm over his brother’s chest, Dean stiffens briefly and then leans back into him with no further sign of alarm.

Still, Sam can’t help checking, “You good?”

“I will be if you shut up and let me sleep,” Dean mutters.

Sam presses a gentle kiss to the nape of his brother’s neck and obeys. He stays awake while Dean drifts off, letting his brother’s scent chase away the last traces of smoke from his mouth and throat. When Dean’s breathing has evened out, Sam scrunches closer and rests his forehead against the back of his brother’s head.

“I love you so much,” he whispers.

Dean, sleeping, doesn’t respond, but the way that he lies so secure and trusting in Sam’s arms already says everything anyway.
Chapter 22

Sam wakes with a confused start. He has no idea why he woke so suddenly, and the fact that Dean is stirring in his arms isn’t helping any. Not when his brother is shifting against him and making sleepy, protesting noises, and all of Sam’s blood is being redirected down to his cock instead of to his brain where he needs it.

Then there’s a loud thud on the door and a very familiar—and very pissed off—voice shouting, “Dean!”

Sam’s eyes widen in comprehension, and Dean jerks upright beside him, pulling free of Sam’s arms. Dean stares at the door with an expression not just of shock but of horror: mouth open and skin pale. Sam is too surprised to figure out how he feels about Dad being here (how the hell did the man even know where to find them?), but he knows exactly how he feels about seeing that look on his brother’s face. Sitting up himself, he reaches out to rest a comforting hand between Dean’s shoulder blades.

“Dean,” he starts, and his brother flinches away from the first brush of contact so violently that he falls off the side of the bed.

“Open the fucking door!” Dad shouts, pounding again.

The speed with which Dean pops up would be comical if he weren’t so clearly terrified. If he hadn’t just flinched away from Sam’s touch like Sam were some sort of leper.

Sam isn’t thrilled with their father’s tone of voice either (it leaves his stomach clenched in the instinctive, childish dread of punishment), but he doesn’t understand why his brother is so upset. He’s also completely unprepared for the way Dean suddenly dives back onto the bed, scrambles over him (kneeing Sam in the stomatch on the way) and off the other side.

Sam curls in on himself, grimacing and trying to catch his breath. It takes him a couple tries, but when he’s sure that he isn’t going to pass out from oxygen deprivation he rolls over onto his other side. He intends to tell Dean to stop acting like a freak, but then he sees what his brother is doing and comprehension makes the words congeal in his mouth.

All of their stuff has been shoved off of the other bed and onto the floor, and now Dean is yanking back the covers and shaking them and punching the pillows and generally doing his best to make the bed look slept in. He mutters under his breath as he works: letting forth a steady stream of swears in a shaky, low voice.

“Shit shit shit. Fucking fuck. Fuck.”

Funny how it never occurred to Sam that there was anything wrong with Dad walking in to find them sharing a bed. Or maybe it did occur to him and he just didn’t give a shit how the man would react.

“No, Dean!” Dad bellows again, and Dean shoots a glance over his shoulder at Sam and stops swearing long enough to hiss, “Get off your ass and help me!”

It’s too goddamned early for this—not even a hint of dawn outside the curtained window—and now that Sam is starting to wake up enough to consciously take in their father’s presence instead of just relying on instinct, he has a few things he wants to say to the man. Ignoring his brother’s demand, he tosses back the covers and gets out of the bed, heading for the door.
Dean catches his arm before he’s more than halfway there. When Sam stops and turns his face back toward his brother, Dean looks even wilder than before.

“You can’t tell him,” he insists.

It isn’t a conversation they’ve had before. They haven’t needed to have it. From the moment Sam figured out what happened to Dean—what put that scar on his forehead—he knew that his brother wouldn’t want anyone else to know what happened to him. Especially not Dad.

Sam has done enough research over the past few months to know where the urge to hide the attack is coming from—it’s a normal response for trauma victims: a stage of secretive shame that has to be conquered before any real healing can begin. He has also done enough research to know that he can’t push Dean past the shame, that outing him at this point would do far more damage to his brother than good. He knows all of this—more, he understands—but the knowledge of Hanson’s escape is too close, and Sam’s frustrated, futile rage needs some kind of target. He needs someone he can get his hands on—someone he can bleed.

If that someone is Dad—who is, after Hanson and Sam himself, the person most responsible for Dean’s rape—then so much the better.

So instead of backing down, Sam replies, “He needs to know what he did,” and starts to pull his arm free.

Before he can manage it, there’s a whoosh of air as the floor rushes up to meet his back. Sam grunts at the impact—grunts again when Dean’s knee lands on his stomach. Dean’s face swings into view between Sam and the ceiling and Dean’s hand pushes down on Sam’s chest, pinning him in place.

The whole thing happens quickly enough that Sam isn’t even sure exactly which Judo move his brother used to take him down.

Dean has always been good at hand to hand combat—likes to get up close and personal with his opponent—but ever since Sam came back from Stanford he’s been a nigh unstoppable force. As he looks up into his brother’s panicked eyes, for the first time Sam wonders whether there’s a more sinister reason than fighting preference for Dean’s improvement. He wonders whether Dean’s subconscious remembered enough of what happened in that bathroom to drive him to this in an attempt to make sure it never happened again.

The possibility, which feels more and more certain with every beat of Sam’s heart, leaves Sam’s chest tight with a mixture of rage and sorrow. He’s a heartbeat away from crying when Dad pounds on the door again while yelling, “Don’t make me break it down, boy!”

The sound of their father’s voice brings the anger back twofold and, eyes narrowing, Sam pushes up against his brother’s hold.

“No!” Dean insists, straining to keep him in place. “You don’t get to fucking decide who knows.”

Dean looks angry as well as afraid now: eyes sharp and brow furrowed. It’s the anger that does it—that glimpse of the unflinching resolution at Dean’s center that reminds Sam that he’s behaving like a prick and that his brother is right.

Sam doesn’t get to decide, not about this.

Much as he’d like to.

“Fine,” he bites out. “But I’m not taking any of his shit.”
Dean gives Sam an exasperated, angry look like he wants to smack Sam around the room until he falls in line, but then he glances at the door (how it isn’t buckling under the force of Dad’s blows, Sam has no idea) and his face smoothes out into weary resignation.

“Get the door,” he says, shoving to his feet (and not being too fussy how much his knee digs into Sam’s stomach in the process, either) and heading back toward the beds.

Sam pushes up to his elbows and cranes his neck around to watch as his brother climbs into the unused bed and pulls the sheets up to his waist. Dean’s posture makes the whole thing look ridiculously staged, and even in the dim room Sam can see that there are clearly two separate indentations on the pillows of the other bed—the one they actually slept in. Then again, for all that Dad has a hawk’s meticulous eye for details, he’s also good at ignoring things he doesn’t want to see.

The fact that his two sons spent the night in the same bed is probably going to fall right into that category.

“Last chance!” Dad thunders.

“Sam,” Dean hisses, making an imperious, frantic gesture toward the door.

Sam doesn’t know whether it’s going to make a difference at this point whether he opens the door or whether they wait for their father to pick the lock or break it down, but he’s eager enough for a confrontation that he pushes up and heads over anyway.

Maybe he isn’t allowed to tell Dad about Dean’s rape or bring up the movie, but that still leaves him with more than enough room to maneuver the man into the fight he’s been longing for. Muscles vibrating with anticipation, Sam flips the overhead light on and then reaches out and unlocks the door.

Before he even has a chance to get his hand on the knob, Dad is shoving his way inside the room. The man casts a single, dark look in Sam’s direction as he strides forward and then dismisses him, focusing his attention on Dean.

“Why the hell aren’t you in Harrisberg?” he demands.

It’s clear from the way that Dean is blinking up at their father that he has no clue what he’s talking about, but Sam is suddenly a whole lot less curious about why Dad showed up on their doorstep than he was a moment ago. He hasn’t thought about it in a few days, but now the coordinates, and his furious reply, and Dean’s subsequently ditched phone are front and center in his mind. If Dad wants to chew someone out for blatant disrespect or for not following orders, then he’s yelling at the wrong son.

Just like always.

Sam’s rage flares higher and he takes a step after their father, pushing the door shut behind him as he does so. This is the perfect excuse for the fight Sam wants: the perfect chance to turn Dad’s anger in the right direction and meet the man blow for blow. Then Dean shifts on the bed, awkward in his confusion. The motion catches Sam’s eyes and attention, and he hesitates.

Dad doesn’t know what happened to Dean’s phone, but then again neither does Dean. And it wouldn’t take a psychic to figure out that Dean isn’t going to react well to the confession Sam wants to make. No, Dean is going to be pissed, and he’s going to feel betrayed, and he’s going to shut Sam out right when he needs him the most.
Dean's just starting to learn how to lean on Sam the way he so obviously needs to. Taking that support away when he's so off balance and wounded (and let's not forget whose fault that is, who ripped those wounds wide open again) would be disastrous.

Sam doesn't think that his brother is the suicidal type, but he doesn't want to find out. Not now, not fucking ever. So, as much as the unfairness of it burns in his gut—as much as his rage is heating his skin and making it difficult to think—he keeps his mouth shut.

“Harrisberg?” Dean says. His forehead crinkles as he tries to connect the dots—futilely, of course, because Sam is the one holding the pencil.

“I sent you coordinates almost a week ago,” Dad shouts. “And now I find you lounging around in Vegas? Get up when I’m talking to you.”

Dean doesn't even hesitate before sliding out of the bed and standing. He looks so young in his boxers and worn t-shirt and tousled hair and sleep-creased face. At this moment, there is nothing of Dad in him, nothing of the hunter. Sam’s memories of his mother’s ghost are already hazy, but he can see her in Dean now, sees her reflection, and he wonders if that might explain the way Dad is always pushing Dean, and shoving at him, and trying to slice every last bit of softness away until there’s nothing but stone left.

He wonders if Dad is trying to tilt Dean’s mirror far enough from Mary to stop reflecting his own shattered heart.

“I haven’t—”

“People are dying, Dean,” Dad barks, and the way Dean flinches instantly kills any pity Sam might have had for their father. “They’re dying because you disobeyed a direct order, do you understand that?”

Dad stops then, clearly expecting some kind of answer, and Sam waits for his brother to set the man straight by telling him about the lost phone.

But Dean doesn’t. Dean looks shaken and shamed, like he actually believes that he’s guilty as charged, and now his eyes fall a little as he says, “Yes, sir.”

Sam wants to believe that his brother is just saying that because he knows it’s what Dad wants to hear, but he knows better. Dean isn’t lying. He isn’t trying to placate the man.

He honestly believes that this is his fault.

Stunned by his brother’s acquiescence, Sam gropes after comprehension. It takes him a few moments—sometimes trying to follow Dean’s thought process is a little like piecing together a puzzle while wearing a blindfold—but then, painfully, everything snaps into place.

Dean believes he’s guilty as charged because, despite how distracted he has been by his own life—by coming back to Vegas, by searching out his rapist—he thinks that he should have remembered to check his messages. They had Sam’s phone, after all. They could have used it to call Dean’s voicemail.

It’s a ridiculous bit of logic, twisted round on itself like a rabbit warren, and it’s so goddamned Dean that Sam wants to scream.

His hands were already curled into fists, but now they tighten until the healing skin on his knuckles goes tight and his bones ache. Then Dad’s words start to filter in again—“even begin to cover how
goddamned disrespectful you were with that text”—and Dean fucking knows that part isn’t his fault, but he’s still standing there taking it like a beaten dog and Sam can’t take it anymore.

“He lost it.”

Dad turns slightly at the sound of Sam’s voice, and while it’s clear that most of his attention is still on Dean, he’s at least giving Sam his profile now. “Excuse me?”

Behind their father, Dean shoots Sam a look that’s part concern (at how thin Sam’s voice sounds, probably), part warning not to interfere. Sam ignores him. Dean lost the right to handle this when he decided to accept guilt that isn’t his to bear.

Standing up straighter, he says, “Dean lost his phone. It isn’t his fault that he hasn’t gotten any of your messages. Sir.”

Dad turns further at that final, insolent word, and Sam can see that he finally has their father’s full attention. The man’s eyes are glittering: his jaw is set in a tight, hard line.

For a long moment in which Sam knows and doesn’t care that the furious jumble of his emotions is obvious on his face, they regard each other soberly. Then Dad’s eyes narrow into a shuttered, dark expression that he can’t read.

Sam expects their father to start chewing him out now—for interfering, for his tone of voice—but instead Dad turns back to Dean and asks, “That true?”

“Yeah,” Dean answers, still looking at Sam with that terse warning in his eyes.

Sam wonders how long it will take his brother to stop expecting a betrayal every time he opens his mouth around their father. He wonders how long it will be before not making that betrayal is natural and effortless for him: how long it will take to bury Dean’s secret in the darkness of his unrelenting anger.

“You still should have checked your messages,” Dad says almost immediately. “I trained you better than that, Dean.”

“I know,” Dean says, and of course he does: his twisted, self-loathing psyche got him there miles ahead of everyone else. “I forgot.”

“I need to know you have my back. I have to know that I can send a job your way and have it taken care of. People are counting on us, we can’t—”

“You could have called me.”

Dean and Dad look over at the sound of Sam’s voice, both of them wearing the same expression of surprise. It’s annoying and, despite his anger, a little painful. Black sheep or not, Sam is a member of this family, damn it. The looks that he’s getting right now, though, are coming from two interlocking halves of a partnership that he doesn’t fit into.

It sends him back to the way things were before Stanford, when Dean and Dad moved like two people sharing the same heartbeat: Dad leading the way and Dean just a breath behind, constant and competent and faithful. They had their own language back then—a coded system of glances and words that Sam was never quite able to crack.

Sam has told his brother more than once that he wasn’t the reason Sam left, but he realizes now that he wasn’t being entirely truthful.
Dad drove him away. His own subconscious desires drove him away. Their suffocating, unsafe life drove him away.

But this played its part in his flight as well—this alienated, lonely feeling. In the end, after all of the accusations and the recriminations and the verbal abuse, the real reason that Sam couldn’t let his brother broker another cease fire was that he just couldn’t stomach having his nose rubbed into how well Dean and Dad fit together anymore. He couldn’t handle the way that everything else became eclipsed for Dean whenever Dad was around—the way that Sam himself seemed to fade away, unwanted, when his brother and father sat down to talk strategy or went out back to train. He was sick and tired of constantly competing for Dean’s affection and finishing in second place.

As Sam continues to look from his brother’s face to their father’s, though, he realizes that he was wrong: they aren’t wearing the same expression. They’re both surprised, yes, but in Dean’s eyes that surprise is tempered by realization and understanding. Dad’s just startled that Sam interrupted his brother’s dressing down for a second time.

It’s a tiny difference, but at the same time it’s earth shattering because it tells Sam, firmly and with no room for doubt, whose Dean is now.

Mine, Sam thinks with a little pulse of warmth. You had him when we were growing up, but you threw him away, you son of a bitch, and he’s mine now. And I’m not giving him back.

“You could have called me when Dean didn’t answer,” Sam repeats, clarifying for their father’s sake, and now, belatedly, sees understanding seep in. He wouldn’t have picked up even if the man had called, so it’s irrational to feel so slighted by how easily their father dismissed him, but that doesn’t make it sting any less.

Dad didn’t even try. Like asking Sam for help wasn’t even up for consideration.

“Why didn’t you call Sammy?” Dean asks, shifting his eyes from Sam to their father.

Dad blinks, glances over his shoulder at Dean, and then looks back at Sam. There’s a wry twist to his lips and more knowledge in his eyes than Sam was prepared to see there. The combination makes him shift uneasily.

“Because Sam made it pretty clear how he felt about me. I knew he wouldn’t pick up.”

“All due respect, Dad, but that’s crap.”

Odd, that sounded like Dean’s voice.

When Sam tears his eyes from their father to check, he’s certain that he’ll find Dean looking back with that hurt, exasperated expression that he always wears when Sam steps too far out of line. He’s certain that his mind is playing tricks on him, that the dark knowledge in Dad’s eyes unsettled him enough that he spoke without knowing. He knows, although he heard his brother’s gravel-rough tone rather than the mellower timber of his own voice, that the words were his and not Dean’s.

But Dean isn’t looking at him. Dean is staring at Dad with his face set into defiant, almost angry lines, and now he opens his mouth and adds, “I know you two don’t get along, but Sam isn’t gonna let people die just because he’s angry with you.”

If Sam weren’t too stunned to move, the unflinching faith in his brother’s voice would make him wince. Because Sam may be feeling slightly guilty that people have died while he and Dean were rooting around in Vegas, but he isn’t going to lose sleep over it. He honestly doesn’t know what he would have done if Dad had called: if he had sent a text or e-mailed over the fresh obituaries. He’d
like to think that he at least would have passed the information on to Bobby, but he can’t be sure. After all, he could have sent Bobby the coordinates after that first text and he didn’t. He didn’t even think about it.

When Dean is hurting, he just ... he loses sight of everything else.

Which, he supposes, makes him just as single-minded as their father. After all, is what Dad is doing for Mary any different from what Sam is so desperate to do for Dean?

But almost as soon as he has asked himself the question, the answer comes back. Yes. Yes of course it’s different. Dean’s still alive: he can still be saved, there’s still something to gain from vengeance—a more valid goal than just Sam’s own peace of mind.

If Sam has to burn everything between him and his brother’s happiness, then he will. He’ll do it gladly and consequences be damned.

Dad sighs, bringing Sam’s attention back to the present. Their father wipes a rough hand over his face and his shoulders sag with a weary slump. For the first time, Dad looks mortal. He looks old—if not defeated, then at least in retreat. Although never quite the god that he was for Dean, Dad was still an imposing, dominant force on Sam’s childhood and, despite his anger, Sam feels a little saddened by the revelation.

“What’s done is done,” Dad says finally, his voice heavy with exhaustion.

The open defiance on Dean’s face shifts into something more conciliatory as he offers, “We could leave now, if you need—”

“No,” Dad answers, shaking his head. “I called Caleb. He’s handling it.”

He turns and walks over to the bed that Sam shared with his brother last night. Then, heaving his breath out in a sigh, he lowers himself down to sit on the edge of the mattress. If he could remember how, Sam would laugh at the horrified look their father's choice of seats puts on Dean's face.

“I could use some coffee,” Dad says, and looks up at Dean, who quickly schools his expression. “Maybe some breakfast.”

There’s an undercurrent of command in the words, which makes Sam bristle, but Dean is already grabbing a pair of jeans off the floor and saying, “Sure, Sam and I can—”

“Sam stays here. He and I need to talk.”

Dean stills at that, and his hands clench nervously around his jeans. The look he shoots Sam is a wretched mix of worry and pleading and expectation, like he wants Sam to fix this. And there’s a part of Sam that wants to fix it—a part of him that wants to tell their father that anything he wants to say to Sam, Dean can hear as well. But his anger hasn’t subsided at all—it may actually have gotten worse, what with the way Dad was just talking to his brother—and there are things that Sam wants to say to their father that he doesn’t want Dean to hear.

Besides, Dad never had a problem chewing Sam out in front of Dean before. If he’s asking for privacy now, then he’s probably doing it out of the same instinct to protect Dean that’s driving Sam. It’s too little too late, as far as Sam is concerned, but he can’t deny that he feels a tiny pulse of gratitude that they’re on the same page in at least one respect.

Looking coolly back at his brother, he says, “I think I saw a McDonalds a couple of blocks away.”
Dean’s mouth goes thin at that, and his eyes go wounded and hurt. But he doesn’t resist any further. He just turns away, finishes gathering his clothes, and takes himself to the bathroom to change. Sam wants to take his brother’s arm as Dean brushes past, say something to soften what Dean must view as a betrayal, but his brother might see that as a crack in Sam’s resolve when it isn’t anything of the sort.

It’s for his own good, he reminds himself, and then flinches as Dean slams the door shut behind him. After a few moments of awkward silence, he crosses to sit down on the newly-rumpled bed across from Dad.

They wait without speaking—without looking at each other, really, and never mind that they’re face-to-face and less than two feet apart. It’s the kind of situation that should get awkward fast, should leave Sam fidgeting and restless, but now that the moment of confrontation has come, he’s calm beneath his anger.

Dean looks pissed off when he comes out of the bathroom several minutes later, but Sam knows that the anger is just a mask to cover up the fear beneath. He tries to communicate with his eyes that he isn’t going to spill any secrets, but it’s difficult to get the message through when his brother refuses to look at him.

“Have fun with your secret powwow,” Dean mutters, grabbing his keys off the table. “And try not to kill each other.”

“Dean,” Dad calls as Dean pulls the door open.

Dean pauses but doesn’t turn around.

“Take your time.”

If the way Dean slams the door shut behind him doesn’t wake up their neighbors, then the way he peels out of the parking lot definitely does. Good thing this is the kind of establishment where the inhabitants know how to mind their own business.

Dad waits until the painful sound of the Impala’s tires has faded into the distance and then says, “You can be pissed at me all you want, Sam, but don’t you ever fuck around with your brother’s phone again. There are lives at stake. And you ever have something you want to say to me, you say it to my face like a man and don’t hide behind voice mail and text messages.”

Sam is surprised by the excellent grasp their father has on just how Dean’s phone was ‘lost’, but his anger is stronger and so he ignores the questions flashing through his head to say, “That’s fucking rich, coming from you.”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” Dad warns, and Sam has had it with the man’s double standards.

Softly and clearly, he says, “Fuck you.”

Dad’s eyes flash as he pushes to his feet. “What was that?” he asks in a low, threatening voice.

Dad never hit Sam before, never hit either of them when they weren’t training. Even during those last, turbulent months before Stanford, Dad never even came close to crossing that line. Sam can tell that he’s thinking about it now, though.

He has no way of knowing whether that’s because all of his jabs over the last five months have been enough to push the man over the edge, or whether Dad is stressed out by other matters, and he doesn’t care. All he knows is that their father is rapidly losing what little control over his temper he
used to have.

Good. Fucking excellent.

“You heard me.”

Dad reaches down, grabbing hold of Sam’s t-shirt and using it to haul him to his feet. This close to
the man, Sam realizes that they’re more evenly matched than they used to be. Dad is still more
heavily built, more experienced, but Sam is taller, has reach and youth on his side.

“Any particular reason you’re trying to piss me off right now?” Dad asks, his voice a low growl.

“You gonna take a swing or are you just going to grand stand all day?” Sam shoots back, jutting his
chin out and offering a target.

Dad’s hand tightens on his shirt and Sam is certain that the man is going to do it. He’s going to
punch Sam the way Sam wants him to and then Sam will be able to tell Dean, in all honesty, that
Dad started it. You can’t ever prepare to be struck, not really, but Sam braces himself anyway.

And Dad releases him with a muttered curse and walks away.

“I don’t understand why the hell you’re so difficult,” Dad says as he goes. “Your brother was never
this disrespectful, not even when he was a teenager.”

“That’s the problem,” Sam announces, squaring his shoulders and taking a step after their father. “He
should have been. He should have told you to go to hell. Then he wouldn’t—”

He shuts his mouth on it at the last second, but Dad turns around again anyway, eyes sharp. Like a
hound on a blood trail.

“Then he wouldn’t what?”

Sam glares back at their father silently.

“Is that what this is about? Dean? You got a bee in your bonnet over the fact that your brother knows
how to follow orders?” He pauses for a fraction of a heartbeat and then adds, “Or are you still pissed
about the movie?”

Shock washes through Sam, freezing, and is swept away again by a torrent of fury. He suspected—
was almost certain—but hearing it out loud. Hearing Dad admit it is just ... it ...

“You did know,” he breathes finally. “You son of a bitch. How the fuck could you let him do that?”

“I didn’t ‘let’ him do anything. Your brother’s a grown man. It was his own decision, and he knew
what he was getting into. If you want to be mad at someone, you put the blame where it belongs.”

“Oh, cut the crap,” Sam spits. “Dean did it for you and you know it! You’ve got him so brainwashed
he’d put a fucking bullet in himself if you asked him to. Spreading his legs and letting someone fuck
him was never even a question!”

“You brother took that job of his own free will,” Dad shoots back. “I didn’t ask him to do
anything.”

Sam can’t believe that the man is trying to hide behind that excuse. He lets his scorn show on his
face as he says, “You didn’t have to. Dean knows what’s expected of him. You drilled it into him
often enough when he was a kid.”
“What do you want me to do, Sam?” Dad demands, spreading his arms wide. “Am I thrilled with the choice he made? No, of course not. But it happened. It’s over. There’s no point in drudging up the past. It won’t change anything and it’s just going to make Dean uncomfortable.”

“Make him—” Sam repeats, and the rest of it gets caught in his throat. He makes an absurd, wild noise to clear it and then finishes, “Do you have any idea how much that messed him up?”

It isn’t the movie that’s the problem of course, not really. But then again it is. Because if Dean had never done the movie, Hanson never would have clapped eyes on him. Never would have even dreamed of touching him.

Making the movie made Dean accessible.

“He seems to be handling himself just fine,” Dad returns. “You’re the one with the problem. Hell, Sammy, you’re acting like a jealous lover instead of his brother.”

The words are pointed, like an accusation, and even in the midst of Sam’s rage they bring him up short. He pushes his emotions aside to look at their father—really look at him—and Dad is studying him with an odd, measuring expression. The man’s body is tense and still as he stands there. His eyes flicker with apprehension—apprehension and something that looks horribly like disgust.

That wasn’t an idle taunt.

Sam’s stomach tightens. He feels caught out—exposed in a way he never expected to be, not by Dad. Looks like the man is a little less willfully blind than Sam thought. He wonders how long this suspicion has been growing in their father’s mind—before Stanford or only since, when Sam’s proprietary, resentful attitude must have tipped him off? He resists the urge to glance guiltily back at the bed.

And that is guilt he’s feeling, and shame, and maybe he isn’t quite so blasé about his feelings for Dean as he thought he was. His newfound uncertainty digs at him, makes him want to take a step back and drop his eyes. But Dean is the best-goddamned thing that ever happened to him, and hell if Sam is going to let their father make him feel bad about it.

He clings to his determination, letting it fan his anger, and says, “Why don’t you just come out and ask what you want to. Go ahead and ask if we’re fucking.”

“Are you?” Dad’s voice is quiet and deadly serious.

Sam dared him, but he didn’t believe their father would actually take him up on it. Didn’t think he’d have the guts. Now that the question has been asked, he wants to say ‘yes’. He wants to throw all of those kisses and the frail, stolen moments he’s had with his brother into their father’s face: wants to make Dad turn tail and run from his sons’ sickening, incestuous relationship.

But Dean. God, Dean would be wrecked if he did that. He’d be devastated and lost in the face of their father’s disgust.

“No,” Sam says finally. His voice is choked with emotion, though, and Dad doesn’t look convinced. Dad is going to worry at this like a dog with a bone unless Sam can wrest this conversation back onto safer paths.

Seizing his anger like a shield, Sam steps forward and continues, “You want to know why I care so much, John? I care because Dean’s my brother and he’s hurting. He isn’t ‘fine’. He isn’t even close. Jesus Christ, do you have any idea what he went through?”
There are still questions in Dad’s eyes, but they don’t seem quite as penetrating or immediate and he allows himself to be diverted. “I saw the movie, yes.”

Sam’s stomach jerks and he isn’t sure whether it’s anger or disgust or horror or jealousy. Dad, of all people, had no goddamned right to see Dean like that. To see him stripped and spread open and fucked out.

But maybe Sam is hearing the man wrong. Maybe he only means that he watched enough of the beginning to recognize his son.

“The whole thing?” he asks, checking.

Dad looks him steadily in the eyes and says, “Yes.”

The wretched confusion in Sam’s stomach bubbles over into his chest: hot and maddening. He imagines Dad sitting in some ratty motel armchair watching Dean shudder and shake: listening to Dean’s moans. Dad saw it, saw how goddamned exposed Dean was, should have known how badly that would fuck with Dean’s head even if he didn’t—couldn’t—have known about the rape, and he’s still denying responsibility. Sam swallows twice and the boiling rage beneath his skin comes out in a sharp nod, in the rapid tapping his right fist against his thigh.

“Did you jerk off to it?” he demands. He isn’t serious—Dad’s an asshole but in this way, at least, he’s a decent father—but he needs to wound and the words are closest weapons to hand.

Sam expects their father to be appalled by the accusation, or at least angered, but the man just lifts his head a little higher and replies, “Did you?”

And just like that, Sam is back in his Stanford apartment with his dick in his hand and alcohol in his blood and his brother’s voice in his ear and Jesus, he did that. He did what he accused Dad of—did worse, because he didn’t just ignore his brother’s pain, he got off on it. He got off on Dean being stuffed full with two cocks, which were both prelude to and unknowing preparation for his second, more ruinous violation.

In that moment, Sam aches with how much he hates himself. The hate runs too deep to be borne, is too intense, and it has to go somewhere or he’s going to explode. He struggles with himself for a moment, fighting to breathe, and then a circuit in his chest overloads and everything flips over from self-loathing to rage.

Dad is still watching him, still cataloguing Sam’s response, still testing him, and so Sam does the only logical thing and punches the man. He feels a little more centered after, watching their father split blood out onto the carpet. Feels like he’s managed to put this confrontation back onto the road where it belongs.

“That what you’ve been bucking for, Sammy?” Dad asks. He’s smiling slightly to himself. It isn’t a nice expression. “You want to take this outside?”

“Yes, sir,” Sam answers instantly.

Dad nods, shrugging out of his jacket and dropping it on the floor. Then, without so much as a second’s hesitation, he turns and heads for the door. The long-barreled pistol tucked down the back of his pants bunches his t-shirt as he moves.

“Get some pants on. I’ll be waiting.”
Chapter 23

When Sam steps out of the motel room, he sees Dad’s truck before he notices anything else. The black Sierra Grande is kind of hard to miss, actually, parked right in front of their room the way it is. It takes Sam a couple more moments of squinting into the uncertain, predawn light to locate their father around the back of the truck, placing something inside a weapons’ compartment. The gun he had on him, probably, and it’s just fucking typical that Dad will treat a gun with that kind of careful reverence and yet is unable to show even the least bit of tenderness when it comes to his own son.

As Dad shuts and locks the compartment, though, Sam doesn’t comment. His anger has gone underground—all but hidden beneath the same veneer of calm that grips him when he knows there’s going to be a fight. It took years to train that kind of concentration into himself, and he has never been able to make it instinctual the way it is for Dean and Dad. Perhaps because the detached sensation of calm frightens him too much—or maybe it’s what he might be capable of while separated from his emotions that scares him.

This morning, he’s grateful for the training.

It might keep him from putting their father in the hospital.

Dad has to know Sam’s standing on the sidewalk, but he doesn’t spare him so much as a glance before striding away toward the far side of the motel. Even Sam has to acknowledge that it makes sense to take this somewhere a little more secluded and private. After all, the locals might know how to keep their heads down, that doesn’t mean a patrol car won’t swing past and spot them. Better to move out of sight of the main road.

More importantly, Dean could return at any moment. He’s going to know they fought, of course, but knowing about it and having to see it are two completely different things. Sam would prefer to spare his brother from the latter, at least.

He strolls after their father—who has reached the relative privacy of the side of the motel and is stripping down to his undershirt—and looks the man over with a critical, evaluating eye. Without all the layers, Dad is slimmer: not much bulkier than Dean. They have the same build: tall and yet somehow still compact. Boxers’ bodies crisscrossed with the scars of the trade. As usual, Sam is the odd man out—taller than either of them. Lankier. Built for speed rather than endurance. But he’s bulked up since Dad trained him last, and he can see their father noting the difference as he performs his own assessment of Sam.

“How do you want to do this?” Dad asks finally.

In answer, Sam smiles, steps forward, and takes a swing.

Dad ducks out of the way, moving with the effortless grace of a man ten years his junior, and comes back with an upper cut of his own. Sam blocks that first strike with a downward cross, but he misses the left hook punch Dad throws a second later. It comes in low and hard, slamming into Sam’s side and forcing the air from his lungs in a painful grunt. He instinctively dances back a couple of steps—you get hit, you back up and regroup—and regards their father warily.

*Seasoned doesn’t necessarily mean slow or stupid,* he reminds himself, circling to the left and noting how carefully their father mirrors him. The words are Dad’s, barked out years ago during some lesson or other, just like Sam’s punches are Dad’s.
Some fathers teach their sons to play baseball. Some teach them to fish. Dad taught his sons to fight. He turned Sam and Dean into weapons—his weapons. Despite his calm, Sam’s anger led him to forget that fact—forget how familiar the man is with how Sam fights. What his weaknesses are.

But it’s been four years, and Sam isn’t the same person he was then. He isn’t the same fighter.

“Sloppy, Sammy,” Dad calls. “Gotta watch that left side of yours.”

The needling is no different from when they were training, and despite his understanding that things have changed—that he has changed—for a second Sam’s mind plays a trick on him and slips sideways, dumping him into the past. He’s all of fifteen years old—gangly and awkward with it—and nothing is ever going to be good enough, not for Dad. He’s never going to be good enough to make Dean’s worshipful, brilliant gaze follow him the way it follows their father.

Sam jerks himself back to the present, but it’s too late, damage done. The calm has slipped, removing anything resembling rationality or reason from his mind. This time, when he darts in he isn’t thinking about strategy. Isn’t thinking about anything but landing a blow and making it hurt.

Fighting their father is nothing like fighting those men at the bar, and not just because Sam is fully conscious of his actions this time. Those men were working schleps who wouldn’t know a roundhouse kick from a crescent. Dad is an ex-marine, and he has been trained in hand-to-hand combat not only by the military, but also by long years of fighting in a guerilla war against things that usually outclass him in strength and speed.

It shows.

As they circle each other on the grassy margin by the side of the motel, Sam throws punch after punch but nothing connects. Nothing connects because Dad is always one second ahead of him, blocking each punch and countering with an attempt of his own. For his own part, Sam is blocking those as well—good thing, too, because Dad isn’t holding back, not at fucking all.

It doesn’t take more than a few minutes for Sam’s forearms to go numb from the shock of repeated impact. Dad's arms can’t be feeling much better, but he shows no sign of slowing. Seems perfectly content to do this until the skin from their elbows to their wrists is mottled black and blue.

Painful as that might be, it isn’t anywhere near enough damage for Sam, and so he changes it up, twisting and lashing out with a sidekick. This time he does connect—solidly—with their father’s ribs. Dad grunts, hunching over slightly and dropping his guard. When Sam closes to take advantage of the opening, though, Dad barrels forward and drives his shoulder into Sam’s stomach, knocking him back.

They part again, circling and wary.

“This making you feel better?” Dad asks. He looks almost as angry as Sam feels, glowering around a lower lip that is slightly swollen from Sam’s first punch. “Dean’s not giving you what you want so you gotta take all that frustration out on someone else?”

Sam can’t believe that their father is still pushing him on that—can’t believe that Dad has stooped to using Dean as a distraction. Enraged, he lurches forward again with a wild swipe that Dad dances away from.

“You son of a bitch,” Sam growls, turning and pursuing.

Dad barks out a short, harsh laugh and lets him close before snaking back out of range. Sam has never been so desperate to connect before, but it’s like trying to hit smoke. Dad’s experience and
speed is one problem, his own desperation is another—it’s making him sloppy, leaves him telegraphing every strike well in advance. He knows he has to calm down, has to center himself, but he can’t remember how.

Finally, Dad gets bored of playing tag and darts in to connect with a right hook that Sam can’t quite duck in time. The blow clips Sam’s cheek and makes both eyes water, leaving him nearly blind. He stumbles back, blinking through the tears and certain that Dad is going to follow up with a more solid blow.

But the attack doesn’t come, and when Sam can see again Dad is several feet away. Just standing there. Guard down and lazy with how soundly he’s whipping Sam’s ass. When he sees that he has Sam’s attention, he says, “What did you expect me to do? Dean and I weren’t even in the same state when he decided to make that movie.”

“You never should’ve let him go to Vegas in the first place,” Sam spits, circling close again and looking for an opening. “You should have been there for him, damn it!”

“I was flat on my back and high on painkillers at the time, Sam,” Dad answers. As he turns in place, keeping track of Sam’s position, his mouth twists in an ugly, superior grin. “Where the fuck were you?”

The question—accusation, really—hits Sam in the gut and knocks the wind from him. He freezes, stunned by an overwhelming wave of guilt (my fault, left him to that, should have been there, should have stopped it). He’s vaguely aware of Dad moving in, of Dad’s fist speeding toward his face, and it never even occurs to him that he ought to block the blow.

Sam’s vision splashes with white and pain flares, hot and immediate, along the line of his jaw. His whole body jerks to the side with the force of the blow, and his hand comes up automatically to cradle his face. There’s blood in his mouth: he bit his tongue or his cheek, but he can’t sort out which. For the second time, Dad should be following up on his advantage and isn’t. He’s still in fighting stance, guard up, but he stands back and waits for Sam to pull himself together. Toying with him.

Fucking bastard.

As Sam lowers his hand and starts to straighten, their father adds, “You think Dean ever would’ve done something that stupid if you hadn’t abandoned him to run off and play Joe Normal?”

No, Sam thinks, and with the thunder of a million black, fluttering wings, all of his self-hatred and guilt comes crashing back in and roosts in his chest. The weight of it is dragging him down, making it impossible to breathe, and it’s out of self-defense more than anything else that he lurches forward with a wild swing at their father’s face.

John sidesteps the blow and then catches Sam’s wrist. Yanking Sam’s arm up and behind his back, he slings his other arm around Sam’s neck. The strain in Sam’s shoulder and wrist tells him that Dad could crack his arm without any effort, while the press of their father’s arm against his throat forces him to struggle for the air he needs.

The smart thing to do in this situation would be to play dead until Dad loosens up on him, but Sam is beyond logic. He’s too hurt, too guilty, too angry to do anything but fight the hold.

Bringing his free hand up, he pulls at their father’s arm. In response, Dad tightens up even further and suddenly breathing isn’t just difficult anymore, it’s impossible. Sam continues to struggle as his vision starts to swim. The rage inside of him has a bitter, unpleasant taste now—the same taste it
carried yesterday when he realized just how out of reach Dean’s rapist is. It’s the taste of futility, coating his tongue and his throat and his heart as his struggles continue to weaken.

Then Dad’s breath huffs hot on his ear as he says, “Why don’t you just give up, Sammy? That’s your M.O., isn’t it? Things get a little too hard and you bail?”

There’s no reason for the goad. Sam is well and truly beaten; Dad has won. This is just more of that old, competitive bullshit—the one-ups-manship that turned all of their fights into such vicious battles when Sam was growing up. Neither of them ever knows when to stop once they get going. They’re too eager to let the anger in, too stubborn to let it out.

Now that extra, unnecessary jab gives Sam the strength to toss his head back into their father’s face. He connects solidly—Dad obviously wasn’t expecting him to have that much fight left in him—and both Dad’s arm around his throat and Dad’s hold on his wrist loosen. Sam jerks free, taking in deep, gasping breaths to clear his head and his vision.

Now would be a good time to go in for the kill—Dad’s bent over with his hands cupping his nose, and Sam can see blood running through the man’s fingers—but Sam is too exhausted to manage it. Can’t see straight even if he had the energy to attack. By the time he has recovered, Dad has also straightened. The man’s nose is still dripping blood onto his lips and beard, but Sam doesn’t think it’s broken.

Not yet, anyway.

Dad wipes some of the blood away and then says, “You never looked back, did you? You never even gave us a second thought.” When his head lifts, his jaw is clenched. His eyes are bitter and challenging. “You want to blame someone for what happened to Dean, you take a good look in the goddamned mirror.”

_Mirrors_, Sam thinks, and images flash through his head like jagged shards.

Dean on his knees in a darkened antique shop with broken, gleaming bits of mirror surrounding him and blood streaking his cheeks and his hand shoved against that fucking scar—

—Dean tied to a chair and raving about mirrors—didn’t know why, not then, didn’t remember, but he knew enough to be desperate that Sam stay away from them, that he stay _safe_—

—Dean tracing the dangerous edges of a slice of broken glass on a windowsill in Chicago: no emotion in his face, no life, eyes distant and shuttered and dead—

—Dean’s expression as he woke up in the cabin, as he remembered, and God Sam has never seen anything so horrifying in his life and Dad is ... he’s—fuck—he’s fucking _mocking_ that, mocking Dean—

—and Sam lets out a guttural roar and charges in again.

Like a lightning strike in sand, the blazing heat of his anger has melted his thoughts to glass. Everything is distorted in his view, warped by the heat and imperfect bubbles. Everything is distant, kept remote by that thick sheet of molten sand.

Sam has never managed this level of detachment before, and it’s eerie. Like watching someone else’s hands moving underwater. There’s a furious static at the edges of his thoughts, crackle of ozone and heat. The lightning is going to crash back down sooner or later—never strikes the same place twice unless you’re a Winchester—but right now he stands in the eye of the storm as he fights.
They’re evenly matched again, Sam notes with a clinical eye. Now that his rage has been bottled back up, they have returned to the punch-block-punch routine of their initial engagement. But they’re both moving a little slower now—too winded and hurt to keep up with the anger goading them on.


Sam’s protective calm shakes with the accusation, but he manages to block a fourth blow and then counters with a series of his own punches, backing their father up across their battleground.

John grunts as he retreats and then prods, “You got your own copy stashed away somewhere right now?”

On the liquid flush of rage that jab provokes, Sam manages to drive an uppercut into their father’s stomach. Dad’s return punch catches him in his shoulder: hard and well placed enough to deaden his left arm. Snarling, Sam responds by throwing a hook punch with his right. Dad catches the punch, tucking Sam’s wrist between his arm and his body to keep him close.

Dad doesn’t usually resort to this tactic, but Sam has seen his brother fight often enough to recognize the setup for what it is and he tries to back away. He isn’t—quite—fast enough to avoid the head butt.

Copper blooms in Sam’s mouth and the cool glass covering his thoughts shatters as Dad releases him. Staggering back, Sam blinks rapidly and tenses for the follow-up attack. His shoulder stings and his head pounds, but he’s still more annoyed than anything else when it doesn’t come. He’s sick and fucking tired of Dad playing with him like this. Squinting through the pain, he glowers in the man’s direction and finds their father shaking his head with a slightly dazed expression.

Even when executed correctly, head butts hurt—which is one of the reasons Sam never bothered to learn this particular maneuver himself. After all, what was the sense in using an attack that would injure him as well as his opponent? But Dad looks more than a little disoriented, worse than Dean normally does, which tells Sam that he changed the angle enough when he backed up that Dad scrambled his own brains with the attack.

“Fuck,” Dad mutters to himself as he shakes his head again.

Good, Sam thinks, better fucking hurt. He wants to hurl a barb of his own in the lull, something that will cut their father as deeply as their father’s words have been cutting him, and can’t come up with anything. At any rate, he’s still too angry to speak—throat pulled tight and choked with something that feels hot and tastes like sulfur.

When Dad lifts his head a minute later, his eyes are lucid again. They’re also angrier than Sam has ever seen them. There’s an ugly twist to their father’s mouth: something disgusted and almost cruel.

“I should’ve seen it sooner,” Dad spits. “The way you watched him, the way you—” His mouth twitches, like he’s trying not to throw up, and he drags the back of his hand across it. “I didn’t want to see it. No father wants to see that kind of sickness in his son. But you, you didn’t seem to care whether I knew or not. Panting after your brother like a bitch in heat.”

God, had Sam been so obvious? Could he have been, when he hadn’t even recognized the desire in himself? Maybe. And maybe that was why Dad started taking Dean along on jobs and leaving Sam behind. Maybe that was why Dad started making an effort to keep his eldest son’s eyes firmly on the hunt and his obedience unquestionable. Maybe that was one of the reasons he was always so ready and willing to fight with Sam at the drop of a hat.
“The night you said you were going to Stanford was the best goddamned night of my life,” Dad continues, and Sam can’t quite stop himself from flinching. Their father’s eyes, ever sharp, glimmer with satisfaction at the reaction. “Too bad you didn’t stay gone. Dean’s better off without you slowing him down and messing with his head. He was on his way to becoming a damned fine hunter before you got your hands on him.”

Suddenly, Sam’s chest is a mess: anger and guilt and hurt and shame tangled inextricably together and making him ache. He tries to separate the anger out, to bring it back to the front where it belongs, but Dad is looking at him—no, he’s sneering at him—and Sam knew he would never get their father’s approval but he never counted on this. He makes a second, weak attempt to hide what Dad’s words have done to him, but the grim, triumphant smile stretching their father’s lips tells him that he’s failing there as well.

“Not the way you wanted to, though, huh, Sammy?” Dad pushes. “Must really piss you off, knowing someone else got there first.”

There’s no one word to categorize what that taunt does to Sam. No word strong enough to describe the fury that lashes through him. No word dark enough to encompass the hatred it invokes (for Hanson, for Dad, for Sam himself). No word desolate enough to give voice to the sorrow choking his throat.

One moment Sam is frozen in place by the sheer violence of his reaction and the next his bewildering, painful emotions are bypassing his brain and seizing control of his body and launching him forward.

Dad tries to get his hands up to defend himself, but from Sam’s perspective the man seems to be moving in slow motion. He lands two vicious punches to their father’s stomach before the man’s hands have even curled into fists. When Dad starts to drop his arms again in a downward cross block, Sam shifts his attack higher, cracking their father across the cheek and then landing a solid blow to his mouth.

Dad’s hands fly to his face and he turns a little to one side, offering Sam his profile. Sam’s vision narrows in on the corner of their father’s jaw and this time he pivots when he connects, putting all of his weight behind the blow. Dad is knocked back by the force of it. Crumpling gracelessly, he sprawls on the pavement in a daze.

It’s still not enough.

Stepping over their father, Sam drops to his knees and gets a fist in their father’s shirt. When he hauls Dad up, the man’s eyes are already focusing again, mirroring the rage Sam knows must be burning in his own. There’s blood dribbling out of their father’s mouth; a fresh stream trickling from his nose. A bruised flush is spreading across the left side of his face where Sam punched him and the area around his eye has already begun to swell.

Infuriatingly, he’s still smiling.

“You can beat the crap out of me all you want,” Dad manages. “Doesn’t make Dean any less broken in.”

The last, fraying thread of Sam’s restraint snaps.

“He was raped, you son of a bitch!” he yells. “Someone caught him in the bathroom after they were done filming and they fucked him hard enough and long enough that he almost bled out, so don’t you fucking talk to me about broken in, you—you fucking—”
Even through a fresh flood of tears, Sam can see comprehension blooming across their father's face. Dad is still beneath him, frozen in horror, but the man flinches with his eyes as understanding settles inside of his chest. Sam has never seen their father cry—not once in his entire life—but he's crying now: helpless, silent tears.

Dad cries just like Dean.

Sam sags, letting their father’s shirt slip from his hands. All of his rage has deserted him. Dad’s tears run red with blood as they fall, and the sight sickens Sam—leaves him cold and hollowed out and weary. Crying harder himself, he falls to the side, off of their father's body and onto the pavement.

Dad’s eyes continue to track him, and the man’s expression is as horrified and shocked and close to broken as Sam has ever seen. He's finally silent, thank God, but those dark, wretched eyes are pleading with Sam anyway: begging him to take it back, to say it’s a lie. Those eyes are praying for absolution that Sam can’t—won't—give.

And then Dad’s gaze slips to the side, back toward the motel, and the pain on his face sharpens. Sam knows, even before he looks himself, what he’s going to see.

Dean is standing at the end of the sidewalk. He’s carrying a tray of coffee in one hand and a white McDonald’s bag in the other and wearing his bruised, battered heart on his face.

Shock.

Desolation.

There’s no betrayal there, not yet—the knowledge of what just happened hasn’t quite sunk in—but it’s coming, oh yes it is, and how the fuck could Sam have done this to him?

The breath that caught when he turned to look at his brother stutters out again and he scrambles to his feet. “Dean,” he chokes out.

The sound of his name makes his brother jerk as though he’s been shot, and awareness filters in through the shock fogging his eyes. Dean’s hands open, spilling coffee everywhere and dropping the bag onto the pavement, and he turns and runs.

“Dean!” Sam calls again, louder, and sprints after his brother. He rounds the side of the motel just in time to see Dean sliding behind the wheel of the Impala. His brother is already pulling the door shut—hastily enough that his foot barely clears the running board in time.

Putting on an extra burst of speed—it’s useless, but Sam can’t help himself—he yells, “Dean, wait!”

The Impala reverses out of its parking spot with a jerky, uncontrolled motion, and Sam adjusts his course. If he can just get to the car, if he can just get the door open ... His fingers brush sleek, black metal and then there’s a squeal of tires and the unpleasant smell of burnt rubber and the Impala jerks away. Sam chases it for a couple of futile steps and then stumbles to a stop and watches as Dean roars out of the parking lot and onto the street. There’s a red light at the intersection, but in these last few minutes of darkness before dawn there’s no traffic—not that it would have mattered if there were.

Dean ploughs right through the red light without slowing, and a moment later he’s gone.
Chapter 24

When he finally stops crying, Sam lets himself back into their room and calls the hospital. He asks the answering service for Claire in Emergency, crossing his fingers, and—for once—comes out lucky.

“This is Claire Collins.”

Sam felt collected enough a moment ago, but at the sound of her voice he starts crying again and can’t get the words out through his tears.

His grief is clearly audible over the line and Claire’s voice, when it comes again, is sharp with fear. “Who is this? Is it my boys? Did something happen to my boys?”

“No,” Sam manages. “No, it’s—it’s S-Sam Winchester. From y-yesterday.”

“The brother,” Claire says, placing his voice immediately. Now that she knows her boys are safe, her own voice has steadied and the rich timber of it warms Sam’s chest. He doesn’t know her, has no real right to take comfort from a stranger when Dean is God knows where doing God knows what, but he closes his eyes and lets her competence wash over him, soothing. “What happened, honey?”

“It’s Dean. My br-brother. He—he—”

“Okay, honey, I need you to do something for me. I need you to take a deep breath and count back from ten, okay? Can you do that?”

Sam nods, realizes she can’t see him over the phone, and croaks, “Yeah.” He does as she asks, and although he doesn’t feel any better afterwards he’s able to say, “He left. I don’t know where he is, and he doesn’t have a phone so I can’t call him, and I don’t know what to do.”

That’s pretty much the understatement of the year—right now, thinking is difficult enough that Sam is lucky he remembered how to work the phone. He realizes that he left their father outside. It’s been almost half an hour, and he wonders whether Dad is still sprawled on the pavement. He wonders whether the man feels as wretched as Sam does.

“He was upset?” Claire wants to know. “About something in particular?”

“Me, I—I told our dad. Dean didn’t—he didn’t want anyone to know.” On the other end of the phone, Claire’s silence is damning and Sam hastens to add, “I didn’t mean to. We were fighting and it just came out.”

“Are you worried for his safety?”

Oh God.

Sam’s breath catches in his throat and he presses a hand over his eyes, which feel hot and swollen from all of the crying he’s been doing. He thinks of the way that Dean sped out of the parking lot—so reckless—and of the hopeless, shattered expression on his brother’s face.

“Yes,” he rasps.

“Oh, I’m going to put you on hold for a minute while I call my cousin. He’s on the force—works out of Cheyenne, but he should be able to pull some strings with his friends downtown and get some
men out there looking for your brother.”

“No!” Sam blurts, straightening. His hand drops to his side. “No cops.”

“Honey, I know he doesn’t want people to know, but you need to think about his safety first here.”

“It’s not—” Sam swallows and then, with the shaking steps of an invalid, goes over to sit down on the bed. “He’s legally dead. About half a year ago, he—”

It occurs to him, suddenly: how incredibly stupid this is. He has no reason to trust this woman, doesn’t even know her last name. And he knows how he sounds. How the story of their lives sounds to anyone who hasn’t been dragged, kicking and bloodied and screaming, into the violent, strange world all hunters inhabit.

“Sam?” Claire prods into the silence. “Talk to me.”

“You know what, forget it,” Sam answers. “I don’t—I don’t know why I called.”

He hangs up without waiting for her response. Then, tossing the phone on the bed behind him, he leans forward and puts his face in his hands. God, he doesn’t know what the fuck he’s doing. The police are his best bet to locate Dean in a city this size before he does something stupid, but the police are also going to toss Dean in a cell before you can say murder one.

Sure, they think he’s dead right now. Sure, there’s a grave with a body in it and Dean’s name on the headstone.

But Sam is more than familiar with the topography of his brother’s luck. If he brings the police in on this, then one thing will lead to another and, somehow, Dean is going to wind up standing trial for a series of brutal murders he never committed. Sam might as well deliver the lethal injection himself.

An unexpected knock on the door brings his head up with a rush of hope before he remembers that Dean wouldn’t bother knocking. He looks at the closed door dully, waiting for whoever it is to announce themselves.

A moment later, their father’s hoarse, subdued voice calls, “Sam? You in there?”

Dad is probably the last person Sam wants to see right now, but there’s a chance that his mind is marginally more functional than Sam’s—a chance that Dad can figure out how to help (find) Dean—and so Sam forces himself to get up and let their father inside.

This time, instead of barreling his way past, Dad slumps into the room with his head lowered. What little Sam can see of their father’s face is enough to tell him Dad is hurting—blood smeared everywhere, one eye swollen almost completely shut. The man is clearly the loser in their fight, and any other time Sam would feel a bitter twinge of satisfaction at that fact. Right now he’s too worried about Dean to give a shit.

Dad comes far enough into the room for Sam to shut the door behind him and then, tonelessly, asks, “Where’d he go?” His good eye is locked on the bed where Dean supposedly slept last night.

“I don’t—” A fresh wave of panic rushes through him—painful, like shards of ice in his veins—and Sam gives a single, involuntary shudder before finishing, “I don’t know.”

Dad nods. “He gonna come back?”

Sam struggles with himself for a moment and then sinks into something that feels like apathy but is
probably just shock. “I don’t know.”

Dad’s head comes up a little at that, as though he’s going to say something. Knowing Dad, it isn’t going to be anything good. If Sam hears one more word about his brother—or about how this is all his fault for leaving—then his calm is going to shatter into a thousand vicious pieces and their fight in the parking lot outside is going to look like a friendly tussle.

But Dad doesn’t say anything. Instead, he shuffles over to Dean’s bed with the weary steps of an old man. When he sits down, it’s with a grimace that reopens the cut on his bottom lip and makes Sam’s bones pulse dully in sympathy. For the first time, Sam can clearly see their father’s face and Dad is still crying: leaking silent, steady tears as he runs his fingers over the hurriedly mussed sheets of what should have been Dean’s bed.

“I didn’t know,” he says. “I swear to God, Sammy, I didn’t—”

“You didn’t look,” Sam answers, voice flat and final.

It’s a little unfair, considering how desperately Dean was hiding it even from himself—how deep Sam had to dig to get at the truth—but only a little. Because Sam was able to see that something was wrong with his brother within weeks after Jess’ death, even if he never guessed how deep the wound ran. Even if he couldn’t give the infection a name.

Dad was there with Dean right after Vegas, when the damage would have been fresh and Dean less practiced at suppressing it, and what did the man do? He started sending Dean out on his own. He abandoned his oldest son when Dean needed his family the most.

Dad doesn’t even hesitate before nodding in acceptance of the rebuke. His mouth twitches in an uncomfortable way that leaves Sam uncertain whether their father is trying to smile or scream. The flash he gets of the man’s teeth is streaked with red: a bloody grimace.

“He wasn’t—I’m not trying to make excuses, but he was already—you don’t know what he was like, after you left. He kept getting into fights—every goddamned night, it seemed. Wouldn’t talk to me unless we were working on a case, and even then he—he never said anything straight out, but I could tell he blamed me for pushing you away. And I didn’t—he said he was going to Vegas to work the tables, and that’s it. I wouldn’t have—even if it was just the movie and not the, the other, I wouldn’t’ve let him go. If I knew.”

Sam has seen their father in plenty of unbalanced emotional states—most of them involving either anger, or alcohol, or a woman—but this is the first time he’s ever seen Dad so genuinely distraught. It catches Sam by surprise, and the sullen thrum of anger that was energizing him quiets without warning. He makes it over to a chair before collapsing heavily and leaning back with his legs sprawled in front of him.

“Dean didn’t know himself when he left,” he says. “He met a producer when he was there.”

Dad nods, accepting the information if not the halfhearted absolution, and then continues, “After, when I found out—when I saw the movie—he seemed. He seemed better, and I didn’t want to—I didn’t want to upset him again.” He laughs bitterly through his tears, wiping a hand over his mouth. “No, that’s not true,” he corrects as he sets his hand back down on the bed. “I just. I didn’t know what to say. What the hell do you say about something like that?”

It’s uncomfortably close to what Sam was asking himself so many months ago and he can’t meet their father’s bleary, lopsided gaze. He can’t have been misjudging the man this entire time, can he? Can’t have been blaming Dad so that he wouldn’t have to acknowledge his own role in what
“And I’m—God, I’m sorry, Sam. For what I said about you two. I was—I was angry, but I know that doesn’t—it doesn’t excuse anything, and I don’t—I was wrong.”

It takes Sam a few moments to understand what their father is apologizing for and then he’s shaken by a disastrous impulse to burst out laughing. It’s funny as hell that spilling the beans about Dean’s rape was all it took to convince the man he was wrong about Sam’s relationship with his brother—one truth burying another—but laughing right now would upset the precarious balance between them. The last thing that Sam needs right now is to get into another shouting match with their father.

He bites down on the inside of his cheek, savagely, and tastes blood. The pain twines around that copper taste and clears his head, black humor dissipating like the stain of blood in fresh water. The hollow ache of sorrow replaces it and Sam leans forward, elbows on his knees as he runs his hands through his hair. He wonders whether Dean would feel any better about being betrayed if he knew that it had served to put Dad off their scent.

Sam doesn’t know which Dean would consider more damning—their relationship or the rape—and he isn’t ever going to find out unless he locates his brother before Dean does something stupid. Not that he will. Do something stupid. Because surely if Dean were the type to do anything he would have done so already. He wouldn’t wait until now, when he’s starting to get better.

But there’s still a wretched, nervous twist in Sam’s stomach that he can’t seem to quiet, and an invisible countdown keeping time with his pulse.

“Yes, he told Claire. Yes, I’m worried about Dean’s safety, and God help him he is.

“These past few months haven’t been easy,” Dad announces, drawing Sam’s attention back. “I’ve been—there’s things you don’t—fuck, this isn’t coming out right. I just—Sammy, I don’t know where my head was at. Never do when it comes to you, for some reason.”

Sam stares dumbly at their father. There’s more awkwardness in Dad’s frame now than before, shoulders slumping and hands as restless as Dean’s when he’s upset, and after a few moments Sam realizes that their father is still waiting for his apology to be acknowledged, if not accepted.

In the face of Dean’s disappearance, holding onto his anger strikes Sam as petty and unwarranted.

“You aren’t any easier to figure out,” he says, which is vaguely accusatory but the best he can manage, even now. It seems to be enough, though, because some of the tension eases from Dad’s body.

Neither one of them has mentioned the rape. Not directly. Not really. But it’s in the room with them anyway—not an elephant or a ghost, but a week-old corpse, reeking and obvious. Sam wishes like hell that he could salt and burn it.

He tilts his head minutely to one side as he continues to look at their father, wondering how the man is feeling—how he’s dealing with that sickening, devastating smell. He tries to remember how he felt when he found out and can’t manage that either. The revelation is too far away, or maybe his mind is shielding him from the force of those emotions.

“You have any idea where he went?” John says finally.

It seems like almost too much of an effort, but Sam manages to shake his head anyway. “No.”

“Is he going to come back?”
Sam frowns slightly at the disorienting wash of deja vu—they've done this before, haven't they? Before he can remember where or when Dad gives himself a shake and, rubbing one hand gingerly over his face, mutters, “Sorry, I don’t—I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

Sam does. It’s the same thing that’s wrong with him: the same numbing, isolating fog clouding his own mind and getting in the way of rational thought and turning the world into something pale and grey. It’s shock—shock mingled with just enough horror to give everything that nightmarish tilt.

Sam can’t keep looking at the wounded bewilderment in their father’s good eye, so he turns his own face away. There’s a subdued glow behind the thick motel curtains, which he knows would translate into a glare if he pulled them open.

Outside, somewhere, Dean has seen another day dawn bright and clear.

Sam wonders what that light looks like to his brother. If the sun feels like it’s mocking him. If the brilliance reminds him of hospital walls and the too-bright glare of overhead fluorescents.

“I’m going to go look for him,” he announces abruptly.

“How the hell do you think you’re gonna find him in a city this size?” Dad asks, shifting a little on the bed as Sam stands.

“I don’t know,” Sam admits, grabbing his jacket off the back of a nearby chair. “But I can’t just sit here.”

Dad nods and starts to rise as well. “I’ll go with you.”

“No,” Sam says. It comes out sharper than he means, but the word stops Dad mid-rise. There’s hurt around the edges of the anger in their father’s gaze, and Sam hastens to explain, “Dean isn’t going to want to see you right now. If you’re with me, he’ll run again.”

There’s no guarantee Dean is going to let Sam get close either, of course—not after the magnitude of his betrayal—but he has a better chance if Dad isn’t trailing after him. Maybe he’ll get lucky and Dean’s anger will win out over his pain. Maybe Dean will let Sam come within striking range. Sam will willingly take however many hits Dean thinks he needs, so long as that particular beating ends with his brother wrapped firm and secure in his arms.

Dad looks confused again, but he nods. “Yeah, okay,” he sighs. He doesn’t so much sit down as his knees give out on him, dropping him back onto the bed. “I’ll wait here in case he comes back,” he adds, lifting up a little so that he can dig a keychain out of his pocket. “You can take my truck.”

Sam doesn’t want to—Dean knows what Dad’s truck looks like, might rabbit before he figures out Dad isn’t the one behind the wheel—but his other option is to steal a car and he really doesn’t want to have to worry about dodging cops while searching for his brother. So when Dad tosses the keychain over, Sam catches it and gives a tight-lipped nod. Palming the keys, he starts for the door.

“Sam.”

Sam glances over his shoulder.

“If you don’t want to get pulled over, you should clean yourself up first.”

It takes Sam a couple of moments to understand what their father is saying, but the meaning eventually penetrates and he wanders into the bathroom to look at himself in the mirror. His lips are bloody and there’s a red crust around his nose, on his chin. He doesn’t know when that happened—
when Dad head butted him, probably. Washing his face off hurts, but not as much as he suspects Dad’s will when he takes his own turn in here. A small solace, maybe, but Sam will take what he can get right now.

He dabs his face dry afterwards—purple already blooming across his cheekbone and up over his left eye, darker bruises across his throat—and then heads for the door again. Dad is still sitting on the bed, but he must have gotten up at some point because he’s holding Dean’s discarded shirt in his hands.

Sam remembers watching Dean strip that shirt off last night, his back turned on Sam in a defensive hunch. That was just moments before Sam went into the bathroom to take his shower, which was minutes before he got into bed with his brother, which was only seconds before Dean pressed up against his back and—

Jesus Christ, how could he have done this to his brother? How the fuck could he have betrayed his confidence like this?

Turning his face away sharply, Sam lengthens his strides as far as he’s able. He needs to be out there right now, finding Dean so that he can apologize. So that he can keep him safe. But as he opens the door, their father’s voice makes him hesitate.

“Sammy. You find him and you bring him back here.”

Sam clenches his jaw against the painful upwelling in his throat. After a couple of seconds, it passes and he’s able to rasp, “Yes, sir.”

Their father is silent as Sam steps forward into the sunlight and pulls the door shut behind him.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Sam drives past the hospital first, compulsively and thoughtlessly, and then over to the Moon Media complex. There’s an Impala in the parking lot, but it’s only ten years old and a faded red color, so Sam continues on without stopping. Following the posted signs, he drives further downtown to the main strip, scanning cars and pedestrians as he goes and hoping to catch sight of his brother.

He sees no less than ten Elvis impersonators—there must be a convention—and an equal number of women who look like they’re selling their time by the hour. Probably on their way home after a night of hard work. Whenever he catches a flash of metallic black, or a leather coat with an upturned collar, his heart leaps and his foot slams down on the break. He nearly causes an accident when he catches the two together near the MGM Grand, but the black belongs to a ’66 Pontiac GTO, and the leather jacket to a forty-something cowboy with sideburns and a mullet.

Finally, driven by a desperation approaching panic, Sam points their father’s truck toward the outskirts of town and drives to the cemetery where Hanson is buried. There are police swarming all over the man’s gravesite: yellow tape blowing in the wind as they try to piece together what happened. Either the desecration went unnoticed until the groundskeeper’s arrival or Claire put in that call to her brother after all, giving this particular crime scene a great deal more importance than it would otherwise have.

It was a stupid, faint hope to begin with, and the probability of Dean’s presence drops to pretty much nil with the addition of the police, but Sam still parks across the street and scans the surrounding area. If nothing else, it’s as good a spot as any to stop while he figures out where to try next.

As he watches the police work, it occurs to him that he’s been looking in the wrong places.
Dean’s upset. He’s hurting. He isn’t going to go to somewhere that will disturb him even more. No, he’s going to seek out somewhere comforting. Somewhere safe.

If there’s anywhere that fits that description in Vegas, then Sam doesn’t know where it is. Hell, he can count the number of places where Dean feels safe in the continental US on one hand.

He’s beginning to think that he should call Claire back and to hell with his fears of police involvement—he and Dad can always break Dean out of jail if they need to—when his phone rings.

Sam fumbles it out of his pocket and looks down, stupidly expecting Dean’s name to pop up on the caller ID. But Dean’s phone is miles away, lost, and it isn’t Dean. It’s Dad. Probably calling for a status update. Sam considers ignoring the call and then picks up anyway.

“Hey,” he answers wearily. “I haven’t found him yet. I’m thinking we should call—”

“I know where he is.”

Sam sits up straighter. “What? How?”

“Same way I found you boys in the first place,” Dad answers, and he sounds a little embarrassed now. “I, uh, put a GPS system in the Impala.”

Sam guesses that their father expects him to be upset by that information, and he is, just not for the reason Dad’s thinking. “Why the hell didn’t you use it sooner?” he demands, already reaching for the ignition.

“I was a little distracted,” John snaps as the engine rumbles to life. “Do you want to yell at me, or do you want to go find your brother?”

Glowering at the steering wheel, Sam puts the truck into first gear and pulls back onto the road.

“Where am I going?”

Sam doesn’t recognize the address when Dad rattles it off to him, and he’s still clueless twenty minutes later when he pulls into a CVS parking lot next to his brother’s car. No way in a million years did Dean run away to hide out in the middle of a drug store—especially this drug store, which is a symbol of corporate America and represents everything Dean hates about ‘normal’.

For a moment Sam worries that his brother knew about the GPS and ditched the Impala here for another ride. Thumping his hands against the steering wheel in impotent frustration, he looks up and down the street for some hint of where his brother might have gone from here and stiffens as his eyes catch on a sign about half a block down on the other side of the road.

The Starlite Motel looks about as appetizing as Sam remembers it being fifteen years ago, back when it was still open for business and they spent a week in one of its sweltering, filthy rooms.

The parking lot where he and Dean played tag between rusting station wagons and old pick-up trucks has become a jungle of weeds and cracked asphalt. The blue and white sign towering over the entrance—the lights on it weren’t working even then—now reads S r l e o t l, and the building itself is a blind facade, its windows covered up by rotting boards. Graffiti—gang signs, Sam guesses—covers the numberless room doors, which were red when they stayed here and are now a dusty pink.

It’s the most beautiful thing Sam has ever seen.
Heart beating too quickly, he gets out of the truck and jogs toward his brother.

It’s easy enough to understand why Sam didn’t remember the place until now: one crappy motel is much like another, after all, and every city looked the same when he was eight. Half the time, he didn’t even know what city he was in—didn’t care as long as Dean was there. As long as he didn’t have to face a new school and new classmates on his own.

It was summer when they stayed here—for a hunt? or was Dad just after some fast cash?—which meant that he and Dean were left mostly to their own devices. The neighborhood wasn’t the greatest even then, so Dean kept them both confined to motel property—Dad’s orders, or maybe just common sense. In the mornings, when it was still relatively cool, they usually hung out in the room and watched cable on the TV set (everyone was green, Sam remembers suddenly, like Martians, and Dean kept making him laugh by shouting out ‘Marvin’ every time someone said their name). In the afternoon, when the sun was high and the room was really starting to heat up (no A/C, not even in Vegas, not in a dump like this), they headed out back to the pool, where Dean finally—after years of promises—taught Sam to swim.

There’s no fence cordoning off the property in front, but the back has been wrapped by a high, metal chain link number with barbed wire on the top. Sam walks alongside the fence until he finds scuff marks in the dirt, sees a scrap of flannel waving from a razor at the top of the fence, and then takes his jacket off and tosses it up. He follows, careful of the wire, and then drops down on the other side.

Here, there are broken beer bottles and the stubby ends of cigarettes and blunts mixed in with the weeds. Sam also spots several twisted spoons caked with brown guck and bits of tubing scattered everywhere like worms after a spring rain. Suddenly thankful for the relative safety of the daylight, he retrieves his jacket from the top of the fence and shoulders it back on (won’t need it soon, it’s already a little warm for even the light fabric) before following the path worn through the yellowed weeds around to the back of the motel.

Some industrious junkie brought a couch back here, and there’s trash littered everywhere: the sun catches on glass and aluminum and sparkles back, dazzling. The pool is still there, but cracked and dry. The ladder Sam clambered down more times than he could count has been ripped away—years ago, judging by the bird’s nests built into the holes left behind by the ladder’s bolts.

Dean is sitting on the edge of the pool with his back to Sam and his head lowered.

“Dean,” Sam says, but if his brother hears him then he doesn’t respond.

Something about the way Dean is sitting makes Sam move carefully, easing forward until he can see the profile of his brother’s face, which is blank as he stares down into the bottom of the pool. One more step and Sam can also see the gun Dean is cradling in his lap.

It’s one thing, thinking abstractly about Dean not being safe on his own. It’s another to actually see his brother sitting here with his favorite, pearl-handled Colt resting lightly on one thigh.

Horror rears up from Sam’s gut to strangle him—he can’t move, can’t speak, can’t fucking breathe. He’s too terrified that he’s going to do the wrong thing and drive Dean to put a bullet in his head.

Silence stretches out between them, thick like tar. The sunlight streaming down makes the entire scene surreal—or maybe that’s the empty Cheetos bag hung up on a patch of weeds at the bottom of the pool. Dean is staring in that direction, but he isn’t watching the bag. He’s looking at the decomposing body of some sort of animal several feet to the bag’s left. It’s too big to be a rat—someone’s lost cat, maybe.
God, how long has Dean been sitting here staring death in the face?

“You remember this place, Sammy?” Dean asks abruptly. His voice is calm and detached—empty, like he’s already gone—and that’s probably the most terrifying thing of all. “That lady with the—you know, all the romance novels? Sat in a chair next to the pool. She used to get so pissed at us. Kept asking where our mother was.”

“Dean,” Sam whispers, taking an unconscious step forward.

“Don’t,” Dean chokes out. His hand tights on the Colt where it’s resting on his thigh and Sam brings himself up short. After a moment, his brother swallows and relaxes minutely, continuing, “I wonder what happened to her.”

Christ, Sam can’t take this.

“Please,” he tries. “Dean, give me the gun.”

“No.”

Fuck. Sam’s eyes are burning for what feels the hundredth time this morning, but he blinks through the unshed tears and fights to focus. He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say now, but he knows—oh God, he knows he has to get this just right. He has to not fuck up just this once.

“Can you—I just want to talk, okay? Can you just put it down while we talk?”

Dean cocks his head slightly but doesn’t take his eyes off the decomposing cat. When he speaks, his voice is still eerily calm. “No. I don’t think so.”

Sam can’t quite keep the choked, desperate noise inside of his throat where it belongs. His lungs seem to have shrunk several sizes—he can’t get any air—and his heart is beating fast enough that it’s going to come right out of his chest in a moment.

“You don’t want to do this, man,” he says. “Just—I know you’re hurting, Dean, and I’m so sorry. I—I didn’t mean to say anything, I swear to God.”

“Yeah, I bet you didn’t mean to slam your fist into Dad’s face, either.”

Sam licks his lips, rushing through responses and discarding each one, and his mouth answers before his brain can tell it to shut the fuck up. “No,” he says, “That one I did mean.”

For a moment, he thinks he’s tipped Dean over the edge, but instead his brother lets out a short, bitter laugh. It’s an improvement over the blank facade he was wearing before.

“But we talked,” Sam adds. “We—we’re good now.”

“Gee, if I’d known that all it took to get you two to play nice was to let someone pound my ass, I would’ve done it years ago.”

“Dean,” Sam chokes out and then takes a jerking, desperate step forward as Dean lifts the Colt from his lap. “No, wait!” he blurts, catching himself before his feet can take him any closer—push this any further in the wrong direction.

Sam might as well not be there for all the attention Dean pays. He’s too busy studying the gun in his hand: feeling the weight of it and adjusting his grip on the ivory handle. His thumb slides back and forth over the safety, restless.
“I thought about it, you know,” he says conversationally. “Back at the cabin when you made me remember. That first night, I took this out and I put it in my mouth and I—God, I wanted to pull the trigger so fucking bad.”

Sam is going to throw up. Or scream. All of the nerves and horror snarling through his chest and stomach have to go somewhere. Christ, he can’t—he can’t do this. He can’t bury his brother. Not today, not fucking ever.

“You want to know why I didn’t?” Dean continues. “You want to know why I pussied out?” He turns his head—not exactly looking at Sam, but coming closer to it—and answers, “Cause I knew you’d have to tell Dad why I did it.” He’s smiling—a brittle, sardonic expression. “Guess the ship’s sailed on that one now, huh?”

“I fucked up,” Sam says quickly. “I know I fucked up, but you can’t do this, Dean. You can’t.”

“All I have to do is put it in my mouth and pull the trigger,” Dean says. His smile is leaking into his voice, filling it with a wretched mix of self-loathing and mockery. “Even I can’t screw something like that up.”

His index finger shifts, curling around the trigger.

Sam’s sweating, but he’s cold—so very, very cold—as he says, “If you do that, then he wins, Dean. Do you hear me? He wins.”

Dean is quiet long enough that Sam is beginning to think he got through and then his brother says, “He already won, Sam. Now I just—I just want it to stop.” His voice cracks on the last word, but it’s the way his thumb is starting to press on the safety that makes Sam’s muscles clench.

“He hasn’t won, and it will stop,” Sam insists, putting all of the faith he can muster into his voice. “Dean, you’re getting better, man. Last night alone—God, you’re doing so much better.”

“When?” Dean scoffs. “When I was going Untouchables on Hanson’s gravestone or when I couldn’t even handle a little make out session?”

“When you let me hold you,” Sam answers. “When you trusted me enough to fall asleep like that.”

“Yeah, well, I won’t make that mistake again,” Dean says, but he doesn’t sound sure and more importantly he hesitated. Sam chances a step forward and then freezes again when his brother thumbs off the safety and barks, “Stay back!”

“Dean,” he pleads. He can’t do anything about the tears anymore—they’re coming whether he wants them or not. “Please. You can’t do this. You can’t leave me.” His voice cracks on the last few words, pouring out all of his misery and his desperation, and Dean flinches. He’s still holding the Colt up, barrel pointed vaguely in the direction of his face, but his grip on the trigger wasn’t firm enough and it doesn’t go off. As Sam watches, a single tear slips from his brother’s left eye to slide down his cheek.

“I need you,” Sam says, pressing harder at the sign of his brother’s weakening resolve. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Dean, I can’t—without you, I can’t. There’s no fucking point.”

Dean’s hand is trembling on the gun now, and another tear slips after the first one. “Don’t do this to me, Sam,” he whispers, voice hoarse.

Fuck that, Sam thinks, and takes another step closer. Between all of his fits and starts, he’s almost there now: almost in grabbing range. “You pull the trigger, Dean, and I swear to God I will be right
behind you. Then Dad can bury two sons for the price of one.”

Sam isn’t sure which threat tips the scales in his favor—whether it’s the thought of Sam’s lifeless body or of Dad’s grief that drives that choked, despairing sound from Dean’s throat and makes him bury his face in his hands. Dean is still holding the gun, but it’s an absent grip. His finger isn’t on the trigger anymore and the barrel is pointed harmlessly off to one side.

With a final, soft step, Sam crouches beside his brother. When he reaches out to take the gun, Dean lets him have it. Sam carefully puts the safety back on before tossing the Colt away, making a mental note to pick it up again when they leave. Then he turns back to his brother and rests one hand lightly on the back of Dean’s bowed neck.

“Shh, it’s okay,” he murmurs.

Dean turns, blindly flailing out for Sam and almost knocking him into the pool. Sam catches himself on one knee before he can go over and opens his arms, letting his brother shove in close and bury his face against Sam’s chest. One of Dean’s hands clenches in Sam’s t-shirt while the other reaches up to grab the back of his neck. He isn’t just crying now but sobbing, his entire body shaking with the force of his pain.

“I’ve got you, man,” Sam murmurs, stroking a hand down his brother’s back. “Everything’s gonna be okay. I’ve got you.”

It takes him a few minutes to realize that Dean is trying to talk through his tears: begging, broken words: “D-don’t leave, Suh-Sammy. Don’t luh-luh-leave me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Sam promises, craning his neck so that he can kiss the top of his brother’s head. “You and me, man.”

Sam isn’t sure whether his brother hears him, but the litany shifts regardless, blurring into gasping apologies.

“I’m—I’m sorry. God, Sam, I’m so—so fucking s-sorry.”

“S’okay,” Sam soothes as he continues to stroke his hand up and down the line of his brother’s spine. “You didn’t do anything. You’re okay.”

“I was going to,” Dean insists. “I w-wanted to, but I—I cuh—c-couldn’t—couldn’t luh-luh—”

Sam thinks, and shuts his eyes against an overwhelming flood of relief.

“Couldn’t leave you. Sammys. It—so d-damn muh-much. I—I can’t—”

“I know,” he says, holding Dean tighter. “I know, baby.”
Dean comes away from the Starlite Motel easily enough once he’s calmed down.

Sam is pretty sure that the crisis has passed, but the Colt is safely tucked down the back of his pants instead of his brother’s, just in case. He pauses in the CVS parking lot, considering the Impala and wondering if he should ride back with Dean—they can always come back for Dad’s truck later. Such an obvious lack of trust might be enough to snap Dean out of the apathetic resignation he’s currently displaying, though, and Sam isn’t quite ready to deal with anything else.

The thought of letting Dean drive himself back to the motel in a fully-armed car seems equally disastrous, of course, so Sam’s first order of business is to get both vehicles behind the building and out of sight. Back here, shielded by a high wooden fence on three sides and the blank facade of the CVS on the other, Sam begins to transfer their arsenal from the Impala to Dad’s truck.

Dean sits passively in the Impala’s driver’s seat. He turned the engine off when Sam asked him to, but left the radio on—Sam can hear the familiar melody of Kashmir spilling from Dean’s lowered window into the late morning air while he works. Once the trunk is empty, Sam moves around to the front and opens his brother’s door.

Although he has to know what Sam’s after, Dean continues to stare bleakly out the windshield. Sam might not as well be there for all the attention his brother is paying him. After giving Dean a couple of minutes to at least acknowledge his presence, Sam sighs and says, “Dean.”

“I’m not gonna do anything,” Dean mumbles, his voice almost inaudible beneath the music. “Promised I wouldn’t.”

Dean did promise—he promised by the side of the pool right before Sam pulled him to his feet—and while Sam wants to believe his brother, he isn’t taking any chances. Not with Dean.

He wants to explain that he isn’t doing this because he doesn’t trust his brother and can’t. Because the Dean he knows would never even have considered giving up the way he almost did today, and Sam’s faith is shaken—not in Dean, but in his own understanding of who his brother is. He wonders where his childhood hero—invincible, strong and brave—has disappeared to.

Was that Dean ever real at all, or was he just a figment of Sam’s imagination?

Thankfully, his brother doesn’t make him say anything else—protest lodged, he slides his seat back and widens his legs so that Sam can get down underneath the dash and retrieve the gun stashed there. Sam stares studiously at the pedals as he feels for the catch holding the weapon in place, but he’s acutely aware of how close his right hand—planted on the seat between Dean’s legs for balance—is to his brother’s crotch. By the time he straightens, mission accomplished, his cheeks are slightly flushed.

Without having to be asked, Dean reaches over and pops open the glove compartment as well. Sam debates going around the other side of the car to get this gun, but it’s easier to lean across his brother and retrieve the final pistol that way.

Now that he has what he needs, Sam eases back out of the car. He tries to figure out what to do with the guns while Dean slides his seat forward again and ends up holding both awkwardly in one hand—he doesn’t want to step away from his brother yet, and there isn’t any more room down the back of his pants, where Dean’s Colt is still resting. Leaning his right forearm against the roof of the car,
Sam watches as his brother resituates himself.

After an inordinate amount of shifting, Dean finally places both hands on the steering wheel and squints out at the bright world on the other side of the windshield. There’s a beat of near silence, broken only by the sound of the radio, and then he says, “I feel naked.”

Sam recognizes the attempt at levity in his brother’s words, and he tries to crack a smile but can’t quite manage it. Maybe they’ll be able to laugh about this someday, but not for a good, long while yet. Not for years.

Tightening his mouth, Dean reaches out to shut his door and Sam steps back to let him.

“I’m going to follow you back,” Sam announces as his brother fastens his seatbelt. He expects his brother to glower at the announcement, but Dean’s weary expression doesn’t so much as flicker.

“I’m not gonna run.”

“I know. I just don’t know how to get back to the motel from here.”

Nothing in Dean’s answering nod indicates that he recognized Sam’s words as either a joke or as an attempt to make this a little easier on both of them by providing the illusion of normalcy. It’s just a nod, absent and uncaring.

“I’ll do my best not to drive off any bridges.”

Sam’s throat constricts. “That’s not funny,” he manages after a couple of seconds.

Dean shrugs and keeps on staring out the front windshield.

Finally, Sam says, “Try to stick to the speed limit for once,” and then turns away and walks back over to Dad’s truck.

Whether because of Sam’s request or because Dean isn’t actually in any hurry to get back to Dad, he drives pathetically slow. Other cars keep on zooming past on their left—even on two lane roads where passing is clearly prohibited. Sam hasn’t heard so many horns in his life—or been sworn at so many times. More abuse is hurled Dean’s way, since he’s the one in front holding up traffic, but as far as Sam can tell his brother doesn’t so much as flip someone the bird in response.

Louder than the horns and the swearing is the rattle of the guns in the truck’s glove compartment—Sam couldn’t fit everything into their father’s weapon trunk. More distracting than the other drivers and the rattling combined is the cold, unyielding shape of the Colt pressing into the small of Sam’s back.

Dad gave that gun to Dean on his sixteenth birthday, and Sam can’t help but wonder now whether his brother chose the Colt deliberately or whether it was just the closest thing at hand. It’s something he doesn’t think he’ll ever feel comfortable asking—not even if he and Dean live to see a hundred—and wondering about it is making him sick to his stomach, so he does his best to concentrate on the road. The constant glint of sunlight off the Impala’s trunk keeps reminding Sam of another reflection, though—light on polished metal, sunburst flare at the end of a barrel—and despite the rising heat of the day, he shivers.

It’s a little after noon when they finally pull back into the Sandlot Terrace Motel parking lot, and Sam relaxes a little as he pulls up next to his brother in front of their room. Dad may not be his favorite person—especially when it comes to handling Dean—but Sam’s still relieved not to be dealing with this on his own anymore. Over the past few months, he’s lost track of the number of times he picked
up the phone to call Radison, or to dial one of the rape assistance hotlines he’s seen advertised—or Christ, to give Bobby a shout—only to hang up without disturbing the empty dial tone.

Much as Sam knows that Dean needs outside help, he can’t shake the feeling that this is family business. It’s too personal—too intimate—to bring in outsiders when Dean is anything less than one hundred percent on board with the idea.

Sam’s already out of the truck and halfway to the room when he realizes his brother isn’t following him. He turns around and the Impala’s engine is off, Dean a shadowy, stationary figure behind the blur of light obscuring the windshield. Wordlessly, Sam steps back down off the sidewalk and gets in on the passenger side.

Dean is fiddling with his scar and biting his lip, eyes downcast. He doesn’t say anything when Sam shuts the door behind him, doesn’t glance over, but Sam can tell from the shift in his brother’s breathing that Dean’s well aware of his presence. It’s hot in here—stifling—and it’s clear that Dean didn’t turn on the AC on the drive over because his t-shirt is pretty much plastered to his chest beneath the flannel that he hasn’t bothered taking off. Sam hasn’t been in here for more than a couple of seconds himself and already his hair is starting to stick to the back of his neck.

When it’s clear that Dean is willing to sit there until they both roast, Sam takes it upon himself to say, “So, there’s air conditioning inside.”

“I can’t do this,” Dean blurs. The words are abrupt, and blunt with fear.

Sam already knows where this is going, but he also knows that Dean needs to say it out loud, so he ignores his own rising discomfort to ask, “Can’t do what?”

“This,” Dean says, finally glancing over. His eyes are frightened, but that’s a welcome relief after the emotionless automaton who almost shot himself this morning and the submissive mannequin Sam had to deal with after. “Dad,” Dean adds before Sam can ask for clarification. “I can’t.”

He grimaces, rubbing furiously at his forehead, and Sam can’t stand it anymore. Reaching over, he catches his brother’s wrist. Sam’s fingers slip a little against Dean’s sweat-slicked skin, and if Dean pulled away he could escape Sam’s touch easily. Instead, he stills, resting his fingertips at his temple, and when Sam tries to draw his hand down, he only resists for a moment before complying.

Sam considers letting go of his brother’s wrist now that Dean isn’t worrying at his scar, but the contact seems to be helping a little, so he brings his brother’s hand over and places it on his own leg instead. It’s really too hot for touching, but Sam knows that the heat isn’t to blame for the way Dean stiffens. He gentles his fingers, stroking over the delicate bones in his brother’s wrist.

“S’okay,” he says, reassuring. “I told you, you can touch me.”

Dean licks his lips once, nervously, and then slides his hand more firmly into place around Sam’s thigh. This was Sam’s idea—and from the way that Dean is starting to look steadier, it was a good one—but he’s beginning to wonder how smart it was to shift his brother’s fixation like this. Dean’s too distressed to mean anything by it, but the way he’s rubbing at Sam’s inner thigh is making Sam’s groin heat and his cock swell.

It’s sense-memory—Jess used to do this when she was in the mood, used to make a game of it with him in restaurants and movie theaters and once, memorably, in the middle of Professor Riggs’ Masterpieces of English Lit class. Jess’ touch never hit him like this, though, never got to him this quickly or deeply. Maybe because her teasing was deliberate and Dean’s is accidental. Maybe because Dean’s fingers are digging in just a little more firmly than Jess could manage. Or maybe just
because it’s Dean.

Whatever the reason, the strokes go straight to Sam’s cock—do not pass Sam’s brain, do not collect so much as an ounce of restraint—and it’s that as much as the heat that leaves him light-headed and flushed. Dean notices Sam’s condition almost immediately—sees the press of Sam’s cock against the inseam of his right pants leg, or maybe notices the hitch in his breath—and hesitates.

“Sorry,” he says, lifting his hand.

Sam traps it again with a hand of his own before Dean can move away and insists, “It’s fine.” At his brother’s skeptical look, he adds, “I mean, I’m gonna have to jerk off in the bathroom later, but I was sort of planning on doing that anyway.”

Dean doesn’t exactly laugh at the joke, but he slides his hand back into place, so Sam considers it a win.

“Now, let’s try that again,” Sam says, settling back into the seat and trying not to think about the sweat running down his back. “What can’t you do?”

Dean drops his eyes, but he doesn’t stop moving his hand and his voice is steady as he answers, “I don’t think I can handle it right now. Seeing Dad.”

Yeah, Sam guessed that was the problem. Personally, he could give a damn whether he ever talks to their father again, but Dean has always measured his worth by just how perfectly he can conform to their father’s expectations and Sam is pretty sure that, as wrecked as Dean feels right now, the prospect of never seeing Dad again would be enough to have him reaching for another gun—promise or no promise.

Dean needs Dad. More importantly, he needs Dad’s approval and reassurance. Sam is going to make sure that his brother gets all three if he has to beat it out of the man.

Keeping his voice gentle, he points out, “You have to face him sometime.”

“I know, I just—” Dean swallows as he tightens his hand on Sam’s thigh.

“What are you so afraid of?”

Sam expects his brother to fight him on that—to hide behind the usual ‘I laugh in the face of fear’ crap—but instead Dean says, “I can’t—he’s gonna be disgusted with me, and I can’t—”

“Woah!” Sam blurts. He isn’t really feeling the heat anymore: too astonished by his brother’s response. “Woah. Dean, you—you’re kidding, right? You don’t honestly think Dad’s gonna be disgusted with you. Right?”

Only Dean does think that: Sam can tell from the way his brother won’t meet his eyes.

Reaching up with one hand, he cups Dean’s cheek and draws their foreheads together. Too hot for this much contact—Sam knows that objectively even if he can’t feel it—but heat isn’t what has Dean cutting his eyes to the left. Toward their room.

Belatedly, it occurs to Sam that Dad might be watching from the window.

While Dean’s hand on Sam’s thigh is hidden by the dash, anything above the waist is going to be more than visible enough to reawaken all of their father’s old suspicions. Especially if Sam takes this where he wants to. But he can’t find it in himself to care.
If this is what it’s going to take to get through to Dean, then this is what he’s going to do. Dad can just suck it up.

“Dean, he isn’t,” Sam murmurs, stroking his brother’s cheek with his knuckles and nuzzling their noses together. “He loves you.”

Dean shakes his head slightly in denial even as he relaxes into the touch. Shifting his hand from his brother’s cheek to the nape of his neck, Sam holds him still.

“Dad loves you,” he repeats more firmly, giving Dean a little shake for emphasis. “Everything’s going to be okay. And I’ll be right next to you the whole time. If you need me to, you just give the word and I’ll kick him out.”

“I can take care of myself,” Dean says, but the words aren’t even convincing enough to be blustery, and he sounds so terribly young, and Sam can’t hold back anymore.

Tilting his face, he kisses Dean once, lightly, on the mouth. Dean kisses back immediately—no skill for once, just fumbling need. It’s probably the most genuine physical response Sam has ever gotten from his brother. He wants to pursue it—see how far Dean can take this—but he’s too aware of how exposed they are and the memory of Dean holding a gun in his hand and contemplating the release of death is still too fresh.

When Sam pulls back, Dean chases his mouth for a moment before catching himself and sucking his lower lip back between his teeth instead.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t have your back,” Sam says. He squeezes the slick nape of Dean’s neck one final time and then lets his hand fall away.

For a couple of seconds, Dean studies him—Sam isn’t sure whether his brother is searching for a hint of mockery or if he’s looking for a reason to trust—and then he nods, hauling in a deep breath of overheated air. Sam watches as he goes about the business of rebuilding his walls with painstaking care.

Dean’s jaw firms first. Then his head lifts and the stress lines at the corners of his mouth ease. His forehead smooths out. Dean closes himself off piece by piece until he’s almost a complete cipher. He can’t finish the job, though. Can’t lock his emotions out of his eyes, which are wet and wounded and so anxious it makes Sam’s chest ache.

Sam doesn’t like the idea of his brother going in to face Dad with so much vulnerability showing, but he doesn’t say anything as Dean finally climbs out of the car. He and Dad may have reached an uneasy truce as far as Dean is concerned, but Sam still doesn’t trust the man not to fuck it up without some kind of tangible reminder of how fragile Dean is. He wonders if he should have called ahead while they were driving back and told Dad about the gun—that would have guaranteed the man’s best behavior.

But Sam doesn’t think that their father is up to handling that news gracefully right now. Not coming so fast on the heels of this morning’s unpleasant revelation.

Sam is just going to have to keep a close watch on his brother for the next few days, possibly call up Claire again (if she’s still willing to talk to him after he spazzed out on her earlier) and get some information on any support systems or resources he could use to monitor or safeguard his brother’s emotional state. Come to think of it, after the events of the last twenty-four hours Dean might be willing to try some light medication.
Sam makes a mental note to bring it up later, once the hurdle of facing Dad is over with and they’re alone again, and then joins his brother on the sidewalk. Dean has made it around to the front of the car, but he’s stalled out again there, standing with his hands shoved in his pockets while he stares at the door to their room like a stray cat might watch a rabid, growling dog.

“Do you want me to go in first?” Sam asks, stepping close enough to bump their shoulders together.

Dean shoots him a glance that has as much annoyance in it as fear and steps forward without answering. The pride that tugs at Sam’s chest as he follows his brother into their room is only slightly muted by the weight of Dean’s pistol at the small of his back.

Sam is already searching for their father before he finishes clearing the threshold, and he finds him sitting on the bed that he and his brother shared last night with a familiar book in his hands. That book used to be Dad’s, before he left it behind for Dean. It used to be a field journal until Dean went and turned it into a Bible—the only holy book he gives a shit about, Sam’s sure.

Dad has his old journal open to what Sam thinks is the section on reapers. His left hand is splayed across one of the pages, and he’s running the fingertips of his other hand over the careful, ponderous notes Dean left in the margins. Sam remembers his brother writing them. Remembers staring so intently at him—alive and whole and making notes when he was all but buried days before—that Dean got pissed and hurled a pillow at his face.

As Sam steps into the room behind his brother, Dad shuts the journal with guilty haste (better fucking feel guilty for that, for leaving Sam hanging when Dean was dying, for being willing to let Dean go out like that without a word of comfort from their father) and tosses it onto the mattress to his left. When he stands, the daylight from the open door cuts through the gloom and illuminates his face.

Sam saw the damage before, but not this clearly and sure as hell not with his brother in the room. He looks again now with a sinking feeling in his gut.

Dad’s left eye is swollen shut and his nose is red and puffy. There’s dried blood caked in his nostrils and more on his split lip and his cheek is horribly bruised. He’s had worse, sure, but not from Sam. Not at the hands of his son.

Sam wishes that he had it in him to feel guilty on his own behalf instead of his brother’s, but he has to admit that he doesn’t. He’s ashamed only because Dean is less than a foot in front of him, looking at the evidence of Sam’s fury. Dean’s probably too upset right now to feel much of anything about Dad’s condition, but he’ll get around to it eventually, and then Sam is going to have to deal with the perplexed disappointment and hurt in his brother’s eyes.

Sam shifts a little at the thought, but although he’s standing directly in Dad’s line of sight, the man doesn’t seem to notice. All of his attention is riveted on Dean. Sam can’t read their father’s expression through the damage, and he can tell from the way his brother’s hand starts to lift up to his temple that Dean’s just as clueless. Dean catches himself almost immediately, forcing his hand down again, but Sam notes the tension bunching his brother’s shoulders and cording his neck and knows how much the restraint costs him.

Quietly, Sam shuts the door behind himself. Dean and Dad are both frozen, caught out by each other’s gazes, but Dean is the only one who flinches when Sam flicks the overhead light on. His brother seems to shrink in the artificial illumination, shifting his weight uncomfortably and dropping his gaze to the floor. His right hand clenches as though it wants to lift again.
Still wearing that unreadable expression, Dad starts forward. He walks toward Dean using the same, carefree gait he employed years ago when he was rounding up a skittish horse after a job in Texas. It hurts to see Dad taking such care, hurts more to know that Dean needs it—to watch his brother take a single, nervous step backward before catching himself. Dean’s breathing has sped noticeably, and by the time Dad stands before him, Sam can smell the pungent, sour scent of his brother’s fear lying thick in the air.

For a moment, Dad stands there, his eyes heavy on Dean’s downturned face, and then he lifts one hand.

Dean flinches at the movement—an abrupt jerk that he’s seconds late in aborting—and then catches himself and holds as still as he can when his muscles are trembling so badly. Dad pauses, the skin around his eyes and mouth creasing with a flash of pain, and then pushes the emotion from his face with obvious effort.

When he reaches again, his hand lifts molasses slow. His fingers brush Dean’s chin—lightly at first and then, when Dean doesn’t pull away, closing in a firmer grip. With steady, gentle pressure, Dad tilts Dean’s head up and over, and Sam’s breath catches as he realizes what Dad is doing—just what part of Dean’s face has so caught his attention.

He and Dad didn’t talk about Dean’s rape—not directly—and so Dad doesn’t know exactly how Dean got that scar, but the man isn’t an idiot. He knows when Dean showed up with that wound, and now that he knows what happened in Vegas he’s more than capable of putting two and two together and figuring out that the souvenir isn’t from anything as innocuous as a bar fight.

Dean has stopped trembling beneath their father’s examination, but Sam isn’t sure that the stone stillness gripping his brother now is any better. Dean’s muscles are rigid enough that Sam’s body aches with sympathy, and later? When he finally relaxes? He’s gonna be sore as hell—even if he manages to avoid pulling anything.

As Dad’s other hand lifts to his face as well, Dean’s throat works. Dad’s fingertips brush the scar, tracing its hooked path, and Dean’s eyes flutter closed.

“I’m so sorry,” John whispers. “God, Dean, I am so damned sorry.”

“I shouldn’t have let it happen,” Dean mumbles, still standing at attention while he stares at the back of his eyelids. “M’ sorry, I—I fucked up.”

Sam thought Dad looked distraught before, but he was wrong. He has never seen their father look so stricken, like a man staring at his own damnation. He didn’t think Dad was capable of that much remorse and pain.

“No,” Dad chokes out.

When Dean mistakes the word for a rebuke and tries to pull away, Dad releases his face and throws an arm around Dean’s shoulders instead, yanking him into a tight hug.

“It’s not your fault, son,” he rumbles, cupping the back of Dean’s head with his other hand to keep him from pulling away. “It’s not your fault.”

Sam has been telling his brother that very thing for months, but there’s a part of Dean that isn’t ever going to accept anyone but their father as an authority on the double-edged question of guilt and responsibility. It isn’t until now, until this moment, that Dean believes the words. Sam sees the acceptance sink into his brother’s bones, sees the burden of guilt lift from his shoulders. He doesn’t
know whether Dean is ever going to allow himself to be completely absolved, but Dad’s words—or maybe the firmness of his embrace—has alleviated the heaviest, most unbearable strain.

Dean doesn’t make a sound, but there are tears streaming down his face as he bunches the back of Dad’s shirt in both fists like he’s terrified that Dad is going to pull away, that their father is going to take his absolution back. Dad makes low, soothing noises as Dean cries, and holds him, and as Sam watches he wonders where this man has come from, this man who is more father than soldier. He wonders if this John Winchester has been there all along, hidden just below the surface—shoved to one side for the expediency of revenge.

Sam wonders, for the first time, what kind of man their father would have been if Mary hadn’t burned in front of his eyes so many years ago.

He’s still reeling from the revelation five minutes later, when Dean quiets. After all the turbulence over the past few days, Dean is worn out mind, body and soul, and his eyelids are drooping when Dad carefully disengages from the embrace.

“Sam,” Dad says, glancing over, and here is the father Sam knows—stiffly awkward with Dean so heavy and thoughtless in his arms.

Sam prods himself into motion, stepping forward to take his brother from their father’s hands. Dean comes to him easily, tucking his face in against Sam’s neck and brushing his skin with slightly parted, wet lips. It’s unintentional—Dean’s all but asleep on his feet—but it still sends an electric thrill down to Sam’s cock. He clenches his jaw sternly, telling his libido to sit down and shut up, and very carefully doesn’t look at their father as he walks Dean over to the bed furthest from the door.

“Stay,” Dean murmurs as Sam sits him down. He gets a hand on the hem of Sam’s shirt and tugs at it. “Sammy.”

Sam’s cheeks heat. He’s painfully aware of their father’s presence as he pries Dean’s hand loose and tilts him over onto his side. “Gotta talk to Dad, okay, man?” he says softly.

Dean’s eyes, which were slipping shut, open again at that. He looks past Sam to Dad and then, licking his lips, nods. “Don’t hit him again,” he mutters.

“I won’t,” Sam promises. Not tonight, anyway. He considers the sheets trapped beneath his brother’s body and then grabs the comforter off the other bed instead.

“Sammy,” Dean yawns as Sam smooths the comforter out over his body. The word is sloppy with sleep, but insistent enough that Sam’s heart beats a little quicker as he leans close.

“Yeah,” he says, resting one hand on his brother’s forehead.

“Don’t tell him.”

For a moment, Sam can’t figure out what Dean’s worried about—he can’t think Sam is in any danger of telling Dad about them—but then he moves slightly and the gun digs into his spine. Ah. Sam doesn’t want to upset his brother when he’s on the verge of much-needed sleep, but he can’t lie to Dean either and, after what he just saw, he’s reevaluating Dad’s tolerance for the news. Tonight, tomorrow morning at the latest, Sam’s going to have to tell him.

“You know I gotta, dude,” he says, stroking Dean’s hair.

Sam expects his brother to protest or panic, but Dean is apparently more exhausted than he thought because his face only creases for a moment and then eases out again—into acceptance if not
“S gonna be mad,” he says, rolling onto his side and offering Sam his back.

“No one’s mad at you, Dean,” Sam promises. He knows that he shouldn’t—not with Dad watching—but he moves his hand down to the back of his brother’s neck and starts massaging anyway. A little more of the tension slips from Dean’s body and he makes an uncategorizable, sleepy noise, and then goes quiet. Sam stays where he is for a few more minutes, gently massaging his brother’s neck until he’s certain that Dean is asleep, and then straightens and turns to face their father.

While Sam was taking care of his brother, Dad moved to sit in one of the chairs at the table, and now he has one elbow propped on the tabletop as he leans his head in his hand. He’s watching just like Sam knew he was, but there isn’t any suspicion on his face. Looks like Dean’s current emotional state has gained them a little bit of leeway.

“Tell me what?” Dad asks as Sam lowers himself into the seat across the table.

Well, no one ever accused John Winchester of being hard of hearing.

Sam would have liked a few more hours to figure out how to break the news gently, but Dad’s like a fisher cat when it comes to secrets. Now that he knows that there’s information to be had, he’s going to sink his teeth into Sam and he isn’t going to let go until he gets what he wants. Sam’s hackles raise instinctively at their father’s authoritative attitude, but he’s too exhausted to make something of it. Besides, this is one secret he definitely doesn’t want to carry.

Keeping his expression neutral, he pulls Dean’s Colt out from the small of his back and lays it between them on the table.

Dad looks at the gun blankly and then comprehension flickers in his good eye and his breath catches. “He was ...” He trails off, unable to say it. Sam can tell that he doesn’t really want to be thinking it either.

“He was close.”

“Jesus,” Dad breathes, and wipes his mouth with one hand. He shuts his eye briefly, forehead creasing, and then nods. “Okay, tell me everything.”

Sam tells him most of it.

He leaves out everything about his new, tenuous relationship with his brother, of course, and he tries to soften anything that smacks of his own, burning resentment toward their father, skims over the fight in the bar, but otherwise he’s as blunt as he can be. He tells Dad everything he knows about the rape itself, assembling the fragmented pieces that he pulled from his unwilling brother over the past few months into a horrible whole. He tells Dad about Claire and Emma, and then he pulls up the police file (complete with pictures taken at the hospital that he was careful not to let Dean see) and lets their father read through it.

“He’s dead,” Dad says when he gets there, and Sam hears his own frustrated rage echoed in their father’s voice.

“Yeah.”

Dad’s jaw clenches and he reads on for several more minutes, silently. Then, finally, he pushes the laptop away and sits back in his chair. His gaze slides past Sam to Dean, who has contorted himself into one of those impossibly uncomfortable looking positions that he’s so fond of. Some of the
comforter is bunched beneath his right arm and he has his nose buried in it, like he’s smelling it. Sam flushes as he realizes that that’s exactly what his brother is doing because that’s their comforter, has Sam’s scent all over it, and God, all he wants to do is go over there and slip into the comforter’s place where he belongs—let Dean wrap close around him the way his brother clearly wants to.

“How did he find out Dean’s name?” Dad asks.

“I don’t know,” Sam answers, tearing his own eyes away from his brother and turning around again to face their father.

“Did you talk to his next of kin?” Dad’s voice is detached, and Sam is struck by a hundred different memories, each one earmarked by that very same, businesslike tone.

Dad. Dad with the scent of a fresh hunt in his nose. Dad bulldozing over anything and everything between him and this week’s creature feature.

Dad’s trying to turn Dean into a case.

Sam’s anger, which was banked by the shock that ended their earlier confrontation, rekindles. His voice is sharp when he says, “What the fuck does it matter? It isn’t going to change anything. Dean still got raped. He’s still hurt. Talking to Hanson’s sister isn’t going to fix him.”

Dad frowns, and Sam can see him laboriously trying to break through his hunter mindset so that he can follow Sam’s logic. Finally, he grunts, “I never said it would fix him. But this—it doesn’t strike you as odd, Hanson dying right before the police brought him in for questioning?”

“No,” Sam says flatly. “Because that’s how Dean’s luck runs. He gets screwed and then he gets screwed over.”

Dad’s frown deepens as he leans toward Sam across the table. “Your brother gets attacked, and you’re going to just chalk it up to bad luck? Just like that?”

“No, I’m gonna chalk it up to his father not giving enough of a damn about him to make sure he values himself enough to stay safe.” Dad flushes with hurt and anger and Sam forces himself to temper the accusation by adding, “And to his brother running off and leaving him alone. We did this to him, Dad—you and me—and we can’t just pass the blame off onto something supernatural because last time I checked, ghouls don’t rape people. Barghests and wendigos and black dogs don’t rape people. People rape people. There’s no case. Stop looking for one.”

Dad stares at him for a long moment, and Sam is sure that the man is going to argue. Part of him wants Dad to argue—the same part that believes that there’s more at work here than plain bad luck. There’s the way that Hanson knew Dean’s name, for one, and then there’s the sheer savagery of the attack itself. How Hanson could have injured Dean so badly when he was already stretched wide by the film shoot, Sam still doesn’t know.

And then there’s ... there’s that indefinable unease that he wakes with sometimes, when his dreams have been particularly bad. The unease that makes him think of other dreams he’s had—of Jess, of Jenny, of Max. His nightmares these days don’t taste quite the same—don’t leave his head pounding for hours afterwards the way the premonitions do—but there’s a chilled pit in his stomach that wants to connect them anyway. If only he could remember what they’re about, instead of being left with no more than a vague, sullied impression.

He doesn’t even know why he’s fighting Dad so strenuously on this—it would make sense to check, at the very least, except ... Except that Sam doesn’t want there to be anything more to this. He very
nearly hasn’t been able to handle this much. Dean is coming apart at the seams faster than Sam can stitch him up and Sam himself has been sliding into the kind of mindless fury that’s going to get someone killed sooner or later and neither one of them can take much more. One more stick and the camel, the caravan, and the whole fucking desert is gonna collapse beneath the weight.

The police have evidence that Hanson raped Dean. They have solid, irrefutable proof. Sam believes that Hanson is their man.

If there’s any more to it than that, then let it rest. Not—not forever, just until Dean has grown strong enough to bear the weight. Just long enough for Sam to catch his goddamned breath.

He opens his mouth to offer the compromise—give it a few months, give Dean some time to recover before we stir this up any more—but their father beats him to it.

“You’re right, Sammy,” Dad says. “I’ve just been so caught up in chasing down the damned demon. It’s got me jumping at shadows.”

Something stirs deep inside of Sam and suddenly he’s less sure than ever. He wishes he could backtrack and take back his objection—stupid, it’s so fucking stupid to wait when Sam wants his hands on anyone who had anything to do with Dean’s defilement yesterday—but instead he hears himself ask, “Is that where you’ve been?”

Dad hesitates, good eye turning toward Dean again. “I’d rather wait and tell you both at once.”

Some of Sam’s instinctual unease falls away before the rush of protective concern that fills him at that announcement. “Dean doesn’t need—”

“This is exactly what your brother needs,” Dad disagrees before Sam can finish. “It’ll get his mind off things for a while.”

“Get his—he was raped, Dad!” Sam shouts, anger surging bright and hot to the front of his mind. Behind him, Dean makes a soft, protesting noise, and Sam forces himself to lower his voice as he continues, “That isn’t going to go away just because you wave a hunt in front of his nose!”

“What do you want him to do, Sammy?” Dad shoots back. “Sit around and stew on it some more? You want to give him more time to think up reasons to reach for a gun? Or do you want to give him a reason to live? A purpose?”

As much as Sam hates to admit it, Dad’s right.

Sam has been so busy trying to figure out how to fix his brother that he lost sight of the single most defining factor in Dean’s life.

Hunting isn’t a job for Dean: it’s an identity. An identity that Sam has steadily been pushing them away from while he chases after his brother’s pain and repeatedly drags it out into the open.

And Dean does need that. He needs to lance the wound every once in a while so that it won’t fester. But he’s clearly been unraveling over the past few days, right underneath Sam’s nose, and Sam thinks that Dad is right about why Dean came so close to ending things. Dad finding out may have been bad—was certainly the primary trigger—but Sam laid the groundwork for that breakdown by focusing his brother so completely on his pain until it was the only thing Dean could see: terrible and all-consuming.

Dean needs to remember that there’s more for him out there. He needs to remember why life is worth living. He needs, most of all, to be reminded of the depths of his own strength.
Pushing him into a hunt would never have occurred to Sam, whose relationship with that bloody world is complicated at best, but now that Dad has brought it up, Sam has to acknowledge that his brother always loved hunting in a way he never did. Not even Dad approaches the job with such obvious pleasure—it’s an obligation for him, a sacred duty.

Dean comes alive when he hunts. He gets off on it. When he hunts, Dean is—he’s—he’s fucking breathtaking, is what he is.

“I’m not saying we ignore it,” Dad continues more softly. “But he needs something else to focus on for a while.”

“You’re right,” Sam says. It hurts his pride more than he’d like to make that concession, but he manages it for his brother’s sake.

Dad looks surprised by his rapid agreement, but he doesn’t say anything and there’s none of the smugness Sam was dreading.

After a moment, Sam clears his throat and asks, “So, does this mean you’re sticking around for a while?”

Dad purses his split lips and then nods. “If that’s okay,” he says, voice cautious. “I want to be here for Dean, but I—you and me being at each other’s throats the whole time is only going to upset him more.”

It isn’t anything but the truth. Sam isn’t sure there’s a whole lot they can do about that, but he supposes that he owes it to his brother to try.

“I’ll try to control myself if you do,” he offers.

The corner of Dad’s mouth twitches wryly and he extends his hand over the table. “Deal.”

As Sam takes their father’s hand, he notices the way that his own hand is no longer swallowed up, notes how similar their grips are: almost identical. It makes him look a little more carefully at their father’s face. He’s searching for signs of himself there, but instead he catches a hint of something else—something dark and doubting and searching.

For a moment, Sam’s almost positive that Dad is looking at him like a potential threat.

Then the corner of their father’s mouth inches up and he says, “You gonna shake on it, boy, or are we gonna have to arm wrestle?”

Sam’s mouth twitches in return and he tightens his grip. “Like you could take me,” he jokes, giving Dad’s hand a firm pump before letting go.

Dad’s gripping his fingers again before he can go anywhere, and the tentative smile on the man’s face has become a grin. “Oh, now you’re in for it. Best two out of three.”

If it feels a little like he’s assessing Sam’s strength during the impromptu contest that follows, Sam’s too busy enjoying the quiet, stress free moment to care.
Chapter 26

Sam makes sure that he’s the first thing Dean sees when he finally opens his eyes again three hours later. He’s lying inches from his brother, close enough to touch if Dean looks like he needs the contact, if he looks distressed. But Dean’s sleep was mostly deep and, as far as Sam can tell, completely dreamless, and he wakes with little fuss, blinking muzzily at Sam a couple of times before closing his eyes again.

“How long you been watching me?” he mumbles, words slurring together with the lingering clumsiness of sleep.

*Always,* Sam thinks, but he’s pretty sure that isn’t what his brother meant, so he says, “Couple of hours.”

“Stalker,” Dean mutters. “Next thing you know, you’re gonna be tattooing my name on your ass and sniffing my underwear. Such a perv.”

Sam huffs out a soft laugh at the taunt—thoughtlessly, but he would have done it deliberately if he’d known it would bring such a contented twitch of his brother’s lips. Without pausing to think about it, Sam puts a hand on his brother’s cheek and shifts forward.

Dean’s mouth opens for him easily, and his lips are pliant beneath Sam’s. It’s just a brief kiss—nothing more than a taste, really—but Sam’s heart is already pounding when he eases back and opens his eyes again.

Dean is watching him with an indefinable expression—there’s sorrow there, yes, and that shadowed pain that never quite leaves Dean’s gaze these days, but there’s something else as well. Something new that Sam hasn’t seen cast in his direction before. Something tremulous and warm that is doing funny things to Sam’s chest and stomach.

“Where’s Dad?” Dean asks after a moment.

“He took the room next door. You want me to get him?”

It’s a rhetorical question—partly because Sam’s sure his brother is going to want to talk to Dad, partly because he promised he’d get the man the moment Dean woke up—and Sam starts to move without waiting for an answer. He halts, surprised, when Dean grabs his wrist.

“What?” he asks, propping himself up on one elbow and looking down at his brother.

Dean’s tongue eases out to lick across his lower lip. There’s a certain self-awareness to the motion that tells Sam it’s deliberate and, with a sudden jolt, he understands what the new emotion in his brother’s eyes is.

Arousal.

“Are you—” he starts, but the ‘sure’ is lost in his sharp inhalation as Dean draws his hand down to his crotch and presses.

Dean kicked the comforter off about an hour into his nap, so there’s nothing between Sam’s hand and his brother’s dick but a stiff layer of denim. Dean isn’t fully hard—he isn’t even *mostly* hard—but he isn’t soft either.
Sam’s exhalation is shaky as he adjusts his hand to cup his brother more firmly and rubs him through his jeans. Dean pushes up into the pressure, his own breathing labored, and his grip slacks on Sam’s wrist. He isn’t meeting Sam’s eyes anymore, gaze fastened on an unimportant spot on Sam’s collarbone, but he isn’t trying to hide anything. From the flush creeping across his cheeks and reddening the tips of his ears—from the way he’s rocking his hips forward in time with Sam’s careful strokes—Sam can tell that his brother’s enjoying himself. He’s enjoying this.

An image of Dean writhing between the restraining weights of two bodies intrudes, followed by the alcohol-blurred memory of Dean rocking down helplessly against Sam, and Sam pushes them both away. The image that replaces those first troubling flashes—Dean sitting on the edge of the Starlite Motel’s empty pool, Colt in hand and sunlight on his shoulders—is the one that makes Sam falter. Not now, he thinks, fighting back the worry and guilt and concern that rise with the memory. It’s a surprisingly difficult task, even with Dean so obviously willing in front of him. Sam is nothing if not stubborn, though, and he manages it, relaxing back into the moment as he slides his hand a little lower to push against Dean’s balls as well.

He watches, entranced, as Dean’s eyes slip shut and his head tilts back. Watches the clench of his brother’s jaw and flutter of his lashes. Watches Dean’s lips part around each labored breath. Watches the surprised pleasure that ripples across his brother’s face like wind across a mountain lake.

The sound of their breathing is too loud in the quiet room, too intense, and suddenly Sam is desperate to break the silence, to make this feel less crucial to both of them than it actually is. His voice comes out in a dry rasp.

“Is that good?”

“’S good,” Dean agrees, and then his whole body seems to lengthen as he rolls his hips forward into Sam’s hand.

His upturned shoulder twitches with the strain of the stretch in a way that reminds Sam of just how tightly his brother was holding himself before. Although he can’t see Dean’s skin through the layers of cotton and flannel, he can still read the lingering stiffness of overworked muscles in his brother’s posture. Giving the half-hard bulge of Dean’s cock one final squeeze, Sam pulls his hand away and sits up.

Dean immediately grunts, annoyed, and opens his eyes. “Dude—”

“I’m not stopping,” Sam tells him, voice coming out muffled as he pulls his shirt over his head. “I’m just—let me try this my way?”

Dean can’t seem to figure out where to look as Sam tosses his shirt on the floor. He seems to be trying to meet Sam’s eyes, but Sam’s chest and stomach are apparently more than a little distracting because Dean’s gaze keeps getting caught up there instead. Even in the midst of everything else, Sam can’t help feeling a tiny flare of pride. He’s worked his ass off to overcome the string bean blueprints encoded into his DNA, and this is the first time Dean has given any hint he recognizes the extra bulk. The faint, sexual twist to the revelation is just a bonus.

If Sam were a little more confident, this is when he’d make a joke at his brother’s expense—trot out one of the lines he’s heard Dean use a hundred times over the years, something along the lines of ‘See something you like, baby?’

But he isn’t confident, and Dean is starting to look flustered, and Sam can feel the moment slipping away from them.
Then Dean clears his throat and asks, “Your way doesn’t involve a sheep or a goat or anything, does it?”

“Ha ha,” Sam says dryly, but his chest feels lighter than it has all week.

Despite those light, over-the-jeans caresses, he wasn’t sure he was reading Dean right until now, until his brother is looking up at him and teasing him with that fond warmth in his eyes. As if that weren’t enough, Dean turns over so that he can prop himself up with both elbows. The new sprawl of his legs makes the line of his half-hard cock even more obvious than before. When he sees the direction of Sam’s gaze, he smirks.

Dean wants this. He actually, honest to God wants Sam touching him.

“Take off your clothes,” Sam says, the words made abrupt by his eagerness. Without waiting for his brother to comply, he slides off the bed and hurries over to his bag.

Sam has been rummaging through it for a couple of minutes—never can find anything when he wants to—when he realizes that there isn’t any noise coming from the bed behind him. Pausing in his search, he turns around to find Dean still fully clothed. His brother is sitting up now, leaning against the headboard as he frowns down at his lap.

“Dean?” Sam calls. The butterflies in his stomach have become snakes again, and his skin is cold. God, how could he have fucked this up so damned fast?

“How, uh, how naked are we talking here?” Dean asks. As Sam tries to figure out what’s going on in his beautiful, damaged brother’s head, Dean looks up and adds, “I mean, I’m not trying to be a dick here, I just. I’ve never. You know, we haven’t. Uh, we haven’t done the whole naked thing before.”

It’s literally the last thing Sam was expecting to hear.

“What are you talking about?” he asks, perplexed. “I’ve seen you naked tons of times, dude.”

“Not like this. Not—” Dean’s throat works and drops his eyes. “It’s different.”

_Different_, Sam thinks. There’s a bitter, resentful taste in his mouth and an ache in his chest. Things _are_ different these days. Hanson made them different.

“I was gonna give you a massage,” he says, trying to keep his voice light. “If you’re up for that.”

“Really?” Dean asks. Anxiety lingers in his eyes as he looks at Sam, but his expression has perked up a little.

“Really. It’d be easier if you took at least the flannel off, but if you want, you can leave everything on.”

“No, I can—that’s fine,” Dean agrees, already moving. Sam watches his brother shrug out of his outer shirt and then turns back to his bag.

Despite Dean’s acquiescence, the bitter taste in Sam’s mouth has thickened. His stomach is queasy from the doubts and recriminations tumbling around in his head. He’s pushing Dean too fast—shouldn’t be touching him at all, no matter what Dean thinks he wants—but he isn’t strong enough to say no. Not after he just came so close to losing his brother for good. He needs to feel Dean—needs to get his hands on his brother and reassure himself that Dean is here, that he’s going to be okay.
He finds what he was looking for in one of the side pockets and turns around in time to see Dean’s pants join both of his shirts on the floor. The unexpected sight kicks Sam low and hard in the gut, shocking him into stillness. His eyes alone continue to move, flicking up and down his brother’s body in restless wonder.

Strong, slightly bowed legs leading to slender hips and flat stomach and broad chest and shoulders. Pale skin everywhere, lightly flecked with freckles and the white, puckered lines of old wounds. Faint, dark trail of hair running down from Dean’s navel to disappear beneath the low waistband of the boxers that are the only thing standing between Sam and a complete and utter system failure.

Sam has seen more of his brother than this countless times before—growing up on the road didn’t leave a whole lot of room for modesty. He saw Dean just like this a few nights ago, when Dean held up the covers so that Sam could slide into bed. But that was barely a glimpse in a darkened room. That was casual on Dean’s part, almost platonic.

Dean was right. This is different.

Beneath the scrutiny, Dean shifts in an abortive attempt to cover himself up and then closes his hand around his thigh and forces himself to sit still. His whole body seems to be flushing, and his eyes are locked on the bedspread, and Sam is seconds away from calling the whole thing off and screw his libido, when he realizes that his brother isn’t upset. That isn’t fear he’s reading in his brother’s posture. Those aren’t old memories making Dean swallow and duck his head.

Dean isn’t anxious. He’s shy.

Sam’s eyes are drifting again—he can’t help himself—and Dean seems to feel the gaze moving across his skin. He shivers, muscles flexing and bunching. His throat arches as he turns his face away, graceful and lovely. After a torturous, silent moment where Sam is seriously considering falling to his knees, his brother hauls in a breath and looks back again.

There’s a hint of Dean’s old bravado in his eyes—that reckless facade he wears whenever he’s feeling out of his element—and as he catches Sam’s gaze with his own, his jaw firms and his chin lifts. Sam’s heart beats out an alarming tattoo against his ribcage—he can’t handle this, can’t handle Dean sitting there mostly naked and looking at him with such steady challenge.

Where the hell did he ever get the idea he was good enough for his brother?

Then Dean’s eyes drop to Sam’s hand. “Wow,” he deadpans. “You sure know how to romance a guy.”

Sam glances down at the container of Icy Hot and blushes. It seemed like a good idea a second ago, but now he’s really wishing that he hadn’t bothered. He hasn’t felt like this much of a jackass since he spent his savings fixing the apartment’s plumbing and had to take Jess out to a birthday dinner at Burger King. Jess deserved better then and Dean deserves better now, but all Sam has to offer is this old container of pungent medication.

He needs it, Sam reminds himself. It helps that he can see how sore and tight Dean’s muscles are, now that they’ve been laid bare. Sam’s good with massages, but he isn’t a professional and he’s going to need all the help he can get if he wants to do anything for his brother. He can always pick up some real massage oil to use next time—preferably something edible so that he won’t have to resist the inevitable urge to taste once he has Dean shining and slick and loose underneath him.

“Lay down and roll over,” he says, moving back toward the bed.
“What’s the magic word?”

Dean is hiding again, burying nerves beneath humor. Sam should be used to it—Dean’s been doing this his whole life—but for some reason it stops him dead. After chasing the source of his discomfort down for a couple of heartbeats, he finds it in a memory of Stanford.

Last year, Jess went to Cancun for spring break and returned with the crazy idea that she had to lose weight. Since Sam’s all but helpless when it comes to feeding himself, that meant that he was stuck eating her fat free cottage cheese and yogurt and salad dressing and potato chips. It’s the milk he’s remembering now, though: the milk and how it tasted like crap until he got used to it. And how goddamned strange it tasted when Jess got over her momentary insanity two months later and switched back to whole.

Dean’s behavior is striking him as odd for the same reason that first glass of whole milk tasted scummy and wrong. His brother has been defenseless since the cabin—since Sam’s post-hypnotic command that he face his emotions instead of hiding from them. But that order is finally wearing off (or maybe he’s getting better, maybe he’s healing) and Sam is going to feel off balance until he gets used to Dean’s normal coping methods again.

In some ways, he’s relieved—Dean needs his defenses, as that night in the bar proved, and he never meant to change his brother so fundamentally with the command in the first place. But he’s also more than a little alarmed, especially after the events of this morning.

Now more than ever, Sam needs to know where Dean is emotionally. He needs Dean to be honest with him, doesn’t have the time or the energy to waste cutting through the bullshit to get at the pain beneath. Fuck, he’s going to have to watch more closely than ever to make sure Dean isn’t backsliding.

His brother seems mostly okay right now, though, and Sam isn’t going to ruin the present by worrying about the future, so he shakes himself and says, “Dude, I’m offering to give you a free massage. You should be kissing my ass.”

“You first, bitch,” Dean responds immediately, rolling over and shaking his butt. It’s probably supposed to look silly—Dean going for a laugh—but as far as Sam is concerned it’s impossible for his brother to look like an idiot when sex is involved. He forces out a laugh anyway, and if it sounds a little strained, then Dean is lucky he isn’t dropping the Icy Hot and climbing on the bed and yanking those ragged boxers down and licking his brother open and slick.

Sam’s dick wasn’t exactly limp before Dean’s little display, but if he straddles his brother now his erection is going to be really fucking noticeable. He was already uncertain about the wisdom of putting Dean in that position, considering Dean’s past and how agitated he gets when he’s even the least bit restrained; now it seems about as smart a move as locking a claustrophobic inside a coffin. On the other hand, trying to give a deep tissue massage from the side is awkward as hell, and Dean... Dean’s going to feel insulted if Sam doesn’t at least give this a try.

Stupid Winchester pride.

As Sam puts one knee on the bed, Dean twists his head around and peers doubtfully at him. “You’re gonna get that crap all over yourself,” he points out.

For a couple of seconds, Sam isn’t sure what his brother is talking about.

Then Dean rolls his eyes and prods, “The Icy Hot?”
Oh. Sam blinks down at the container in his hand, uncertain.

Snorting, Dean sits up and reaches out and, before Sam has really figured out what’s going on, his brother’s hands are on the waistband of his jeans. Dean was joking a second ago, but he’s deathly serious now, fingers skirting in from Sam’s hips to meet at the fastening.

Which is about the time Sam’s brain catches up with current events and he shoots a hand out, clamping down on Dean’s right wrist.

“I’ve gotten worse things than Icy Hot on my jeans before,” he says.

They’re close enough for Sam to draw in his brother’s spent air with every breath, close enough for him to count the freckles on Dean’s nose or the yellow flecks (not light like the sun, but rich and deep, like a lion’s pelt) in his vivid green irises. He’s close enough to see his brother’s pupils flare as Dean tries to focus on his face, and then Dean’s eyelids lower as he drops his eyes. His hands are trembling against Sam’s bare stomach, and anxiety is pouring off him and chilling the air.

“Dean,” Sam starts softly, but before he can finish Dean says, in a breathy, nervous rush, “Yeah well, I know how you hate to do laundry.”

“I don’t mind,” Sam insists, unable to stop himself from rubbing his thumb against his brother’s pulse. He isn’t exactly talking about the laundry, and he can tell from Dean’s prolonged silence that his brother understands that, but Dean still isn’t moving away. Finally, Dean swallows and nods with a hint of his old determination.

“Yeah, well, maybe I do.”

His wrist twists suddenly in Sam’s grip as he fumbles for the top button, and Sam reflexively tightens up, stilling him again.

“Dean.”

“You’re not going to hurt me, Sam.” It isn’t a question, but the stiff posture of Dean’s shoulders indicates that he’s waiting for an answer anyway.

The statement is debatable, considering their history—seems like all Sam ever does is hurt his brother, and if Dean has somehow overlooked that fact then Sam sure as hell hasn’t. Neither has Dad, judging from his earlier words. Some of them were empty barbs fashioned and hurled out of anger, but some of them (where were you, abandoned him, damned fine hunter before you got your hands on him) hit a little too close to home to be anything but true.

If Sam really loved Dean the way he claims, he’d leave. Dad’s here now, he’d take care of Dean, make sure he gets the treatment he needs.

“Sammy?” It’s too soft to be a whisper: a timid word riding his brother’s breath. Sam’s surprised he even heard it over the pounding of his heart.

“No,” Sam agrees, voice choked and low with how much he hates himself for doing this, for not being strong enough. “No, I’m not going to hurt you.”

Dean’s shoulders sag with relief at the promise (which Sam has already broken, he’s broken it a hundred times over). “Okay, then,” he breathes, and reaches for the button again.

Sam can’t bring himself to release his brother’s wrist, but his grip has loosened involuntarily and
Dean is able to thumb the top button loose and pull the zipper down. As the pressure of the denim eases off of his erection, Sam bites the inside of his cheek to keep from groaning and holds himself painfully still. He can’t control his cock, though, and at an accidental brush of his brother’s knuckle it twitches violently.

Dean doesn’t jerk away, but his full-bodied flinch is bad enough and Sam’s throat is aching as he releases his brother’s wrist.

“I, uh, I think you can get the rest for yourself,” Dean says as he moves away.

Torn between self-hatred at his inability to let his brother go the way he should and frustration that this isn’t ending with Dean’s hand wrapped around him, or Dean’s mouth sucking him off, or Dean’s ass clenching tight and warm against him, Sam pushes back off the bed with his knee.

He doesn’t know how he can even be thinking about sex right now, how he can be that callous in the face of Dean’s obvious nerves. But Dean’s—fuck, no matter how he came by it, Dean’s shy vulnerability is pushing buttons Sam never knew he had. He wants to protect, yes, and cherish, but he also wants to claim—he wants to mark so that there aren’t any more mistakes in the future, so that everyone can look at Dean and see that he’s off limits, that he’s already fucking owned.

The impulse leaves him feeling so guilty and wretched that his erection is wilting. All of the aroused heat that was there moments ago has gone cold and damp. Sam would like nothing more than to back up thirty minutes and stop this whole thing before it gets started, but it’s a little late for that. He considers putting a halt to it anyway—Dean will be royally pissed, but he’ll get over it—and then looks at his brother.

Dean is lying on his stomach again, chin resting on the pillow he has bunched up between his arms. He’s going for nonchalant, but it’s coming across as skittish, and why the hell is he even agreeing to try this?

The answer comes a second later, honest and stinging.

Dean is doing this to prove to himself that he can. This whole scenario is about comfort from Sam’s point of view, but Dean is looking at it like a test. Sam doesn’t know what the penalty for failing is in his brother’s head, but it can’t be anything good.

You can do this, he tells himself, tightening his grip on the Icy Hot. Dean wants you to do this.

Getting his jeans off is still terrifying as hell.

Slowly, Sam gets back on the bed and eases one leg over his brother’s body. And freezes.

Objectively, he understands that they aren’t going to get anywhere until he drops down, but he can’t quite get the command through to his muscles. It keeps getting caught in a net of imaginings that feel like memories: Dean facedown on the floor, blood slicking one side of his face and getting in his eyes; Dean dazed and uncomprehending as his pants are yanked down and—

“Better not be charging by the hour, dude,” Dean says, jarring Sam from his thoughts. He looks down at the tense lines of his brother’s back, and his own broad thighs, and the bulge of his cock, which is still wilted from all of the apprehension tumbling around inside of him, and firms his jaw. This time, when Sam tells himself to sit down, the message gets through.

As expected, Dean’s breathing goes ragged as he feels Sam’s weight across his ass and upper thighs. He grips the pillow with white-knuckled hands, and the muscles in his back cord and twitch violently enough that Sam’s back is aching in sympathy.
All he wants to do is lift up again, but that isn’t going to accomplish anything in the long run, and so he forces himself to stay where he is. Reaching out, he rests a hand on his brother’s side and says, “Hey, man, it’s okay. It’s just me. I’m not going to hurt you, remember?”

“Sam?” Dean breathes, and he sounds confused enough that Sam suspects that his brother is halfway to a flashback.

“One and only,” he answers, trying to keep his voice light. “You ready for the best massage of your life? Swear to God, dude, you’re gonna be boneless when I’m done. Gonna be worshipping my hands.”

Relief washes through Sam, cool and refreshing, and he manages something resembling a real smile. “Hey, it’s a fact of life. I’m just that awesome.”

Dean is silent long enough that Sam is beginning to think that joking was the wrong way to go, but then he snorts weakly and mutters, “You wish.”

“Jerk,” Sam responds automatically, and then adds, “Terms?”

“Laundry duty for a month.”

It feels sort of like hustling a townie at pool, but Dean is right: Sam doesn’t really like doing laundry. Besides, much as he complains about the chore, Dean is just plain better at it. Everything comes out feeling softer and smelling cleaner when it’s his turn.

“You’re on,” Sam agrees, uncapping the Icy Hot and releasing the sudden, eyewatering scent of medicated mint.

Dean shifts a little beneath him, adjusting his grip on the pillow, and then mutters, “I’m gonna smell like a fucking peppermint patty.”

Scooping out two fingerfulls of white paste, Sam smears it over his hands. “Could be worse: I could be using strawberry-scented oil.”

“Do and you die,” Dean threatens, and then tenses even more as Sam’s hands drop down onto his shoulders. “Fuck.”

“Just try and relax.”

“I am relaxed,” Dean shoots back, like Sam can’t feel the tension vibrating beneath his hands as he starts to knead.

Sam doesn’t argue with his brother, though. Instead, he concentrates on feeling for the pressure points he knows will bring relief while taking care to soothe the Icy Hot into Dean’s skin. At first, his brother’s back is like silk-sheathed rock beneath his hands: all stubborn strength and stiffness. Gradually, though, as Sam settles in to work and Dean gets used to his weight, he starts to relax.

Now that Dean isn’t actively tensing, it’s easier to find the knots. Sam hones in on the first one and starts kneading. The muscle comes loose all at once, like a cut cord, and Dean’s entire back ripples with the release.

“What the fuck?” he swears, trying to tense again.
Sam keeps his fingers moving, forestalling the urge by pressing just right on a second knot and releasing that one as well. Dean swears a second time, shivering.

“I know it feels weird, but you’re gonna have to go with me on this, okay?” Sam tells him, regooping his hands before seeking out knot number three.

“That fucking hurts, asshole,” Dean complains, but he isn’t fighting to get away and he isn’t telling Sam to stop.

“You’ve got a lot of knots,” Sam explains, digging both thumbs into a stubborn lump and rubbing. “Once I loosen them up, you should start feeling better.”

Dean gasps as the lump shudders and eases out and then, through clenched teeth, says, “You sure you passed this class? You didn’t flunk out, right?”

“I passed,” Sam answers shortly. Between his efforts to work out all the damage Dean did to himself over the last couple of days and his brother’s verbal prods, the proximity of Dean’s ass to his cock isn’t a huge issue anymore. Neither is the guilt coiled in his chest.

Sam isn’t sure whether he’s more annoyed or more concerned, but he knows that he isn’t horny.

“Cause it feels like you flunked out,” Dean notes.

Definitely more annoyed.

“Jesus Christ, Dean, can you just shut up and let me work?” Sam demands, letting his exasperation color his voice.

“Just checking,” Dean grumbles, but he shuts up after that, only letting out the occasional grunt as Sam finds and releases another knot.

Sam counts sixteen in all between the nape of his brother’s neck and the small of his back, which is ridiculous, and then takes another scoop of Icy Hot and works his way back up. Some of Dean’s knots are playing hard to get and have reformed on him, but they loosen almost immediately the second time around and by his third pass his brother’s back is nice and lax. Sam shifts his rhythm, moving his hands in pleasurable rather than therapeutic rhythms, and this time the noise Dean makes is warm and slippery and loose.

Sam’s concern and annoyance both seep away as his hands move across his brother’s skin, leaving him with nothing to focus on except how soft Dean feels, how warm. The Icy Hot is covering up his brother’s scent, too sharp to be at all sexual, but Sam’s libido doesn’t seem to mind. He’s hardening again, slowly but surely: keeps wondering what it would feel like to lean down and drape himself over his brother. Keeps wondering what Dean would do right now if he slid their bodies together and bit a teasing love-bite into the sensitive skin just beneath Dean’s ear.

Clenching his jaw, Sam eases off of his brother. He reapplies another glop of the Icy Hot to his hands and then, carefully, encircles Dean’s right thigh. Dean stirs, head lifting as he tries to tense, and Sam moves one hand from his brother’s thigh to his back and strokes.

“Still me,” he reassures as he starts massaging the sturdy muscle beneath his fingers. “Gonna make you feel good, okay?”

“Mmph,” Dean manages, which could mean any number of things, but he isn’t trying to move any more and Sam thinks he can see a lazy smile on his brother’s half-hidden mouth. It’s as clear a green flag as Dean has given him lately and Sam feels justified in lifting his hand from his brother’s back
and returning his attention to his thigh.

There are more knots here, of course, and Dean’s leg twitches as Sam works them out, but he doesn’t protest. Sam works carefully as he moves his hands down one leg and up the other—he’s less practiced with these muscles, doesn’t want to fuck up and leave Dean aching—but eventually his brother is completely lax. When Sam casts a glance up Dean’s body to his face, his brother’s eyes are closed and his mouth is hanging open.

“How?” he tries, stroking a hand up and down his brother’s calf.

“Mm?”

“You awake, man?”

“Why’d you stop?”

Sam can’t help grinning at the thoughtless response, and his chest expands with warmth. He knew this was a good idea. “Want me to get your front?”

In answer, Dean flops over and lies there in an undignified sprawl.

Still smiling, Sam starts to reach for the Icy Hot again and then freezes, eyes caught on the bulge in his brother’s boxers. Before he’s had time to think it through, he reaches out and rests his hand over the bulge, marveling at the feel of his brother’s semi-hard cock through the worn fabric. Dean’s hips move at the touch, driving his cock more firmly against Sam’s hand, and he moans softly. When Sam glances at his brother’s face, Dean’s eyes are open, filled with lazy warmth.

“You gonna finish?” Dean asks, and he could mean any number of things except for the intent in his gaze. Except for the way he rolls up against Sam’s hand again in thoughtless demand.

Sam wants nothing more than to push Dean’s boxers down and jerk him off, but he’s pretty sure that the Icy Hot on his hands would make that a more extreme experience than he means it to be. Besides, there’s something so fragile in the air right now, and Dean’s cock, which is stuck in that half-hard state of staticy arousal, feels vulnerable beneath Sam’s palm. He isn’t sure his brother will be able to achieve anything more, even with Sam’s hands and mouth at his disposal. God, even this much, after months of nothing but panic and disinterest, is nothing short of a miracle.

Sam doesn’t want to push his brother into something he isn’t ready for, but he doesn’t want to shut Dean off either, not if he’s somehow capable of more. Opting for the middle ground, he straddles his brother again. Dean tenses as Sam’s weight drops down on him, but there’s no real panic in it this time, and the tension rolls right back out of him as Sam bears down with a careful pulse of his lower body.

Sam’s hard himself, leaking precome into his boxers, and the feel of Dean’s cock so close to his own is maddening. Arousal makes his vision blur and his pulse speed. Luckily, Sam doesn’t need to see in order to continue: doesn’t need to think once his hands are back in place on his brother’s chest.

It’s different than it was with Jess—easier, not having to dig through breast to get to the muscle beneath. It’s harder, too, because Dean is more responsive than Jess ever was. He shifts with each pass of Sam’s fingers, shudders when Sam’s thumb brushes against his nipple. He seems to have gotten used to the shock of release, and now, whenever Sam loosens a knot, Dean responds by letting out a moan and bucking up against him.

None of which is doing anything for Sam’s concentration or for his determination not to rip both of their boxers off and take Dean right now.
“Christ, you’re sensitive,” he breathes.

“S’not—fuck—not normal?” Dean wants to know. Bringing one of his hands up, he wraps it around Sam’s thigh and holds on.

“If everyone reacted this strongly to deep tissue massages, they’d charge a hell of a lot more for them,” Sam replies, digging his thumb into the muscle just below his brother’s left nipple.

Dean squirms, moaning with a helplessness that makes Sam’s cock jerk in his boxers. His eyes, which were half-lidded with pleasure, fly open. He looks dazed, looks decadent and fuckable, and Sam can’t help it anymore.

Dropping forward, he slides both arms around his brother and grips his ass, holding him close while rolling his own hips and grinding their cocks together. Dean makes another soft, whining noise, and Sam catches the sound in his own mouth before covering his brother’s lips and kissing him. Dean’s hand shifts from Sam’s leg to his side, clutching, and there’s no mistaking it for anything but desire, no mistaking the thrust of Dean’s tongue into his mouth as anything but hunger.

Sam kisses his brother back while thrusting down—pull of damp cotton across his cock, teasing brush of Dean’s half-erection—and then, driven by a deep-rooted, hungry impulse, pulls his mouth free. He isn’t so far gone as to forget that Dad is next door, that Dad is going to be seeing them within the hour, and it’s Dean’s collarbone that he latches onto and not his neck.

It’s debatable whether Dean understands what Sam’s after, but he tilts up for it anyway, twisting his head back into the pillow and pushing his chest up while Sam sucks and bites and does everything he can to ensure that the skin between his lips and teeth will be purple and sensitive for days. His brother’s hand finds Sam’s hair and grips and that’s it, Sam grinds down once more and comes, shaking, in his boxers.

The fire trembling through him should dampen now, but instead he feels as feverish as ever as he crawls backwards down his brother’s body. His orgasm is still rolling through him, his cock is twitching out its last few pathetic spurts, and they’re not done here. They’re not done until Dean feels this with him.

Adjusting his grip on Dean’s ass, Sam nuzzles against his brother’s boxers. Above him, Dean makes a wordless cry that cuts off as Sam bites down. Sam mouths frantically at his brother’s cock through the worn fabric, tasting cotton, and the faint, bitter transfer of his own climax, and a medicinal aftertaste that has to be from the Icy Hot. Dean’s thighs are trembling, and Sam would be concerned that it’s a sign of distress except for the way they’re parting, except for the way his brother’s legs are coming up to frame Sam’s body, except for the way Dean’s hands are gripping Sam’s hair and keeping him close while he thrusts up.

“Sam,” Dean pants. “Fuck, Sammy.”

He isn’t getting any harder, but that’s because there’s too much between them, it has to be, and Sam doesn’t hesitate before sitting up and yanking his brother’s boxers off. He’s back down where he needs to be a second later, before Dean can protest the absence, opening his mouth and swallowing down his brother’s cock.

Dean’s a big guy, but he’s only half-erect and it isn’t too difficult for Sam to fit everything into his mouth. He holds his brother there for a moment, giving himself a chance to savor the weight and taste, and then gives a soft moan and brings his tongue into play, licking slowly from root to tip.

Dean may not have been all that articulate before, but the noises he’s making now have lost any
pretense at coherence. His hands are in Sam’s hair again, tugging while Sam licks and sucks and uses every trick he knows to bring his brother off.

But Dean isn’t getting any harder—actually seems to be softening—and finally his hands fall away from Sam’s head. Sam knows what that means, but he shuts his eyes against the knowledge and keeps trying until Dean’s voice, strained but gentle, says, “It’s not happening, dude.”

No, Sam can do this. He can. He can fix this.

“Sam,” Dean says again, getting a hand in Sam’s hair again and pulling. “Give it up.”

Sam isn’t ready to give up yet, but he recognizes that he’ll probably keep trying until his jaw locks, and—more importantly—he recognizes that Dean needs him to stop. His face feels wet as he pulls off, and he realizes with a dull kind of surprise that he’s crying.

“C’mere,” Dean says, leaning down and pulling on his shoulder. Sam resists—he tries to, anyway—but that works about as well as it always does and he ends up stretched out next to his brother with Dean’s hand combing through his hair as Dean kisses him.

“You are so getting a tip,” Dean mumbles against his lips, and despite the crushing weight of failure, Sam laughs.

Twenty minutes later, he tosses his brother a quick smile and steps into a fresh pair of boxers. Now that Sam isn’t caught up in a tumult of emotion, he understands what a huge step it was for Dean to get hard at all: for Dean to enjoy something so sexual in nature, even briefly. His chest is as stupid as ever, of course, and it still aches with the knowledge that he couldn’t get his brother off, but the warm glow of pride is stronger.

Dean is fucking amazing.

As Sam leans over to pull his jeans back up, he’s startled by the sudden weight of his brother’s body draped over his. He staggers forward a few steps before catching himself and straightening. Dean slides his arms around Sam’s stomach and drops his head down onto his shoulder.

Um.

“Not that, uh, not that I don’t like this, but what the hell, Dean?”

“Mmm?” Dean says, nosing at the side of Sam’s face and kissing his jaw.

“You. You’re—this morning, you were—” Sam takes a breath and then makes himself say it. “—you were a couple of seconds away from blowing your brains out and now you’re ... not,” he finishes weakly.

Dean is still and silent, but Sam can sense the shift in his brother’s mood anyway. It’s subtle—a tension in Dean’s arms that wasn’t there before, a drop in the room’s ambient temperature, a shift in his brother’s breathing. Then Dean is pulling away.

Cursing himself for ruining the moment, Sam turns and catches his brother’s hand. Dean is looking down at the floor, expressionless. He doesn’t fight Sam’s grip.

“I’m just—I’m just trying to understand, all right?” Sam says.
Dean sighs. “I don’t know what to tell you, Sam. Sometimes, I—sometimes I feel fine.”

“And other times?” Sam prods.

Dean lifts his gaze, and the eyes he fixes Sam with are brutally honest. “Other times I wish I bled out before I got to the hospital.”

Dean is here now, he’s warm and safe and they just had sex—or as close as they could come, anyway—but Sam’s chest still goes agonizingly tight with panic. “You have to stay,” he blurts. “Promise me. Promise me you won’t try to hurt yourself again.”

Dean’s eyes cut to the side and he starts to pull away. “We’ve been over this.”

“Dean,” Sam says—just that, but it stops his brother cold.

“I already promised you, dude,” Dean tries, but the way that he isn’t looking at Sam is making Sam’s insides squirm. Is making him wonder in a more concrete way just how sincere Dean was when he made that promise.

“Do it again,” he demands. “And this time, I want you to mean it.”

“What the fuck does it matter?” Dean mutters. “You already got rid of all the weapons.”

Dean was awake and aware for the Impala’s disarming, but Sam is surprised by how quickly he noticed the missing weapons bag from their room. The accusation in his brother’s voice throws him, makes him want to apologize, but he manages to fight down the urge and ask, “Can you blame me?”

That gets him a scowl. “For treating me like a liar? Yeah, I think I can blame you for that.”

“Then tell me, Dean,” Sam presses, moving even closer. “Tell me that when you promised me you wouldn’t try anything again you meant it. Look me in the eye and tell me that and I’ll get everything back from Dad.”

Dean keeps glowering at the floor and Sam’s stomach plummets.

“You can’t, can you?”

Dean’s jaw tightens. “Sam—”

“No. No more bullshit. Either we’re in this together or we’re going out together, but you make a choice and you stick with it.” Part of Sam is horrified by his own words, but he’s too upset to stop himself. He can’t handle worrying about Dean’s safety on top of everything else. He just can’t.

“It’s not that simple,” Dean says after a moment.

“Make it that simple.”

Dean pulls free with a grimace, bringing his hand up to press against his scar. Sam wants to slap his brother’s hand back down again, but he’s already pushing hard enough without complicating matters further.

“Right now I’m fine,” Dean says as he moves away. “I can breathe, I can—I feel like I’m getting better.”

“You are,” Sam insists.
“But,” Dean continues, with a warning glance in Sam’s direction. “I can’t—I can’t make promises when I don’t know how I’m gonna feel tomorrow—or hell, in five minutes. Everything keeps shifting around on me, and I don’t—I can’t trust this feeling. What if it’s just an illusion, and I’m not—what if I can’t get better? I can’t go through life like this, man. I won’t.”

“And if you weren’t getting better, or if you were getting worse, I’d pull the trigger for you,” Sam says. He doesn’t add that he’d be one bullet behind his brother. If Dean doesn’t know that yet, he isn’t ever going to.

Dean’s watching him now, hand stilled at his temple. His expression is wary, but hope has begun to creep in at the edges.

“But you are getting better,” Sam continues. “And I get that you can’t see that clearly right now, but I can, and you have to trust me on that.”

“I do trust you,” Dean says as he finally lowers his hand.

“Then promise me.”

After a long, measuring look, Dean nods. “Okay.”

“And you have to tell me when you’re thinking about it.”

“Dude,” Dean protests, wrinkling his face in embarrassment.

“I know you hate talking about your feelings, but I think the fact that I found you with a loaded gun in your lap this morning entitles me to a little warning.”

The words are harsh—deliberately so—and Sam is thankful to see his brother flush as he nods. It’s probably not his best moment, using Dean’s tendency towards guilt against him, but if it’s going to keep his brother breathing then Sam doesn’t really care.

He watches Dean a moment longer, trying to decide whether there’s anything else he wants to add to the list while they’re having this discussion, and then turns away to retrieve his shirt. He can’t really do anything more short of putting his brother into a padded, suicide-proof room, and if they’re going to go hunting the way Dad wants to, that’s going to be a little difficult.

God, they’re going to have to give Dean a weapon—no way around it, he can’t go out unarmed and leaving him behind like a useless kid is going to do more to damage him than all of Sam’s fuck ups put together.

_Cross that bridge when you get to it_, Sam advises himself as he pulls his t-shirt on.

Dean is silent while Sam finds a clean overshirt, and then, when Sam starts to put his right arm in the sleeve, he asks, “Did you tell him?”

No need to ask ‘who’ or ‘what’.

“Yes,” Sam answers without pausing.

“Was he pissed?”

Sam’s beginning to wish he never questioned his brother’s mood in the first place. Dean’s happiness was out of place and discomforting, but it was preferable to the ache that his brother’s messed-up psyche is leaving inside of him now.
“Sam?”

“No, he wasn’t,” Sam says, turning around so that his brother can read the truth on his face. Of course, that means that Dean can read his distress as well, but Sam’s thinking that it might be good for Dean to see how concerned people are for him right now.

Predictably, his brother drops his eyes and shifts.

Sam fixes him with a steady gaze as he adds, “He’s worried about you. We both are.”

Dean’s hands curl into fists and then open again. Shutting his eyes, he whispers, “I hate this.”

Sam isn’t sure whether he’s reading his brother right, but he steps closer anyway. When he touches Dean’s shoulder, Dean moves into him without hesitation and, feeling more confident, Sam reaches up to stroke his brother’s hair.

“You’re getting better,” he says. Maybe Dean needs to hear that out loud more often. Maybe they both do. “We’re gonna get through this, man.”

“Sap,” Dean mutters, but Sam’s words have eased the tension that was beginning to reclaim his body.

Dropping his hand down from Dean’s hair to rub at his back, Sam says, “Dude, you’ve gotta stop tensing up. You’re gonna undo all my hard work.”

“Guess you’re just gonna have to put in overtime then, huh?” Dean says, and there’s more than a little of his old cheekiness in his voice. When he pulls back out of Sam’s arms, he’s smiling. Looks steadier than he has in a long time.

Sam’s going to get whiplash trying to keep up with his brother’s mood swings.

“We should probably go over to Dad’s room,” he suggests while the suggesting’s good. “He wanted to see us when you woke up, and it’s a little, uh, fragrant, over here.”

He isn’t talking about the Icy Hot, and Dean knows it, but his brother sniffs at his own shoulder and wrinkles his nose.

“Yes, that reminds me,” he says, “First chance we get, we’re stopping and getting you some real massage oil—unscented, I’m not using any of that frou-frou vanilla crap.”

Privately, Sam thinks his brother would enjoy something with a little kick to it—cinnamon, maybe—but he figures that there’ll be plenty of time later on to introduce Dean to the varied splendors of flavored oils.

“Okay.”

Dean eyes Sam like he isn’t sure whether to believe him or not and then, giving his head a shake, starts for the door. “I mean it, dude—I find anything scented in your bag, and I’m spiking your coffee with Ex-Lax.”
Dad must have been waiting for Sam’s knock because the man is opening the door almost before Sam has finished lowering his hand.

“Is he—” Dad starts, and then stops as he takes in Dean, standing close enough to Sam that their shoulders are bumping. For a few moments, their father is visibly confused, and Sam feels a stab of pity.

He’s never thought of Dad as an old man before, but their father has never worn his years so heavily. Now—whether because of their fight, or the shock of his eldest son’s rape, or Dean’s teetering emotional instability—those years are like a solid weight pressing down on his shoulders.

Dad has never seemed at such a loss before either. He always knew exactly what to do when Sam was growing up, knew what to say. Now he stands speechless in the doorway of his motel room. There’s grey at his temples, more streaking his beard. Sam wonders how long it’s going to take his father’s face to heal up.

“Sam said you wanted to talk,” Dean says finally, breaking the ice. It’s a little too belated to rescue the moment.

“Yeah,” Dad agrees, shaking himself. “Yeah, I—” He gives them both a second, considering look with his good eye and then nods. “Come on in,” he offers, stepping back.

Sam lets Dean go first and then has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing when Dad wrinkles his nose and asks, “Which one of you boys smells like an after dinner mint?”

“I pulled some muscles,” Dean replies without missing a beat. He’s in the middle of the room, turning in a slow circle as he examines the walls, and his obvious distraction gives the words the credence they need.

“What’d you do, use the whole jar?” Dad grumbles as he shuts the door behind Sam, but if Dean makes any response Sam doesn’t hear it. He’s too busy copying his brother’s earlier movement, taking in their father’s redecorating.

Pinning his research to the walls is one of Dad’s habits that Dean (thank God) never picked up. Sam guesses that if he asked, Dean would probably say that he likes to be able to shuffle his notes around until they’re in the right order. He wouldn’t mention the deeper reason—the one Sam sees on his brother’s face every time Dean looks at their father’s walls—but they both know the truth.

Dad’s version of wallpaper turns the closest thing Dean has ever had to a home into a war zone, and the relentless determination evident in each tack and pushpin leaves him, for all his admiration, feeling cold and a little sad.

Dad’s only been in here for a couple of hours, but that was more than enough time for him to settle in, and the ugly, duck-and-reeds wallpaper has all but disappeared beneath a sea of information—pages torn from a library book in haste, computer print outs, weather reports, obits, and ream after ream of Dad’s careful, precise handwriting. John Winchester’s notes, his thoughts and theories, spread across the walls in a pattern that makes sense in his own mind and nowhere else. Even Bobby, who always understood Dad better than anyone else, used to shake his head in confusion at the chaos.

Little as he likes the habit, Dean’s the only one who ever managed to crack the code.
Now, as Sam turns from the walls to meet his brother’s gaze, he can tell that Dean has already ferreted his way through the bewildering cipher. Dean’s eyes are wide. He looks shocked: winded. He also looks more like himself than he has in months, and although Sam would like to think that their recent activities in the other room are responsible for that, he knows that it’s this. It’s the hunt.

Apparently, Dad was right about what Dean needed.

As thrilled as Sam is to see his brother perking up like this, he can’t help but feel a tiny, bitter sting at the back of his throat.

“The demon?” Dean says, sounding both terrified and exhilarated. “You’re tracking the demon?”

Dad gives a grim nod of acknowledgement and then says, “Sit down, boys.”

Dean is already sitting on the bed that’s clear of Dad’s belongings by the time Sam realizes he isn’t moving. Instead, he’s staring at his father with his back straight and his mouth set in a stubborn, thin line.

“Sam,” Dad says, warning in his tone, and it’s so fucking stupid to be arguing over this—Sam knows that—but he can’t figure out how to make himself back down.

“Here we go,” Dean mutters wearily to his left, and the sound of his brother’s voice makes Sam start. Guilt floods in and drains the tension from his shoulders. It dampens the burning in his gut. He starts for the bed at the same time as Dad says, “Nevermind, you can stand if you want to. Just that this might take awhile.”

Dean is looking at both of them like they’ve each sprouted another head, or are possibly possessed. When he opens his mouth a second later and says, “Christo,” Sam isn’t all that surprised.

“Very funny,” he mutters, sitting down beside his brother. The mattress is in terrible condition, and the added weight slides them together, but he doesn’t try to move away and neither does Dean, who’s still looking shocked and slightly suspicious.

“I’m not kidding,” Dean says, glancing back and forth between them. “I’ve seen you two tear into each other over less than that before, so what gives?”

Sam isn’t doing anything wrong, but he feels caught out anyway. Rational or not, well intentioned or not, the bargain he struck with their father is going to feel like a slap in the face to his brother. Dean’s going to resent them both for this—for ‘babying’ him.

Sweating lightly, Sam searches for an answer that will make sense without hurting Dean and comes up blank. And they’ve already lost the moment to play the ‘what conspiracy, I don’t see any conspiracy’ card because both he and Dad have been silent far too long in the face of Dean’s suspicion. Besides, Sam’s pretty sure that ‘hand-caught-in-the-cookie-jar’ doesn’t even begin to describe the expression on his face.

They should have been ready for this, damn it! Should have had some kind of story in place because of course Dean was going to notice something was up—he’s been defusing confrontations between them ever since Sam was old enough to talk.

Then, out of nowhere, Dad says, “Sam and I talked. We’re putting our differences aside until the demon is dead.”

It’s possibly the one lie Dean would buy.
Sam can see the sympathy when Dean glances at him—the memory of Jess’ death in his brother’s eyes—but none of that softness seeps into Dean’s voice when he snorts, “We’ll see how long that lasts.” Leaning forward, he rests his forearms on his knees and returns his attention expectantly to Dad.

The position must be stretching Dean’s lower back, but there isn’t so much as a twitch of discomfort on his face, and Sam’s chest warms. Physical comfort seems like such a small thing in comparison to everything else that Dean’s dealing with, but these days Sam will take what he can get. It’s gratifying to see his brother so relaxed—to know that he was able to give Dean that much, at least.

“So,” Dean says, returning them to the matter at hand, “When you say ‘dead’, you mean ...”

With a grave expression, Dad pulls a gun out from the small of his back and holds it up so they can both get a good look. It’s the same gun he had before, Sam realizes: the same one Dad put into his truck’s weapons’ compartment before their fight. Sam didn’t take much notice of the weapon then—it wasn’t possible to see that clearly through the blur of his anger—but he’s rational enough now and the gun is old. An antique.

“Is that a Colt?” Dean asks, and Dad, still not speaking, steps forward.

When Sam realizes what their father intends to do, the ‘don’t’ rises hot and heavy in his throat. God, they just finished disarming Dean and Dad wants to give him another gun? The man was on board with the intervention a couple of hours ago—he took the weapons bag away without argument—and Sam doesn’t know where the hell their father’s common sense went.

He can’t get his protest out past the sudden, clenching fear filling his throat, but he must make some kind of noise because Dad glances at him as he holds the gun out, handle first, toward Dean. There’s a warning in their father’s good eye—somewhere between ‘don’t fuck this up, Sammy’ and ‘trust me, I know what I’m doing’.

Sam suspects that the man actually went a little senile while Dean was napping, but he keeps his mouth shut anyway. After all, they’re going to have to give Dean a weapon eventually. This way, they’ll both be within grabbing distance if something goes wrong.

That logic doesn’t make it any easier to watch his brother reach out and take what Dad is offering, though.

The transfer carries more weight than it should, even taking into account Sam’s reservations. He’s seen their father hand Dean dozens of guns. He’s seen Dad hand over plastic explosives, and machetes—and once, two delicate, fluted bottles filled with chemicals that, when combined, would eat their way through metal and flesh and bone.

Dad has given Dean the power of death time and again—he’s painted his eldest son’s hands as red as his own, left Dean’s fingertips dripping—but watching it happen has never left such a pit in Sam’s stomach before. It’s never left him so devastatingly conscious of the power in his brother’s hands.

Sam would like to blame the shift on Dean’s recent suicide attempt, but he’d be lying to himself. Because that’s the root of his concern, and of the nauseous twist in his stomach, but it isn’t responsible for the way his heart is beating. It isn’t responsible for the shivers rippling his skin.

No, this is something deeper and more instinctual. It’s been stirred up by the gun, relic though it seems, and now he’s being forced to look at his brother in an entirely different light.

Dean has always been a hero to Sam. He’s been the white knight and the gunslinger. But somehow
the violent side of those personas has always been buried beneath Dean’s jokes and his swagger and the fact that Sam knows him, that he’s the annoying older brother who once held Sam down in the backseat so he could burp in his face.

Now, for the first time, Sam looks at Dean and sees the weapon. Their father has forged his older brother into something both more and less than a soldier, something with a fierce, diamond core that can’t be shattered by any amount of violation or pain. Dean may be broken by everything he’s gone through, he may even be irrevocably damaged, but he’s still dangerous. He’s still a killer.

Sam has been so focused on his brother’s pain that he forgot Dean’s strength.

It’s hitting him again now, in the wake of his realization, and he’s left breathless as his brother strokes an assessing hand down the barrel. Breathless and, for some reason, a little afraid. Afraid of Dean, which is so ludicrous he doesn’t know what to do with the emotion.

“Does this thing even work?” Dean asks, lifting the Colt and sighting down the barrel.

“It’s got a hell of a kick, but yeah, it works.” Dad’s answer is paired with a slight smile, like there’s a story there, and his voice holds the same, quiet triumph it always does after a particularly difficult victory.

Dean looks up at the familiar tone, one eyebrow raised skeptically. As he shifts the look over to Sam, the skepticism deepens into a question. That look implies solidarity, implies the same us-against-the-world mentality that Sam has always longed for from his brother, and his fear falls away. With a slight lift of his shoulders, he signifies that Dean’s bet is as good as his regarding Dad’s sanity.

Because handing Dean a gun is stupid, but Dad’s acting like the piece of crap is their salvation instead of salvage, and that’s all sorts of crazy.

On the other hand, this is Dad. Sam doesn’t much care for it, but the same faith in the man’s competence that always fills Dean resides in his own chest as well. Whatever else their father may be, he’s always been one hell of a hunter.

Even reduced to only one working eye, Dad still manages to take them both in with the same, fond look as he relates, “Back in 1835, when Halley’s comet was overhead, the night those men died at the Alamo, they say Samuel Colt made a gun—a special gun. He made it for a hunter—a man like us, only on horseback. The story goes, he made thirteen bullets.”

Unlucky number thirteen, Sam thinks. But it’s also a powerful number. Talismanic. That odd, cornered feeling that formed in his stomach when Dad handed the gun to his brother strengthens and he tightens his grip on his thighs.

“This hunter used the gun a half dozen times before he disappeared,” Dad continues. “The gun along with him. Friend of mine found it about thirty years ago, and I ... inherited it last month.”

His mouth quirks with the same, secretive humor Sam has always associated with their father and then Dad soberes again as he announces, “They say this gun can kill anything.”

Dean frowns as he looks more carefully at the gun. “Kill anything, like supernatural anything?” he asks.

“Like the demon,” Sam puts in softly. He’s slightly surprised by the sound of his own voice, and then more surprised by the soft glow of pride that warms his chest when Dad nods at him. The feeling eases the irrational fear and allows Sam to relax a little.
“Yeah,” Dad agrees. “Like the demon.”

Sam doesn’t know what to say to that, and from the heavy silence that falls it seems his brother is equally clueless. As the quiet deepens between them, Sam loses the last, lingering threads of fear amidst his rising discomfort. Pursing his lips, he shifts on the bed and is pathetically comforted by the creak of broken bedsprings.

As usual, it’s Dean who breaks the stalemate.

“Does it work?” he asks, looking up again at Dad. He asked the question already, but it didn’t have this weight to it then: didn’t mean precisely the same thing as it does now.

Slowly, Dad’s split lips widen into a broad grin. The expression—all pride and triumph and a certain amount of boyish glee—takes about twenty years off his face. “Yeah, it works. Works on vampires, anyway.”

Sam blinks—Dad always told them that vampires were nothing but a myth—but he doesn’t have a chance to pursue that line of questioning because his brother is laughing next to him, soft and wondering and genuine.

“Holy shit,” Dean says. For the first time in months, there’s nothing of the rape in his eyes: nothing but amazed reverence as he looks down at the gun in his hands. “Holy shit, this—Dad, you actually found it. You figured out how to destroy the demon for good.”

Dean didn’t actually need any more reasons to strengthen his hero worship, but not even Sam can begrudge him this one. The demon has caused their family so much pain. It killed Mary, set the three of them on this blood-soaked path, murdered Jess—and that bitch Meg in Chicago was connected to it, Sam is sure: the bitch who clawed them up and put her hands all over Dean like he wasn’t anything but a (toy) piece of meat. And now ... now the means to end all of that—to take their revenge and fucking finally be able to rest—is in Dean’s hands. Dad put it there.

If Sam thought his legs would hold him, he’d be over there hugging the man.

“This is it,” he agrees, putting his hand on his brother’s shoulder and squeezing. “We find the demon and put a bullet in it and then we can—we can—Dean, we can actually have a real life.”

Sam hasn’t dared consider it until now, thought he and Dean were stuck in this world forever. He was ready for that, made his peace with it in New Paltz, but suddenly there’s a whole world of opportunities opening out in front of him—in front of them both.

Sam can go back to school. Dean can too if he wants, he can—an engineer, maybe. He’d be good at that. Or, hell, med school. Dean’s certainly proved himself in that capacity often enough in the field; he’s got steady hands and a sharp eye and an instinctual knack for finding the source of the blood loss, or the slurred speech, or the blurry vision.

And they can—they can get an apartment. Fuck, a house. Something that’s theirs, somewhere quiet and safe, and they can actually have the dog they wanted when they were kids, and speaking of kids, they can have those too. Surrogates, adoption, something. They can work the details out later.

From the doe-startled eyes Dean has turned on Sam, he’s just as overwhelmed by the sheer number of possibilities spreading out before them.

Sam starts to pull Dean toward him with the hand on his shoulder and then remembers that they aren’t alone. A second after that, he hears his earlier words echoing back to him in his head and realizes how they must have sounded to their father. How ungrateful and confrontational and
Turning an apologetic look on the man, Sam opens his mouth to explain and then hesitates, surprised by the soft smile on their father’s face.

Dad regards him steadily for a couple of seconds and then says, “I don’t think I ever told you this, Sam, but the day you were born, you know what I did?”

“No ...” Sam says slowly. He isn’t sure where his father is going with this, but even though experience tells him it can’t be anywhere good, Dad’s expression is as mild as it ever is—almost tender. Once again, he finds himself catching a glimpse of the John Winchester who might have been their father without the demon’s interference, and it leaves him just as unsettled and sad as it did before.

“I put a hundred bucks into a savings account for you.” Nodding to Dean, Dad adds, “Did the same thing for you, Dean. College funds. And every month I’d put in another hundred dollars until ... Anyway, my point is, boys, that this—this is never the life that I wanted for either of you.”

Sam feels like he’s been waiting all his life to hear those words from their father. Distantly, he acknowledges that Dean’s muscles have gone painfully tense beneath his hand, but he’s too focused on Dad to even try figuring out what that means. Dad’s attention, Sam can tell, is similarly fixed on him. Trying to mend bridges that Sam believed were ruined beyond repair.

He tells himself to accept the offering and move on, but his stupid, mulish mouth opens and asks, “Then why’d you get so mad when I left?”

The question comes out sounding more hurt than argumentative, and he realizes belatedly that it isn’t anger driving him—isn’t resentment either. It’s the desperate, young part of himself that has always wanted to fit in—the part that has always yearned for his father’s affection and gone unnoticed. It’s the part of him that is still wounded and aching from their father’s earlier words (best goddamned night of my life) and wants, more than anything, to be assured that they weren’t true.

Dad’s smile fades and he glances down before looking back up at Sam and saying, “You gotta understand something. After your mother passed, all I saw was evil, everywhere. And all I cared about was keeping you boys alive. I wanted you prepared—ready. So somewhere along the line, I uh. I stopped being your father. And I—I became your drill sergeant.”

It’s an accusation Sam has hurled at Dad countless times. One he never expected to hear back from the man as part of an apology.

“So when you said that you wanted to go away to school, all I could think about—my only thought was that you were going to be alone, vulnerable.”

A knot deep inside Sam’s chest loosens at the confession. The wound that Dad’s earlier words left can’t ever be completely erased, but the honest pain in their father’s face eases its ache. For the first time in a long while, Sam sits beneath Dad’s gaze and feels loved.

Dad shakes his head, moisture shining in his good eye, and continues, “Sammy, it just—it never occurred to me what you wanted. I just couldn’t accept the fact that you and me—we’re just different.”

It’s a ridiculous statement and Sam surprises himself by laughing.

“What?” Dad asks. It’s difficult to read his expression through the bruises and the swelling, but Sam can tell from the stiffness in their father’s voice that he’s feeling defensive.
Before the man can make the short move from defensive to angry, Sam says, “We’re not that different.”

He’s thinking about the drinking, about the desperate need to protect the love of their lives, about the burning thirst for revenge that has choked Dad ever since that night in the nursery and Sam ever since he found out what happened to his brother when he was alone and no one was on guard.

Dad’s eyes are sad, though, and Sam knows that their father thinks he means Jess and Mary. And those lost women are a part of it, but they aren’t at the heart of their similarity, which Sam is just beginning to understand reaches all the way down to the essential core of who he is.

In some ways—in the important ways—he’s more a reflection of Dad than Dean ever will be.

“I guess you’re right, son,” Dad says. The sorrow in his eyes is starting to leak into his voice, but Sam isn’t ready to let the darkness back in yet.

“So,” he says, making his own voice deceptively light and throwing his arm all the way around Dean’s shoulders to bring his brother back into the conversation. “Whatever happened to those college funds?”

The tilt of Dad’s lips says that he’s well aware of what Sam is doing, and there’s a glimmer of mischief in his eye as he answers, “Spent it on ammo.”

Sam expected as much, and it’s the predictability of the answer as much as any real amusement that makes him laugh. Dad joins him, and it takes Sam a couple of moments to realize that Dean isn’t there with them. Oh, his body is, but Dean is stone still and silent, and now that Sam is starting to pay attention to him again, he realizes that his brother is radiating tension.

“Dean,” he says, breaking off from his laughter immediately. “Hey, you okay?”

Dean is offering Sam his profile, which means that Sam has only half an expression to work with, but it doesn’t take much to read anger in the way that his brother moves, suddenly, shrugging Sam’s arm away and striding over to stare at the far wall. He drops the Colt on the table as he passes it. Rubs his hands against his jeans as though he was holding something dirty.

“Dean? Son?” Dad tries, exchanging a worried look with Sam.

“You’re tracking it, right?” Dean asks without turning around. He’s standing in front of a map of the States, a rainbow of pushpins stuck into it like acupuncture needles.

Sam meets his father’s eyes a second time and then stands himself. He feels a little winded as he walks toward his brother: bewildered by Dean’s unexpected sourness. These days, dealing with Dean is sort of like being strapped into a roller coaster, but there’s usually a logical reason for the shifts. Dean’s been after Sam and Dad to kiss and make up for years—now that they have, he should be happy, not ... not whatever this is.

“Hey, man, what’s wrong?” Sam asks, keeping his voice gentle as he rests a hand on his brother’s shoulder.

Dean shakes him off without turning around, more violently this time, and grits out, “Nothing. I’m fine. You two are so eager to have this over with, let’s do it. Then you can both get on with your lives.”

Understanding hits Sam low and hard, and from their father’s audible inhalation behind him, he isn’t the only one.
“Dean,” he says, floundering and awkward. He wants to reach out again and doesn’t quite dare. “Dean, we aren’t—I mean, this isn’t—”

“We’re not leaving you,” Dad says, baldly, and Sam winces at how it sounds out loud. Hastily, he scrambles for something to soften the announcement.

“We’re still gonna be a family, Dean,” he says. “We’re just. We’ll be normal. Safe.”

Dean turns around at that, which relieves Sam until he sees his brother’s face. He’s pretty sure that Dean hasn’t been this angry since he slugged Sam in the cabin and then walked out on him.

“And what’s that gonna look like, Sam?” Dean snarls. “Huh? You gonna go back to school?” His eyes lift and cut to the side, seeking Dad and digging in. “You gonna find yourself another garage?”

Sam is starting to see where this is going and he wishes, more than anything, that he could rewind the conversation and send it down a different path.

“I ... haven’t thought that far ahead,” Dad says. “I guess it’s a possibility.”

He sounds as reluctant to contribute to Dean’s vitriol as Sam is, but Sam can tell from the confusion coloring their father’s voice that Dad still has no idea why Dean is so upset. Sam’s own stomach is twisting in on itself. His chest feels cracked and bloody. Dean’s eyes swing back to him—cutting, demanding confirmation—and Sam flinches.

“I’m not leaving you,” he says, but there’s a constriction in his throat and the words come out weaker than he intends. They sound like a lie even to his own ears.

“What the fuck am I supposed to do, huh?” Dean demands. “What can I do?”

And there it is, laid out there for everyone to see, and Sam doesn’t have to be looking at Dad to know there’s stunned pain in the man’s eyes.

“Anything you want,” Sam tries. He means it, of course he does, but he knows even before his brother’s cutting laugh that Dean isn’t going to buy into it.

“That’s rich coming from you,” Dean spits. “Thought I was ‘daddy’s good little solider’. Thought I wasn’t good for anything but taking orders.”

Sam jerks at the sharpness of the words. He should have been ready for the attack, which has been four years in coming, but somehow Dean has managed to ambush him anyway. The words sound even worse coming out of his brother’s mouth than they did the first time around, when they were Sam’s.

He wants to explain, wants to say that he was angry and young and stupid and, most of all, scared. He was leaving for Stanford in the morning and fucking terrified of losing Dean, of being alone, and everyone says stupid shit when they’re scared, they lash out to hurt those closest to them before they can be hurt themselves and God, Dean, he never meant it, never meant any of it. Sam wants to apologize—for that fight and for all the others since or before—and can barely breathe through the pain in his chest.

“What am I supposed to do, huh?” Dean repeats, voice louder and rougher as he works himself up.

“’M I supposed to get some factory job? Stand on an assembly line fucking around with widgets every day? Am I supposed to flip burgers at some grease pit? Go ahead and tell me what the fuck I’m qualified for! I don’t have a diploma. Hell, thanks to that son of a bitch in St. Louis, I don’t even have a fucking birth certificate or social security number! So you go ahead and tell me just what
Normal, safe job I can do.”

“Dean,” Dad tries, but Dean’s eyes are locked on Sam. Sam sees the biting intent in them before Dean opens his mouth, but there’s no time to shield himself from what’s coming.

“Maybe I should set myself up on a corner somewhere,” Dean sneers. “I’m so pretty, right? Must be people out there willing to pay for it instead of taking it. How about it, Sam, you could be my pimp.”

Sam punches him. He blinks afterwards, shocked, and looks down at his own fist, which doesn’t feel like it’s attached to his arm. Dean rubs at his jaw, body tilted away but eyes still burning and locked on Sam as he spits blood onto the carpet.

“See?” he pants. “You’ve already got the swing down. Be a fucking natural.”

“You’re not a whore,” Sam says. He sounds angrier than he feels, which he understands isn’t a great sign. He can’t help himself, though: Dean knows where all of his buttons are and he’s busy kicking them with all the strength he can muster.

“No, I’m not,” Dean agrees, straightening and dropping his hand. “I’m a hunter. That’s what I do. It’s who I am.” He looks back and forth between Dad and Sam, still angry, but Sam thinks that the brunt of his rage has passed: exhaustion and worthless, aching sorrow already creeping in around the edges.

“That’s not—Dean, that’s never what I wanted for you,” Dad says. His voice sounds horribly thick and wet, and Sam is filled with the sick certainty that their father is crying. “I just—I want you to be able to have a home, a family.”

“I have a family,” Dean shoots back.

“A wife, son,” Dad presses as he steps up beside Sam. “Kids.”

Dean’s eyes flick to Sam and back to their father quickly enough that Sam would have thought he imagined it if not for the guilty twitch of his brother’s Adam’s apple. In his current mood, there’s no saying whether Dean would be willing to uptilt everything—and he could, all it would take is a couple of words. Or hell, he could just grab Sam and yank him in for a kiss. That’d do the trick.

Sam thinks, for a couple of awful, endless seconds, that Dean is considering it. Then his brother sags, all the energy running out of him and leaving him dulled. The hand he lifts to rub at his scar is a weary afterthought.

“Doesn’t matter,” he mutters. “You can do what you want.” Then, glancing at Sam with an expression terribly close to apathy, he finishes, “You both can.”
Sam couldn’t say anything before, not with Dad standing right there, but as soon as he and Dean are back in the privacy of their own room, he blurts, “I’m not going anywhere.”

With the same, weary blankness he wore all through Dad’s explanation of weather signs and power outages, Dean says, “Yeah, okay,” and keeps heading for the beds.

He lies down on the one they shared last night, which Sam wants to see as a good sign. He has to admit, though, that it might just be because the sheets in the other bed are still smeared with Icy Hot. Squaring his jaw, he follows his brother over.

When he sits down on the edge of the mattress, Dean rolls over and offers Sam his back. It’s a childish enough move that Sam has to consciously resist the urge to sigh in exasperation. Goddamn it, why can’t this ever be easy?

“I’m not gonna lie, Dean,” he says. “School’s an option. But I don’t have to leave you to go. We could—we could get an apartment, maybe. Somewhere off campus.”

Dean hunches further away and doesn’t say anything.

“And we could—I mean, not for a while, but if you wanted kids, we could, I don’t know, adopt or something.” Now that Sam is thinking more clearly, he knows that would look really fucking weird to Dad—would probably reawaken those old suspicions—but he’s confident that, between the two of them, he and Dean can think up an explanation.

He expects Dean’s objection to center on his supposed dislike of children—which is a load of bullshit if Sam ever heard one—but instead Dean snorts and then says, “I can’t even handle a hypothetical conversation and you want to give me a kid to fuck up. Yeah, great idea.”

“You’re already dealing with a lot of crap, Dean, and Dad and I blindsided you with the—with the retirement thing.”

“Retirement,” Dean huffs humorlessly. “Yeah, right.”

He’s uncurled a little, but the entire line of his body is a warning not to press further. Sam wishes he could listen, but he isn’t leaving his brother alone when he’s like this. Dean’s only going to twist things further askew in his head until he’s convinced that Sam and Dad are both itching to ditch the worthless, broken member of the family at the first opportunity.

“You weren’t actually planning on hunting when you’re Dad’s age, were you?” Sam asks.

“Sam, if you don’t shut the fuck up, I swear to God—”

“Just answer the question and I’ll leave you alone.”

Dean’s silent for a moment and then he says, “No.”

Something in his brother’s voice tells Sam that the word is meant as an answer and not a refusal.

“Then you must’ve had some sort of plan—something, you know, some kind of idea of what you’d —”

“I never planned on hunting when I was Dad’s age because I never figured I’d get out of my
twenties,” Dean interrupts. “Hunting isn’t one of those gigs that comes with a pension plan.”

Sam startles, shaken by that declaration, much the way that he supposes Dean means him to be, but his brother isn’t saying it just to be cruel. He’s saying it because it’s the truth.

Sam tries to figure out how to explain to Dean that he’s going to have to come to grips with the concept of getting old, because he isn’t dying before he’s thirty, or forty, or fifty—or fuck, sixty—but all the explanations he’s coming up with get stuck somewhere between “need you” and “you’re mine” and sound a little too possessive even in the privacy of his own mind.

As Sam searches for more acceptable words, Dean adds, “I’m okay with it. And not just—you know, because of the thing. I’ve always been fine with it. I don’t—I don’t want to be the last man standing, Sammy, and if that means laying my life down for you or Dad, then I’ll do it in a heartbeat.”

Great. Because Sam didn’t already have enough reasons to worry about his brother’s safety.

“Yeah, well, if Dad and I both quit, then I guess that isn’t going to be a problem, is it?” he tries.

Dean doesn’t respond.

“So, starting from the assumption that you’re still gonna be stuck with me when you’re fifty—”

“You said you’d leave me alone.”

“I lied. So, starting from that assumption, what do you want to do? When the demon’s dead?”

Dean is silent.

“I can outwait you, Dean, you know I can.”

It’s true. Stubbornness is a Winchester family tradition, but Sam received more than his fair share of that particular trait. It came in handy when they were kids and Sam wanted his brother’s attention. Worked whenever Dad wasn’t around, anyway.

Dean shifts a little on the bed and then says, “I’d make a crappy dad.”

Sam knows that his brother is trying to distract him, but that doesn’t lessen the ache in his chest. Makes it sharper, actually, because Dean wouldn’t have been able to come up with that statement so quickly if he hadn’t already been thinking it. He has no idea how his brother can believe that about himself, after everything he did for Sam when they were growing up.

God, Dean would make a fucking awesome father—as long as there was someone around to make sure the kids weren’t eating pie for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

But that’s another conversation for another time. Right now, Sam refuses to let himself be sidetracked.

“You didn’t answer my question,” he points out.

Dean actually rolls over a little at that, twisting far enough around to look Sam in the eye as he says, “I want to hunt, okay? I want things to go back to how they were before you left us. I want us to be a fucking family, alright?” He looks at Sam a moment longer and then lays down again, burying his head into the pillow. “Now fuck off and let me sleep.”

Sam doesn’t budge. “Dean, we are a family.”
“Christ,” Dean mutters. He sounds annoyed, but his feelings must run deeper than that because his hand is starting to lift to his forehead.

Sam isn’t in the mood to sit here and watch his brother prod at the tangible reminder of his nightmare. Reaching over Dean’s body, he catches his brother’s wrist and holds it still and steady.

“You’re still my brother,” he says. “And Dad’s our father, and that isn’t going to change no matter what we’re all doing.”

Dean doesn’t respond, but his breathing has sped a little and Sam realizes that between the press of his body and his grip on Dean’s wrist, he’s all but pinning his brother to the bed. Trusting in Dean’s stubborn streak to keep him in place, Sam releases his brother long enough to lie down beside him, and then rests one hand against the small of Dean’s back.

“Besides,” he adds, doing his best to keep his voice light and teasing. “You don’t really want Dad around all the time, do you?”

Dean doesn’t agree, but then again he isn’t lashing out or running either, so Sam takes a chance and presses his mouth to the side of his brother’s throat. Dean shivers once before relaxing and tilting into the kiss.

“Looking over our shoulders,” Sam continues as he covers his brother’s throat with slow, gentle kisses. “Barging in at all hours ... taking turns doing the laundry ...”

Dean rolls over in a sudden movement, grabbing both of Sam’s wrists and pinning him against the mattress. His expression is an interesting mix of pissed off and uncertain and intrigued.

“Dad never did the laundry,” he points out, flexing his hands around Sam’s wrists.

Lying passively beneath his brother’s grip, Sam returns, “You want to give him a chance to start?”

Dean’s answering grin is unexpected and sharp. “I’m not the one with jizz caked on the inside of his boxers.”

“Not this time,” Sam responds. It’s half challenge, half promise, but instead of reassuring Dean further, it makes his smile falter. A moment later, he releases Sam and sits up.

“You’re awful confident,” he notes. “I mean, we don’t know for sure whether I’ll ever be able to get it up again, let alone shoot.”

“Well, there’s always Viagra,” Sam says flippantly.

Dean’s eyes widen and his mouth falls open in an expression of shock. For a single, horrible moment, Sam is sure that he misjudged his brother’s mood. Then Dean’s eyes narrow and Sam finds himself flailing out as his brother tries to push him off the side of the bed. He catches himself on the edge, barely, and pushes Dean back, and then it’s on.

Five minutes and two headlocks later, Sam finds himself stuck with his hands wrenched behind his back and his face smushed up into his brother’s armpit.

There are times when sex with Dean is the last thing on his mind.

“Dude, gross!” he protests, trying to get an arm free. “Let go already!”

But Dean just tightens up on him, stilling his struggles, and singsongs, “Rules, Sammy.”
“Okay! Okay! Dean Winchester is the awesomest big brother ever!”

“And?”

“And Sam Winchester is a sparkly princess!”

“Damn straight,” Dean agrees triumphantly and, finally loosening his grip, sets Sam free.

Sam coughs as he rolls away, only half in jest. “Dude, you really need to shower,” he announces, waving a hand in front of his face.

“You offering to scrub my back?” Dean asks. It starts off as a joke, but by the time he finishes speaking all of the levity has gone out of his voice. The question lies between them, heavy and awkward with unspoken meaning, and Dean shifts uncomfortably as he turns his head to stare at the wall.

“Do you want me to?” Sam asks after a few moments.

Dean sucks his bottom lip between his teeth and bites down, indecisive. It’s an unconsciously sensual look for him—that goddamned mouth again—and Sam’s groin heats. He should look away—Dean doesn’t mean to be doing this, and it’s wrong and invasive to be getting off on an absent expression—but before he can make himself drop his eyes, Dean glances back and offers, “I don’t know. Maybe?”

After Dean’s blowup in Dad’s room, ‘maybe’ isn’t good enough, no matter how much Sam might want to snatch up every opportunity his brother offers. Putting his hands behind his head, he closes his eyes and says, “Rain check.”

The room is silent enough that Sam would think Dean already left, but the stillness of the mattress is a dead giveaway that his brother hasn’t gone anywhere. He feigns sleep, hoping that Dean will get the picture and go shower before his already waning willpower becomes nonexistent, and eventually Dean shifts and clears his throat.

Apparently, they aren’t done talking yet.

Cracking one eye open, Sam finds his brother regarding him with a serious expression. “Yeah?”

“I’m sorry about before,” Dean answers. “What I said. I don’t—I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

Sam does. As far as his research has led him to believe, the anger and the hostility are typical responses from someone in the process of recovering from trauma. Dean’s manic highs and depressed lows aren’t unusual either. In his case, though, everything is exaggerated by a lifetime of low self-esteem and an almost fanatic need to deny his own emotions.

Soldiers aren’t afraid. They don’t feel pain, or sorrow, or anything that might get in the way of their duty.

Sam doesn’t remember Dad telling Dean any of those rules, which are clearly bullshit, but he guesses that he can see how his brother might have inferred them. After all, they spent their childhood and adolescence being rewarded and praised for unflinching bravery and steady obedience. Dad never actually punished either of them for being human, but Sam knows intimately just how much a single, disappointed look from the man can hurt—and Dean didn’t have any other role models to counteract that lesson.
Sam was lucky. He had Dean.

Although his brother is the one who taught Sam that it's okay to cry, and to feel weak, and to look for comfort from others, Dean’s incapable of allowing himself the same leeway. There’s an emotional disconnect somewhere deep inside of him—some switch that got flipped and welded into place.

Now all of the emotions that the rape stirred up are summoning others in their wake, dragging all of the skeletons Dean has spent his whole life trying to hide out into the light. He may have started to rebuild his defenses, but they aren’t as strong as they used to be, and in the face of such overwhelming emotions they keep failing him.

And each fresh failure only upsets him more.

This afternoon wasn’t Dean’s first extreme reaction to stress, and it won’t be the last. Things are likely to get even worse before they get better—all of the literature agrees on that cheerful fact. But everything Sam has read—and every one of his instincts—also says that the storms will diminish, and then come less frequently, and finally cease altogether.

If he can keep his brother alive that long.

“I’m sorry I hit you,” he says, looking at the slight discoloration on Dean’s jaw. “Next time I piss you off, you’ve got a free pass.”

If anything, though, Sam’s apology only disturbs Dean more. Frowning, he demands, “How can you just shrug it off, man? How can you just—Christ, Sammy, I’d leave me if I could.”

“I love you, Dean,” Sam answers, ignoring the pang his brother’s words set off in his chest and sitting up on his elbows. “I’m not gonna ditch you when you need me the most.”

“I’m acting like a chick on the rag,” Dean mutters as he drags a hand through his hair.

“Hey.” Sam reaches out and rests a hand on his brother’s calf. “You’re going through a lot right now, dude. No one expects you to be perfect. Hell, I’d be more worried if you weren’t snapping at us.”

“I guess. It’s—” Dean’s face tightens and he reaches up, brushing his fingertips against his scar. Sam tenses, but before he can do anything about it Dean drops his hand again to make a vague, all-encompassing gesture. “The whole talking thing, it’s not—I’m not good at it.”

“You’re doing fine.”

“No, Sam, I’m not,” Dean insists, glowering. “I can’t—earlier, with you and Dad, I think I—I got so pissed off because I knew I couldn’t, cause I didn’t know how to put it into words. I can’t—I can’t fucking talk to you!” He slams one hand down on the bed, hard enough that the whole mattress shakes.

Sam wants to respond, wants to move his hand up and down Dean’s lower leg in a calming caress, but he senses that his brother isn’t done yet. Pursing his lips, he limits himself to light circles with his thumb and waits for Dean to speak.

Finally, Dean says, “You and Dad, you talk about—settling down. Stopping. And then you, with the— the apartment.”

“You don’t want a home?” Sam guesses, confused.
But Dean shakes his head. “It’s not—I have a home. I’ve got the Impala, and I’ve got you and Dad. I don’t. I mean, I remember before, with Mom. I remember a little. But it isn’t—I don’t know how to—like with Cassie, when I was there, I couldn’t—I—”

He breaks off with a frustrated grunt, but Sam doesn’t need to hear any more. He thinks he knows what Dean is talking about now: what had his brother’s heart beating too quickly in his chest and left him feeling trapped and claustrophobic enough to lash out. He knows what triggered this latest outburst because, for those first three months at Stanford, he felt the same way.

“You don’t know how to stop moving,” he says, and Dean looks at him, startled. “You stay in one place longer than a week and it starts feeling like you’ve got ants under your skin. You keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something to go wrong, for an attack. And when nothing happens, it only gets worse.”

“How do you—”

Sam laughs. “Dean, I grew up the same way you did, remember? It’s just—it’s habit. It gets better.”

For a moment he thinks that he’s managed to calm his brother down again, but then Dean’s scowl deepens. “What if I don’t want it to get better?” he challenges. “What’s wrong with the way I am now?”

“Nothing,” Sam answers instantly, shifting his hand higher on his brother’s leg and tightening his grip. “If you’re really, honestly happy, then nothing. But I’ve seen the way you look at kids, dude. I saw how you were with Michael and Lucas.”

Dean looks away at that, and his scowl eases as the tips of his ears go red. Sam could produce further evidence if he wanted—hell, the way Dean looked at the empty playgrounds as they were driving out of Fitchburg alone would be enough for even the most skeptical jury to convict him of having a soft spot for kids. He’s pretty sure he already made his point, though, so instead he just finishes, as gently as possible, “You can’t raise a family on the road.”

Dean licks his lips and starts, “Dad—”

“Dean.”

Sam’s warning tone is apparently enough to override even Dean’s hero worship—or maybe, just maybe, Sam’s beginning to make headway as far as their father’s infallibility is concerned—because Dean shuts up and swallows thickly. After a couple of moments, he glances at Sam and, with a weak smile, offers, “You turned out okay.”

Sam hesitates—in no world is Dean going to take this well—and then points out, “I’m in love with my big brother, dude.”

Sure enough, Dean’s moving almost before Sam has finished speaking. Sam lurches after his brother, catching his wrist and hanging on despite Dean’s attempts to shake him off.

“Hey,” he says, keeping his voice soft.

Dean tosses his head, skittish, and tries to pull away again. A muscle in his jaw is twitching violently and his free hand—the one Sam isn’t holding onto with a death grip—is up at his temple.

“Hey,” Sam repeats, more firmly this time, and grabs his brother’s other wrist as well.

“Let go,” Dean rasps. He’s averting his face, enough tension in him to cord his throat, but his
struggles are weakening.

“Stop trying to run away from me and I will.”

“Fuck you,” Dean chokes out.

Sam is hyperaware, heart pounding in his chest and eyes locked on what he can make out of his brother’s face. He doesn’t want to panic Dean, but he can’t let him run either—not before he can finish explaining himself—so he takes a chance and transfers both of his brother’s wrists into his right hand before tightening up again. Luckily, Dean’s upset enough that he misses the opportunity to get away.

When Sam brushes his brother’s cheek with his left hand a moment later, Dean flinches. Then, catching himself, he stills. He isn’t struggling anymore, but his entire body is shaking with minute tremors. His pulse flutters wildly against Sam’s palm. Shifting his grip so that his brother’s heartbeat isn’t quite so noticeable and distracting, Sam strokes Dean’s cheek a second time.

“Dean,” he says. His brother shakes his head slightly and Sam slides his hand around to cup the back of Dean’s neck. “Dean,” he calls again.

“What?” Dean manages, his voice strangled and reluctant.

Now that he’s certain he has his brother’s attention, Sam says, “I’m not ashamed of it.”

Dean makes a thick, incredulous scoffing noise.

“I’m not ashamed of it,” Sam insists. “And I don’t want it any other way. Dean, I love you. I love you so fucking much.”

Dean’s face is still turned away from him, but Sam can see enough of his brother’s cheek to know that he’s crying, noiseless and slow. He hates himself a little for bringing this out into the open where neither one of them can ignore it anymore, but he can’t deny that it’s necessary. They can’t avoid this forever.

A year from now, ten, twenty—they’re still going to be brothers. Dad will still be their father, and the same blood is still going to be running in their veins. The bond of family can’t be dissolved by man or magic or even God. The ugly, vicious name for what they’re doing—the word both he and Dean have been careful to avoid—isn’t ever going to go away.

“I’m in love with you,” Sam repeats, fighting to keep his voice steady. “And I’ve made my peace with that. It’s—this isn’t going to change, okay? You’re it for me. And you make me so happy sometimes that I can’t—I can’t believe how lucky I am.”

He strokes Dean’s cheek again, and this time Dean tilts his face into the touch, seeking comfort. He’s still crying, both eyes squeezed shut so that he doesn’t have to look at Sam. Sam’s own eyes water at the sight, and a hot, painful lump rises in his throat.

Taking a measured breath, he continues, “But it’s fucked up. We both know it’s fucked up. And I don’t know how much of that is how we were raised, and how much is just us, but, Dean. Dean, you can’t want this for anyone else.”

“No,” Dean chokes out, shaking his head. “No, I—course not.”

He sounds absolutely miserable, and looks worse, neither of which were Sam’s intention when he started this conversation. The lump in his throat swells, and as he feels the first, hot tears slip down
his own cheeks, he releases Dean’s wrists in order to cup his brother’s face with both hands. Leaning in, he presses their mouths together and Dean opens for him. Dean fumbles for Sam’s face and kisses him back with deep, shuddering licks and feverish nips.

In the end, it’s Sam who breaks away, tears running silently down his cheeks. He turns his face to the side but doesn’t move away, resting his forehead against his brother’s as he breathes, “Don’t you dare blame yourself for this.”

“Sam,” Dean says helplessly. “I—”

“No,” Sam growls, tightening his grip on his brother’s face. “I started this, Dean, I—if it’s anyone’s fault then it’s mine. You didn’t—you didn’t do anything wrong, man.”

“I should’ve, when you were a kid, I should’ve—”

“Should’ve what, Dean?” Sam asks, lifting his head enough to look in his brother’s eyes. “Should’ve taken care of me? Should’ve taught me right from wrong? Should’ve been a better brother? Jesus Christ, man, you did all that! You—everything good I am, I learned from you, you know that, right?”

Predictably, Dean clenches his jaw and shakes his head. “No, you—you’re right. It’s fucked up. I did this to you, I—”

Sam kisses him again—fiercely, just to shut him up—and then says, “It isn’t your fault.”

Dean’s face scrunches—a wretched cross between self-disgust and despair—and Sam grabs the back of his brother’s head before he can shake it.

“It isn’t,” he insists. “God, Dean, what the hell do you think you did? Touch me in a bad place? Because you didn’t.”

“Well I must’ve done something, Sam!” Dean shouts, jerking away with an abrupt movement. “Otherwise we wouldn’t be in this mess!”

Exasperation pushes aside Sam’s pain and guilt and concern. “Okay, fine. You want to be that way? Then you can explain to me why Dylan Errols broke my heart in tenth grade.”

Dean hesitates at the edge of the bed. “What?” he says.

“You want to take credit for me being in love with you? Fine. But you better be ready to answer for every crush I ever had, Dean. Go ahead and explain how you made me bi, cause I’d love to know how that message got through when you were dicking everything with a skirt in a ten mile radius.”

Dean looks confused for a second and then, stubbornly, shakes his head. “That’s different.”

“How?”

Dean struggles with the question for a moment and then blurts, “It just—it just is, damn it!”

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Sam replies, “Look, I know you aren’t going to let it go right now, but I just—I want you to consider the possibility that not every messed up thing I do is your fault. I get to screw up on my own sometimes, dude.”

Dean drops his eyes to the mattress between them for a moment, clearly thinking it through—clearly trying—but when he looks up again Sam can tell that his brother is still determined to blame himself.
He doesn’t say anything, though, and after a moment the pain in his eyes dulls as he buries the burden of guilt deep inside where Sam can’t get at it.

_Damn it, Dean._

“Look,” Sam says, trying to shift the subject back into more comfortable roads. “If you don’t want kids, that’s one thing. If you’re just dragging your feet because you think you’d suck at it, then you’re being an idiot.”

“ Aren’t you a little young for your biological clock to be ticking?” Dean mutters. He’s going for scornful, but he’s still a little too shaky to be convincing.

“Sure,” Sam agrees. “But I’m not talking about doing anything now. I just—I want you to start thinking about what you want out of life.” As Dean opens his mouth, Sam hastens to add, “ _Other_ than hunting. And settling down doesn’t mean that you have to give that up, Dean. I mean, Bobby’s got a base of operations and he’s one of the best hunters we know, right?”

Dean straightens at that, his eyes going almost comically wide and startled. As though the thought never occurred to him. Probably didn’t. He’s had other things on his mind.

Dean’s off balance now, doubting his own beliefs, and Sam could probably push him into facing up to a few more harsh truths if he tries. He could rip his brother’s worldview apart and set him on the path toward discovering a new, healthier outlook.

A year ago, he wouldn’t even have hesitated. He might even have—consciously or not—prodded Dean in a direction that’s better aligned with what he wants for himself.

But Sam is older now—painfully so—and he knows better. Pushing Dean when he’s this weak is only going to damage him more in the long run. More than that, it isn’t fair—for once in his life, Dean should be able to decide for himself instead of doing his best to be the man everyone else wants him to be.

So instead of making any of the comments that are jouncing around inside of him, Sam says, “Just think about it, okay? Figure out what you want. Then we’ll find a way to get there.”

Dean looks at him blankly and then deadpans, “I want to be a ballerina.”

Sam has no way of knowing whether the joke indicates that Dean is actually feeling better or if it’s just another defense mechanism, but his chest gives a hopeful, aching pulse anyway. Letting a smile lift the corners of his lips, he reaches out and shoves at his brother’s shoulder. “Go shower, twinkle toes.”

“With a pink tutu,” Dean adds, not budging. His face is just as expressionless as before, but there’s a twinkle of humor in his eyes now and Sam’s grin widens.

“Very manly.”

“Takes a man to—”

“Wear pink and prance around like a sissy, yeah, I know.”

Dean’s impassive mask finally cracks as he grins, wide and genuine. “You’re just jealous because you don’t have my delicate ankles.”

“Dean ...”
“Showering.”

When Dean comes out of the shower, he goes over to the far bed without looking at Sam. Judging from the stiff set of his shoulders as he begins to strip the mattress, unceremoniously dumping the Icy Hot-crusted sheets on the floor, the light mood he went into the bathroom with has evaporated. Sam doesn’t know why he expected otherwise.

This is the way Dean operates these days, after all. It’s like living in the depths of an overgrown forest. Occasionally, wind will stir the branches enough to let in a shaft of sunlight, but only for a moment, and then the gloom returns, more oppressive than before.

It’s frustrating, and maddening, and none of it is Dean’s fault.

Understanding that doesn’t make Sam any happier about the situation, and there’s a growing pit in his stomach as he watches his brother finish stripping the bed. The revealed mattress is a dirty, grayish-pink color, and stained with things Sam doesn’t want to think about, but they’ve slept on worse. He’s disgusted but not at all surprised when Dean lies down on the mattress and rolls over to face the wall.

Sam shifts where he’s sitting on the bed they shared last night. He doesn’t mean to say anything—Dean’s making himself quite clear—but he has this problem where he can’t control his mouth and so he finds himself asking, “What’re you doing?”

“Sleeping.”

Sam’s capable of letting it go at that, he really is.

Okay, maybe not.

“I thought—Dean, I thought we agreed that we were—”

He stops. Mostly because he isn’t sure where he’s going with that sentence. That they were dating? Sleeping together? Boyfriends? Platonic cuddlers?

“Dad’s next door,” Dean says into the silence. Like that explains anything after Dean let Sam dry hump him like a horny teenager a couple of hours ago—after Sam had Dean’s cock in his mouth. This isn’t about Dad. Dad is just a convenient excuse.

But Sam can’t find it in him to push his brother any further today.

“You can have this bed,” he offers instead. “It’s my fault the sheets got ruined.”

“I’m good here.”

Sam looks at the stubborn line of his brother’s back for a moment longer before sliding off the bed and pulling off the flat sheet. “At least take this to cover up the mattress,” he says, holding it out.

Dean has to know that he’s standing there—Sam wasn’t exactly being stealthy or quiet with his movements—but he doesn’t turn around. From this angle, Sam can see that his brother’s eyes are firmly shut.

“I’m good.”

“It’s filthy,” Sam protests, and his own skin crawls at the sight of his brother lying there: at the
thought of Dean’s clean, pale legs and arms and—inevitably when his shirt rides up in the night—stomach coming in contact with something that looks like it was last cleaned when Regan was president.

Dean opens his eyes at that, finally, and turns his head around enough to look at Sam. Sam doesn’t like the flat, dull quality to his brother’s gaze. Whatever Dean’s mind did to him when he was alone in the bathroom has rubbed off what little shine he’s been able to win back, leaving him scuffed and sullied.

“So am I,” he says.

It’s so horrifyingly wrong that Sam can’t even begin to figure out how to argue with him. And Dean wouldn’t be able to hear him right now even if Sam could find the words—not with that expression on his face. Not with that deadness in his eyes—doll eyes have more life than his brother’s do right now, a shark’s are more human.

Finally, Sam gets his mouth working again and says, “We’re going to talk about this in the morning.”

“Fantastic,” Dean grunts, turning away again and dropping his head back down on the pillow. “Looking forward to it.”

Sam dreams again that night.

It’s the same nightmare that’s been plaguing him off and on since the cabin—the one he only remembers when he’s asleep—but this time, he isn’t watching Dean’s defilement. He’s participating in it.

Sam is slicking his fingers in the blood streaming from the fresh cut on his brother’s temple, he’s biting down on Dean’s right nipple hard enough to break the skin, he’s shoving Dean’s legs wider and thrusting in, he’s pulling out and dragging him over to the wall and reseating himself. There are words coming from his mouth—horrible, vile taunts—and it’s those words as much as anything else that are making Dean shake like he is, but Sam (Hanson) has his hand on his brother’s cock and he’s pounding against Dean’s prostate unerringly.

Dean’s cries don’t so much change as they shift tenor.

When he says ‘stop’ now he doesn’t mean the rape so much as he means this—Sam’s (Hanson’s) hand on his cock making him enjoy it, at least a little—and Hanson (Sam) wants to stop, he’s desperate to stop, but he can’t, he can’t make himself—oh God what is he doing? Everything smells funny, like rotten eggs, and there’s a bitter, wrong taste in his mouth beneath the copper, and he’s still doing this. He’s hurting this guy, this kid, this beautiful, beautiful creature who can’t get his eyes to focus past the pain or maybe there’s damage from the mirror (concussion? aneurism?). There’s blood in one eye, but the other is still greengreengreen, and the guy (SamStallionDeanPretty) is moaning and begging Hanson (Sam) not to make him come. Hanson forces Dean-o’s head to one side (look ma, no hands!) and tongues at the gash on his temple, widening it, deepening it, letting the blood flow, and the guy does come, and the sound he makes, the sound is indescribable, it—

Sam jerks awake with a scream in his throat. He’s lashing out before he knows what he’s doing, but Dean is ready for him: uses the hand he had on Sam’s shoulder—the hand he was shaking him with—to block the blow and then shoves him back down against the bed, forearm pressed against his throat.
“Sam!” he barks. “Calm down, it’s me.”

Sam is aware enough to know that now, of course, and he stills immediately. He’s panting, and his heartbeat is pulsing through his skull, but more importantly he’s nauseous—fuck, he’s gonna hurl for sure this time. The nightmare is already fading, just like it always does, but he remembers enough to know that it was wrong—and to be ashamed about the thick, throbbing line of his cock pressing against his boxers.

“Lemme up,” he chokes. “Gotta—bathroom—”

Dean lets him go.

Sam makes it to the toilet—barely—and the force of his nausea cramps his stomach and esophagus. He shakes as he pukes, sweat slicking his shirt to his skin and dripping from his hair. When he’s done, he slumps down next to the toilet and rests his forehead against one weak, shaking arm. His erection, thank god, has wilted, but he still hunches in over himself a little, as though he can hide the sickness that made it rise in the first place. The dream is all but gone now, having left behind only an amber blur and a vague impression of guilty dread, but he can still feel it clinging to his skin like noxious pond scum.

Dean is standing in the doorway, a blacker shape against the darkness. Sam can’t see his brother’s face, but he knows that Dean is watching him—can feel his steady regard and wants to slink away from it, wants to hide himself. He hunches further, ignoring the strain it puts on the small of his back, and turns his face away.

“You were talking in your sleep,” Dean says.

Sam doesn’t want to know, but his brother is still standing there, waiting, while silence and darkness bear down on Sam from all sides, so he croaks out, “What did I say?”

Seconds tick past—maybe minutes, it’s hard to tell—before Dean answers, “You were begging someone to stop you.”

It isn’t what Sam was expecting, not at all, and his head comes up. Blinking, he strains against the darkness in an effort to make out his brother’s expression. As though Dean senses the attempt, he tilts his face away: Sam can tell from the way the shadowed lump of his brother’s head shifts.

“You remember what you were dreaming?” Dean asks after a moment.

“No,” Sam rasps. Wasn’t anything good, though. He knows that much.

“You okay now?”

No. Not in the slightest. But Sam can’t articulate what’s wrong with him—nothing more than a complaint of a bitter taste in his mouth, detectable even through the vomit, and the whiff of rotten eggs in the air—and Dean clearly doesn’t want to hear anyway.

“Yeah,” Sam exhales.

Dean nods and disappears from the bathroom doorway without another word. Sam shifts up far enough to flush the toilet and then sits back down again. Resting his forehead against the toilet seat, he shuts his eyes and waits for his heartbeat to slow, for the bitter pall of the nightmare to lift.

It’s a long time before he goes back to bed.
When Sam wakes up in the morning, Dean is already gone. Confused and a little frightened by his brother’s absence, Sam glances at the clock on the nightstand and sees that it’s late—well past nine thirty and approaching ten. With a soft curse, he tosses back the sheet and rolls out of bed.

The note Sam finds taped to the back of the motel door—with dad, don’t freak—calms his rising nerves, but the damage has already been done. Between the late hour and the shock of waking to find Dean missing, his thoughts are muzzy as he stumbles through his morning routine. A dull ache throbs behind both of his eyes—something close but not identical to the pain that always plagues him after his visions. Sam finishes as quickly as he can and then knocks back a couple of aspirin before pulling on his shoes and heading next door.

Dean is sitting on Dad’s rumpled bed with folders and notebooks scattered around him. His hair looks mussed and soft—no gel today—and he’s still wearing the faded black t-shirt he had on last night when he went to sleep. Sam would be willing to bet that his brother has the same boxers on as well, and the evidence of Dean’s eagerness to escape their room before Sam woke up leaves a sour taste in Sam’s mouth. Dean doesn’t even acknowledge Sam’s arrival, continuing to leaf through a stack of meteorological graphs instead.

It’s odd seeing him so engrossed in research. Normally, Dean has to be bullied or blackmailed into it, and then he spends the whole time complaining and searching for an excuse to do something else. Anything else. Sam isn’t used to this version of his brother, who has obviously settled in for the long haul and is even now adding notations to Dad’s journal.

“Coffee?” Dad asks, drawing Sam’s attention over to the table where their father sits. When Dad sees that he has Sam’s attention, he lifts a Styrofoam cup in clear offer. “Should still be warm at least.”

Sam hesitates, casting another concerned look at his brother, and then goes over to join their father.

“Thanks.” Accepting the cup, he sits down where he can see both his father and his brother at the same time. Then, softly and out of the corner of his mouth, he asks, “How long has he been doing that?”

“Woke me up around five,” Dad answers, keeping his voice just as low. It feels wrong, talking about Dean like he isn’t even in the room, but Sam’s off balance enough that the slight, nagging guilt is the least of his worries.

Last night, Dean went to bed upset. He was upset when Sam woke them both up with his nightmare, and judging by his uncharacteristic behavior this morning he’s still upset now. Of course, Dean’s newfound interest in research might be nothing more than an eagerness to get back to hunting. His preoccupation might be genuine instead of an attempt at avoidance.

“Did he ... did he do this with you? After I left?” Sam asks hopefully as he watches his brother fit the end of the pen in his mouth and chew on it.

“The gung-ho research assistant stuff?” Dad says, and he’s watching Dean too. His left eye is a little better today, but the swelling hasn’t gone down enough for Sam to read any emotion. He has to rely on their father’s right eye for that, and the weary sorrow he finds there tells him that Dad hasn’t been doing anything this morning except watching his eldest son. Sam wonders if Dean feels awkward at all, or if he’s even noticed the scrutiny past his own pain.
That isn’t a comfortable thought, and Sam shifts a little in his chair. Over on the bed, Dean puts down the meteorological reports and opens a folder full of newspaper clippings. The only indication he gives that he knows anyone else is in the room is the overzealous rustling of the clippings as he flips through them—probably an attempt to drown out the low, indecipherable murmur of Sam and Dad’s voices.

“Yeah, that,” Sam agrees in a hushed whisper. He hopes like hell that Dad will say yes, that he’ll say ‘someone had to pick up your slack, Sammy’, that he’ll say anything to make this a return to routine instead of another symptom.

But Dad shakes his head.

“Guess you’re rubbing off on him,” he observes. From the faint furrow on his brow, though, it’s apparent that he guesses nothing of the sort.

“Guess so,” Sam echoes dully.

Dad’s eyes cut towards him and, for a moment, their gazes meet in perfect understanding. It’s the first time their father has looked closely at Sam all morning, and almost immediately his eyes sharpen. His slight frown deepens.

“You feeling all right, Sammy? You look pale.”

“Headache,” Sam answers as he takes a sip of his lukewarm coffee. “I, uh, didn’t sleep well.”

Dad continues to frown at him—like he isn’t sure Sam’s telling the truth, like he expects there’s something else going on. Sam’s about to call their father on his paranoid, hunter’s bullshit when the man gives his head a little shake and slumps back in his chair.

“Yeah,” Dad sighs, returning his gaze to Dean. “I know the feeling.”

Dean researches unfalteringly through lunch and all the way up to dinner. Then, finally, he crawls off the bed and stretches in an absent, thoughtless way that draws his t-shirt up, baring a strip of his stomach. Mindful of his father’s presence, Sam does his best not to stare.

After a brief debate, they decide on Chinese and, surprisingly, Dad offers to go pick it up. The meaningful glance he gives Sam as he leaves goes a long way toward explaining the uncharacteristic gesture, though: Dad is leaving them alone together because he wants Sam to get Dean to talk. Sam expects his brother to protest the move (Dad isn’t being the least bit subtle) or at least to try to get their father to bring him along, but he seems to have reconciled himself with the fact that he’s going to have to face Sam sometime.

That doesn’t make it any less awkward when Dad shuts the door behind him on his way out.

Sam is left standing by the window, self-conscious and uncomfortable, while his brother moves around the room replacing the graphs and clippings he took down to work with today. He can feel the time slipping through his fingers—Dad’s going to drive slowly, and he might even detour to a local bar for half an hour, but he’s still going to come back at some point and they need to have things settled between them before the man walks through the door. Sam just doesn’t know how to begin.

As the silence stretches out, it gets harder and harder to find the words to break it, and Sam is considering calling for a do-over when Dean finally throws the papers in his hands to the floor. It’s
an abrupt, violent movement that seems to come out of nowhere, and Sam jumps. Dean looks a little surprised by it himself, but covers the expression up almost immediately. As his brother bends down to start picking things up again, Sam prods himself into motion and hurries over as well.

“Here, let me hel—”

“I got it,” Dean says, jerking a clipping out of Sam’s hand. His voice isn’t a growl—not quite—but there’s enough warning in it that Sam sits back on his heels and puts his hands safely on his thighs where they’re less likely to get stepped on or smacked.

He isn’t doing anything—he’s just sitting there quietly, close enough to see the dark, exhausted smudges beneath his brother’s eyes—but his presence is obviously upsetting Dean because his movements get sharper and sharper. He keeps fumbling the papers he’s already collected, dropping some of them back to the floor in the process, and he’s starting to sweat.

Sam hates that he’s the reason his brother is acting so flustered, and he considers moving away, but he doesn’t want to draw any more attention to himself. Dean’s already aware enough of him as it is.

Finally, just when Sam thinks he’ll scream if Dean drops one more chart, his brother clenches his hands into fists, crumpling the sheets he’s holding, and says, “I can’t do this.”

“I can get them for you if you want.”

The words are out of Sam’s mouth before he realizes that Dean probably isn’t talking about picking up the papers. Sure enough, his brother gives a humorless little laugh and tosses what little he’s managed to gather back on the floor.

“I don’t give a shit about the papers,” he says, still staring at his knees. “I’m talking about us. This. You and me, it—it isn’t working.”

Sam’s first, shaming reaction is a burst of needy panic that makes him want to throw himself on top of Dean and hold on until his brother recants. He locks down on the impulse before he actually moves, thank God, and then takes a couple of seconds to regain control of his breathing before he asks in a carefully controlled voice, “What makes you say that?”

“I don’t know. It just isn’t.”

But Dean still isn’t looking at him—he hasn’t looked directly at Sam once all day, not even when they were figuring out what to have for dinner. Dean’s well aware that his eyes are the weak chink in his armor, giving away things he’d rather keep hidden, and so his lowered lashes and the reluctant clench of his jaw indicate that he does know. He just doesn’t want to say.

Learning Dean’s reasons might not change anything, of course. It might actually damn Sam further—make him feel like more of a worthless shit than he already does—but that doesn’t make Sam any less eager to know. Because there’s a chance that Sam can fix this if he knows what’s wrong. Some (okay, most) of his reasons for keeping them together are selfish, but his own needs and desires aren’t the end of this particular story.

This thing between them isn’t pretty. It isn’t normal, and it sure as hell isn’t easy. But it is working.

Sam knows that it’s working because Dean’s getting better, whether his brother can see that for himself right now or not.

He wants to press for a reason, but he knows from experience that the harder Dean’s pressed, the more he shuts down. Occasionally, he cracks open from the pressure before that happens, but the
best tactic to use when Dean’s clamming up has always been silence. Dean can’t take the quiet—drives himself to speak more quickly and honestly than Sam could ever manage.

It’s hard as hell keeping his mouth shut, especially with all of the emotions jumbling around inside of him, but Sam bites the inside of his cheek and clenches his jaw.

After a few minutes, Dean starts to fidget just like Sam knew he would. He shifts his weight on his knees, and drums his fingers against his thigh, and eventually reaches out and starts shuffling the papers into a pile in front of him. A nervous tic jumps in his cheek, pulling the muscle there tight and then relaxing it again.

Finally, without pausing in his work, Dean grudgingly elaborates, “You deserve someone normal.”

His voice sounds a little less hostile and a little more pleading—*drop it, Sammy, just let me go*—and Sam feels safe enough to try helping with the papers again. When his brother doesn’t snatch the clippings away from him this time, the dread in his chest eases a little.

“Define normal,” he says, reaching for a National Weather Service-issued report on annual rainfall in Brunswick County, North Carolina.

Dean actually glances up at that, and the quick flash of his eyes is somehow both miserable and annoyed at the same time.

“Someone you can settle down with without worrying about getting arrested for moral indecency,” he grunts, picking up his pile with his left hand and adding papers to it without taking any care not to wrinkle them. “Someone you can raise kids with. Someone who isn’t your brother.”

There are still a couple of pieces on the floor, but Dean pushes up with the word, which seems to sum up everything wrong between them and yet doesn’t even begin to explain what they are to each other. Papers in hand, he heads for the table.

Sam hurriedly grabs the last few sheets—a couple of newspaper articles, a map of the United States littered with red dots and Dad’s concise handwriting—and then gets up to follow. “I don’t think that’s really what’s bothering you.”

“Gee, you caught me, Sam,” Dean shoots back sarcastically as he drops his stack on the table. “I’m actually thrilled with the whole incest thing we’ve got going on here.”

It’s the first time either of them has said the word out loud, and it sounds even worse than Sam thought it would. But of course that’s Dean’s intent—he’s using it as a goad, trying to get Sam riled up enough to forget whatever argument he might have prepared—so Sam ignores the sick feeling it conjures in his stomach.

When he puts his own collection of papers on top of his brother’s, the move puts them shoulder-to-shoulder. Sam pauses, giving Dean the chance to shy away if he’s going to, but Dean just rests both hands on the table and leans forward, dropping his head with an almost inaudible sigh.

“I think this is about what we did yesterday,” Sam announces softly.

Because he’s had time to think about it—has been turning it over in the back of his mind all day while Dean messed around with reports and charts and newspaper articles—and it’s the only logical conclusion.

Yes, Dean needed reassuring after the morning he had. Yes, he was feeling good at the time—the burgeoning erection he managed to achieve proved that much.
But something made his cock wilt in Sam’s mouth, and now that he’s thinking about it more objectively, Sam isn’t sure anymore how much of Dean’s affectionate display after the fact was real and how much was a calculated attempt to make Sam think it was real. Or maybe Dean was trying to deceive himself with the performance. Maybe he was trying to convince himself, for just a few minutes more, that everything was all right.

The way that Dean curls his fingers beneath his hands on the table confirms Sam’s suspicions and guilt bites at the back of his mouth, bitter and nauseating. He should have known better than to touch Dean like that. He never should have let things go so far.

Sam wants to beg forgiveness—he’s supposed to be the rational one here, he’s supposed to be looking out for his brother—but this conversation isn’t about him, so he swallows the frantic pleas swelling in his throat and says only, “I pushed too fast. I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry.”

Dean doesn’t lift his head, but he does turn it, looking up at Sam from the corner of his eyes. And Sam is going to have to reevaluate his theory that Dean’s eyes are the windows to his secrets because there isn’t any kind of recognizable emotion in that look at all. His voice is just as unreadable as he repeats, “You’re sorry.”

“Yes,” Sam agrees.

“Sorry for giving me a blowjob.”

Well, that and everything else, but there’s no reason to complicate things. “Yes.”

Dean regards Sam for a moment longer and then drops his head even lower, chin brushing against his chest with a heavy exhalation. He looks up again almost immediately, avoiding Sam, and pushes off from the table. His hand lifts as he walks away, going to his temple—to the scar. Sam has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from commenting on it.

“See, that’s what I mean,” Dean says. “That’s fucked up, Sam. I’m fucked up. You shouldn’t have to deal with this.”

As he nears the wall, Dean stops but doesn’t turn around. His hand is still raised, working the phantom ache at his temple, and there’s a defeated slump to his shoulders. But for the first time all day, Sam feels the faint, prickling beginnings of hope.

If that’s all this is—if this is just Dean trying to be noble for Sam’s sake—then there’s no problem at all. Sam isn’t going to lose this. He isn’t going to lose Dean.

Fighting to keep his desperation out of his voice, he says, “I think that’s my decision.”

“I’m serious, man,” Dean snaps, turning around and dropping his hand. His expression has thawed, and now Sam can read self-disgust there, and fear, and pain, and—most alarming of all—resignation. “I’m a freak,” Dean adds bitterly. “You can do better.”

“We’re both freaks,” Sam offers, only half-joking, but his brother shakes his head and the determined set of his mouth stiffens.

“No, you aren’t, Sam. I mean, yeah, the whole psychic thing is a little weird, but you can’t help that, and I—you said it yourself, man, I don’t—” He swallows, hand coming up to rub at the grimace on his mouth, and then finishes, “I’m a sick fuck.”

“What?” Sam blurts. He knows that his face isn’t hiding anything, and Dean is undoubtedly reading the appalled horror there as disgust, but he’s too shocked by his brother’s accusation to dissemble. “I
never said that!” he protests.

“You—yesterday,” Dean maintains. “I—I asked if—when you were, y’know.” He makes a vague
gesture to his chest, which doesn’t actually clarify anything, and then, with a short, exasperated sigh
—as though Sam is being deliberately obtuse—grunts, “The massage thing, remember?”

Ok, now Sam knows when Dean’s talking about, even if he’s still completely lost as to the what. He
might have been a little distracted by all the naked skin beneath him, but he’d sure as hell remember
having said anything remotely negative to his brother, and he didn’t.

“I was there, Dean,” he says. “Of course I remember. But I never said anything like that.” The words
come out hard, edged with the anger of the unjustly accused.

Dean’s chin juts out and he lifts his head, defiant. Sam would really appreciate it if—just once—his
brother could apply that kind of determination to something other than beating himself down.

“I asked if it was normal,” Dean says. “What I was feeling. And you—”

“I said no,” Sam finishes, chest twisting with guilt. He should have known that Dean would take his
answer and twist it around in his head.

Dean smiles at him—sad and knowing—and the expression makes Sam want to shake his brother
until Dean gets his head on straight.

“Dean, normal—I don’t think that means the same thing to you as it does to me,” he says instead,
trying to both look and sound as reasonable as he can. “When it comes to—to sexual triggers, I don’t
think there is a normal. Different people get turned on by different things, and what works for one
person can shut someone else down completely. I mean, the girls you’ve been with—they all like the
same thing in bed?”

Dean’s face scrunches in confusion for a moment before smoothing out again. The return to non-
expression is a vast improvement over the smile he was offering Sam before. “No.”

“Enjoying the massage doesn’t make you a freak,” Sam argues, borrowing his brother’s words. “It
doesn’t make you sick.”

Dean looks at him and there’s something going on in those eyes. Sam’s sure that his words are
getting through to his brother. He’s being heard.

Then Dean says, “I came, Sam. That son of a bitch was raping me and I came twice. That’s pretty
much the definition of sick freak.”

Sam should have seen this coming from a mile away, but somehow he missed it. The words—an
attack, really—twist in his stomach violently enough that he throws up a little in his mouth. He
swallows reflexively, fighting down the nausea, and moves forward without thinking.

“God, Dean, how can you—you’re not sick, man, you—”

“I liked it,” Dean spits. The blank mask of his face has finally cracked wide open, and it isn’t hatred
or even disgust that Sam sees there: it’s loathing. Loathing and humiliated, cringing shame.

Sam’s in range now, reaching, and one of his hands actually brushes his brother’s shoulder before
Dean seems to realize what he’s doing and snaps backward. In his haste to get away, Dean trips over
his own feet and falls into the wall, where he catches himself after a brief scramble. He clings there,
breathing shallowly and warning Sam to keep back with the hostile line of his body as shreds of their
father’s new wallpapering drift down around him.

“I’m sorry,” Sam says, holding his hands up and out in a placating gesture even though his brother’s face is turned away, forehead pressed into the wall like he can melt through and out the other side. “I’m not going to touch you, okay? I just. I just need you to listen to me.”

“I liked it,” Dean says again. His voice is softer this time—less confrontational—but that only makes it worse. “That son of a bitch raped me and I got off on it, Sam. What the hell can you say to make that all right?” When he twists his head to look at Sam, his eyes are wet. Begging.

Sam’s not all that far from crying himself—seems like tears are only a heartbeat away these days—and his voice is choked as he says, “God, Dean, I wish—I wish I could say something to make you better. If I could, I would—fuck, you have to know I would do anything to fix you. I would—anything it took. But I—Dean, nothing I say can make it all right.”

Dean is wilting in front of him, crushed beneath the weight of Sam’s words, which he’s clearly reading as repudiation, and Sam hastens to add, “I can’t make it all right because how you’re feeling? That’s inside of you, man. No one else can change that but you.” He takes a deep breath and then, firming his jaw, says, “But I can tell you that you didn’t like it.”

“Sam,” Dean chokes out, starting to shake his head in denial.

“You didn’t,” Sam says, and has to shove his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out again. “Dean, you’re not the only person to orgasm during rape. It doesn’t mean you liked it, and it sure as hell doesn’t mean you wanted it. It means that your body responded to stimulation.”

“Stimulation,” Dean spits, flicking his eyes up sharply. “That what you call it when someone fucks your ass with a knife?”

Sam’s stomach plummets and all the spit in his mouth dries up. He doesn’t remember reading anything like that in the police report, but it would explain the damage, which was staggering considering how loose Dean would have been when he was attacked.

“He didn’t—”

“No.” Dean shakes his head, mouth twisting bitterly. “No, but that’s what it felt like. I’ve never—it fucking hurt, okay? It hurt like hell and I still—” He doesn’t say it this time, snapping his mouth shut and pursing his lips before pulling himself upright. “So you go ahead and tell me how that’s normal.”

Dean clearly doesn’t expect the challenge in his eyes to be met, but not even having his hands in his pockets is enough to detour Sam this time. Yanking his right hand free, he reaches out and grips his brother’s upper arm, holding on tightly enough to establish a connection but not so firmly that Dean can’t get away if he needs to.

“You can’t judge yourself based on how your body responds to trauma,” Sam says firmly. “There are a thousand explanations for that kind of thing. I mean, your brain could have gotten confused and switched the signals, you could have—”

“‘fore.”

Sam almost doesn’t catch the word, mumbled the way it is while Dean stares at his own chest.

“What?” he asks, moving his thumb in a light, reassuring circle against his brother’s skin. “I didn’t quite—”
“Before,” Dean repeats, louder this time. His head lifts, eyes seeking out Sam’s. “I got off on it before. Being hurt.”

For a moment, Sam honestly forgets how to breathe. He doesn’t know what kind of expression is on his face, but whatever it is, it makes Dean lick his lips and shift nervously.

“Not—not a lot,” Dean hastens to add. “Not like that, but I, uh.” His eyes fall again and his cheeks flush.

Sam has never felt so invasive before, and he knows that he shouldn’t be touching Dean while Dean makes this confession, but he can’t make his hand open.

“I did nipple clamps a couple of times,” Dean mumbles. “And this one girl, she wanted to spank me, and I figured—hey, I’ll try anything once, and I—I came without anything else.”

An image of Dean kneeling naked on a bed rises in front of Sam’s eyes. His brother’s nipples are bruised and swollen and sore between the teeth of the clamps, which are connected by a black, metal chain that looks so pretty against all that pale skin. Dean’s cock is hard and dripping, and his ass is bright red from being struck. The flesh there will be feverish to the touch, and Dean’s cheeks will twitch beneath Sam’s hands as kneads them, and he’ll make the most incredible, beautiful hissing noises.

Sam comes back to himself in the next instant—ashamed and a little nauseous and a lot turned on—and is really, really thankful that his brother isn’t actually looking at him right now. Dean’s silent for a moment, maybe waiting for Sam to make some kind of judgment call—’that’s pretty sick all right’, or maybe even, ‘it’s okay to feel like that’—but Sam’s too busy fighting with his treacherous libido to offer anything constructive.

Eventually Dean nods.

“So I figure—I figure I’m just fucked up, that I’m a freak.” He hesitates and then, tilting his face further away, says, “Maybe that’s why he picked me. Hanson. Maybe he—maybe he saw that I’m sick, and he—he knew I’d get off on it. Maybe I didn’t fight because part of me wanted it.”

Sam can’t feel anything but horrified at that statement. The warm burn of arousal in his groin immediately goes cold and sickened. His chest tightens and gives one of the sore, deep-seated pulses he’s starting to expect. Pulling his left hand from his pocket, he holds Dean by both arms and ducks his head in an attempt to catch his brother’s eye.

“Dean, look at me,” he begs.

With grudging reluctance, Dean obeys. There’s a cringing quality to his gaze, as though he expects Sam to tell him that he’s right.

“I don’t give a fuck what Hanson saw,” Sam says. His voice comes out angrier than he means it to, but he can’t help himself. His hands are aching with the need to punch someone. “It doesn’t matter. Because you never gave him permission. You said ‘no’, Dean, end of story. Or does ‘no’ stop meaning that just because you like to mix a little pain with your pleasure?”

“It’s sick,” Dean whispers, starting to drop his eyes again.

“Hey,” Sam says, and gives his brother a little shake to get his attention again. “You calling me a pervert?”
The lost, damned expression on Dean’s face is tempered with a faint, questioning hope as he meets Sam’s gaze.

Sam looks back at his brother with a calm confidence that he doesn’t actually feel. “You think you’re the only one in this family with less than vanilla tastes in bed?”

Dean’s expression wavers, running through a bewildering array of emotions before settling somewhere between hopeful and ‘Sammy, you dog!’ Licking his lips, he says, “You, ah ... you like ...

Before he can work up the courage to actually ask, Sam says, “I’m not having a conversation about sexual preferences with you right now. I just want you to understand that this isn’t about whether you prefer missionary or doggie style or—or, hell, Dean, if you’ve ever had any rape fantasies. Because this? What Hanson did to you? You didn’t ask for that. You never gave him permission to touch you.”

“I—"

“An orgasm isn’t permission, Dean,” Sam insists, rolling right over what was undoubtedly meant as an objection. “It doesn’t validate what he did, and it sure as hell doesn’t mean that you wanted it. And you have to believe that, man, because otherwise you’re never going to get better."

Dean breaks away from him then—removing himself from Sam’s grip gently, but firmly—and walks past him toward the window. He lifts one shaking hand to brush his temple before clutching the windowsill.

After a couple of minutes, he says, “I know what you’re saying, Sammy, and it—it makes sense, sort of, but I. I don’t know that I believe it.”

“You have to find a way,” Sam says. “Because I can say it until I’m blue in the face—and I will, I’ll keep saying it until it sinks in—but you need to figure out how to believe for yourself.”

Much as it breaks Sam’s heart not to be able to do that for his brother.

Dean nods without turning around. “Yeah, I get that,” he sighs. “I’ve just ... Dude, you know I’ve never really been one for that faith crap.”

Sam blows out a slow, shaky breath and makes himself smile. “First time for everything.”

Dean nods again and doesn’t speak, but for once Sam isn’t tempted to push. He can tell that his brother is thinking about it—that he actually listened to what Sam had to say, even if it wasn’t something he’s ready to hear—and there isn’t really anything else he can do right now. He just has to hope it was enough.

Clearing his throat, Sam sits down on the bed Dean was using as a desk and leans forward, resting his forearms on his thighs. “Yesterday was too much too fast,” he says.

Dean is silent, and for a moment Sam doesn’t think his brother heard him—or maybe Dean’s just not ready to finish this conversation. Then Dean sighs and says, “Yeah.”

“You have to tell me,” Sam insists. “Before I go too far, not after. I’m not a mind reader.”

“I know,” Dean says, running a hand through his hair as he turns away from the window. “I just—I don’t know, okay? When you’re kissing me—and then, yesterday, when you were, y’know, it felt good. I was—it felt good, okay? But then I just, I don’t know, I started thinking about actually
coming, and then I—” He pauses to wipe his lips with the back of his hand and then finishes, “I was thinking about the bathroom, and how I came then, and I just. It made me want to puke.”

And that ... actually makes a whole lot of sense.

“You felt guilty for liking it,” Sam says.

Dean blinks at him, startled. “I. Yeah, I guess. I shouldn’t feel like that, not after what happened. It doesn’t—it’s not normal.”

There’s that word again. Sam doesn’t know when his brother got so hung on falling into the ‘normal’ category when he’s spent his entire life sneering at it, but he really could have done without this extra complication. He could try to convince Dean yet again that ‘normal’ doesn’t exist, but it took him twenty-two years to figure that out for himself and he can’t expect to convert his brother overnight.

Maybe he can use Dean’s preoccupation with the concept against him.

“Enjoying that kind of thing is actually a sign that you’re getting better,” he offers. “It’s a sign that you’re getting back to normal, not moving away from it.”

“I know that,” Dean replies with a hint of a scowl. “It’s just ... it’s hard to remember.”

Sam isn’t at all sure that Dean does know that, but he isn’t going to argue the point right now. He watches, considering, as his brother wanders back over to the table and rifles through the papers with nervous fingers.

“How much can you handle before you start feeling sick?”

Dean shrugs without looking over at him. “I don’t know. Uh. I like kissing you, but sometimes it—it depends. Sometimes I’m fine, but then other times I just ...”

The paper shuffling is getting more and more agitated as he speaks, and finally Sam can’t take it anymore and gets up to join his brother by the table.

“Okay,” he says, closing one hand around his brother’s wrist and stilling Dean’s hand. When he rubs his thumb against the inside of his brother’s wrist, Dean’s pulse is racing. “Okay, we’re gonna back up. Just kissing. And when you’re good with that—always, not just sometimes—we can try a little more.”

Pressing his lips together in a grimace, Dean stares at the table and mutters, “This is stupid.”

“No, it isn’t,” Sam argues, but the way that Dean is still refusing to look at him tells him that his brother isn’t buying that. He casts his mind around for a way to explain in Dean-speak and then asks, “When Dad hurt his leg, you didn’t expect him to start running again the next day, did you?”

A tiny furrow appears between Dean’s eyes. “No.”

“He had to work up to it, right?” Sam presses. “Had to go to the psychical therapist, do exercises, take it a little bit at a time.”

Dean glances at Sam finally, looking annoyed with himself for getting caught so easily. “That’s different.”

“How?”

They both know Dean doesn’t have an answer, but Dean looks for one anyway, scowling as he
flounders around for a way to refute Sam’s argument. Finally, he sighs. With the same bad grace he always shows when he’s been out maneuvered, he grunts, “Just kissing?”

Sam nods.

“Where does sharing a bed fall on the therapy spectrum?”

Sam’s very, very careful to keep the victorious joy bouncing around in his chest out of his expression. “You tell me, man. You’re the one who knows how you’re feeling.”

Dean’s silent for a moment, thinking, and when he speaks again he sounds slightly less grudging. “It’s like kissing, I guess. Usually it makes me feel better.”

“And other times it doesn’t?” Sam guesses. “Like last night?”

Dean looks away, shrugging, but he doesn’t deny it and—unwittingly or not—he’s leaning his body toward Sam’s. Sam takes his cue from his brother’s body language and not his stony silence and moves closer.

“I’m never going to turn you away,” he says, standing close enough to feel the heat coming off of his brother’s body. “But if you can’t handle it, if you don’t want to be touched, I’m not going to be angry. Or hurt. We have to get two beds for Dad, anyway.”

“He’s sticking around?” Dean asks, still looking away and pretending that Sam’s on the other side of the room instead of crowded up against him.

Although Sam gets the feeling that his brother already knows the answer, he says, “Yeah.”

“He shouldn’t,” Dean mutters. “It’s still too dangerous and we—I’m a liability.”

Shifting to one side, Sam releases his brother’s wrist to wrap an arm around his waist instead. When Dean doesn’t punch him, he hugs his brother more firmly against his chest and rests his chin on Dean’s shoulder. “He wants to help.”

“I don’t need his help,” Dean snaps, resentful and tense. “I’m handling it.”

Sam didn’t want to bring it up again, but if he doesn’t head this off at the pass then Dean’s going to be sullen for weeks, and so he sighs, “Dean, I caught you with a gun in your lap yesterday.”

“I wasn’t going to do anything.”

That’s a different story than Dean was singing yesterday, and the tension in his body is also branding him a big fat liar, but Sam got his point across, and he isn’t going to force his brother to admit it out loud. Instead, he says, “Humor him, okay? If it gets dangerous enough, he’ll leave. You know he will.”

Sam isn’t sure he believes that anymore himself. He might have believed it of the old Dad, but their father has been a different man these past few days—or maybe it’s Sam who’s changed. Maybe he’s finally old enough to understand, at least a little, why Dad does the things he does. However it happened, Sam isn’t sure anymore that their father is capable of leaving when Dean is hurting this badly.

But the lie reassures Dean the way that it was intended to, and his brother relaxes a little in his arms.

“So,” Sam says, reaching out with one hand to lift a page from the pile on the table while continuing
to hold Dean close with the other. “You find anything interesting?”

That isn’t really what he’s asking and he hopes that Dean knows it—that his brother can hear the ‘we okay?’ loud and clear because Sam can’t bring himself to ask directly.

“There’s some definite patterns like Dad said,” Dean answers, reaching out with his right hand to fish a report out of the pile. “Here.”

Sam accepts the report from his brother, but all of his attention is focused on Dean’s other hand—on his left, which has dropped down to settle on top of Sam’s where it’s resting on Dean’s stomach.

Yeah, we’re good.

Reassured, Sam kisses the side of his brother’s neck and then releases him so that he can sit down in one of the wooden chairs. Dean is smiling as he takes a seat on the other side of the table—hesitant, but genuine.

“Weather’s the biggest tip-off,” he says, gesturing to the paper in Sam’s hand.

Sam looks down to follow along as Dean explains about thunderstorms and electrical strikes and temperature dips, and is only slightly distracted by the way that his brother’s ankle hooks around his beneath the table.

Dean spends another two days reviewing Dad’s research, but by the end of the third afternoon it’s clear to everyone that he’s become bored with the exercise. When Dad drops a newspaper on the table alongside the coffee tray the next morning—there’s a headline circled in red: ‘Clarton Lake Claims Third Victim’—Dean perks up like a little kid in an ice cream parlor.

Sam’s not sure he’s ready to trust his brother with a weapon, but he realizes that that’s going to be a difficult step no matter how long they wait. Besides, there’s nothing more for them in Vegas: no reason to stay so close to the sight of Dean’s violation.

At least they won’t be going after the demon right out of the gate.

It isn’t for lack of trying, of course—he and Dad have been scouring weather reports while Dean searched through Dad’s notes for new patterns—but Sam can’t claim to be anything but relieved by the fact that they’re postponing that particular hunt. Dean isn’t anywhere near ready.

Dad has voiced his frustration over the son of a bitch’s abrupt disappearance over and over again (Sam’s heard about Salvation, Iowa, often enough that he almost feels like he watched the Holts burn with his own eyes) but his complaints seem empty. His righteous anger is authentic enough, of course, but his words are stilted. False.

It’s weird, but Sam has a feeling that Dad doesn’t want to rush into that confrontation any more than he does. He’s probably just as worried as Sam about how Dean’s going to hold up when faced with his mother’s killer.

Medication might help with that, and Dad and Sam have talked about it several times over the past few days. Sam’s also talked around the possibility with his brother once or twice, but Dean ignored every hint.

Now, while Dean packs and he does some long-distance reconnaissance on the web, Sam uses his brother’s high spirits as an opportunity to broach the subject directly.
“Hey, Dean?”

“Mm?”

“I was thinking—”

“No, I’m not putting on a gold bikini and prancing around the motel room,” Dean says, not so much as glancing up from his bag.

“Ha ha,” Sam mutters, mostly because his brother’s expecting the response. Before Dean can derail the conversation again, he continues, “I was thinking about medication.”

Dean goes still.

“It wouldn’t have to be much, just—maybe a light sedative to help you sleep, or, uh, something to help with the anxiety?”

The warning in his brother’s eyes as he lifts his head should be enough to shut Sam up, but of course his mouth keeps going anyway.

“There are even some natural remedies we can try,” he babbles. “St John’s wort is supposed to be pretty good, and we wouldn’t need to fake a prescription to get it.”

“No.” Dean’s refusal is flat and final.

Sam can feel his chance to convince his brother slipping away from him, and he gropes after it desperately. “Dean, please. I know you think taking medication makes you weak or something, but it —”

“No means no, Sam,” Dean interrupts. His voice is a hostile sneer. “Isn’t that what you keep telling me?”

The barb hits Sam low in his gut, where it’s supposed to, and he swallows the rest of his pleas. Dropping his eyes before his brother’s cold, satisfied smile, he waits for Dean to go back to packing.

Eventually, Dean does.

In the icy expanse of the silence between them, Sam shivers.

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An hour later, Sam twitches the curtain aside and glancing out the window to make sure that his brother and father are still busy loading the Impala. When he’s relatively sure that he has a couple minutes of privacy, he lets the curtain fall shut again and pulls out his cell phone. This time he dials the ER directly, having pulled the number off the hospital website yesterday when Dean and Dad were out picking up lunch.

Sam isn’t even sure why he’s calling—he doesn’t know this woman, she’s a stranger he met in passing—but he still feels a little let down when he asks for Claire and the pleasant, androgynous voice on the other end of the line answers, “It’s her day off.”

“Oh,” Sam says, heading over to the table and picking up his bag.

His disappointment must have leaked into his voice because the receptionist offers, “I can take a message, if you want?”
Dean, of course, picks that moment to poke his head back into the room and call, “What’s the hold up, dude?”

It’s the first thing he’s said to Sam since their argument, but there’s no lingering rancor in his voice. Sam has a moment to feel relieved that Dean let him off the hook so easily and then his brother notices the cell phone.

“Who’re you talking to?” Dean asks, just as the receptionist prods Sam with an impersonal, “Sir?”

“Yeah,” Sam says, answering the receptionist. Under the pretense of scanning the room to make sure neither of them left anything behind, he turns his back on his brother. “Can you just let her know that I found my brother and he’s gonna be fine? And, uh, tell her thanks. For everything.”

“And you are?”

Sam can feel his brother’s eyes eating into the back of his head and it makes him hesitate. With Dean standing so close, he can’t very well identify himself as ‘the rape victim’s brother’—not if he wants Dean to talk to him anytime within the next few months. Although Sam doesn’t know whether he could bring himself to say it as plainly as that even if Dean weren’t here.

Finally, he settles on, “Tell her it’s her friend from the FBI.”

If she can’t place him from that, then he had no business calling in the first place.

“I didn’t know Claire knew any—”

Sam hangs up on the suddenly interested receptionist and shoves his phone into his back pocket before turning around to face his brother.

“Do I want to know?” Dean asks tonelessly.

Sam could lie, but Dean heard more than enough of the conversation, and he’d only be hanging himself if he tried. “No,” he admits.

Dean nods and taps the back of the door with one hand. “Okay, then,” he says heartily.

Sam’s pathetically grateful for his brother’s casual forgiveness, which he’s pretty sure he doesn’t deserve. He’s about to say as much when Dean’s mouth turns up into the shit-eating grin that always gets them in so much trouble with the police.

“Oh crap, what?” Sam blurts, tensing.

Dean’s grin widens. “If you don’t get your ass in the car in the next thirty seconds, you’re riding with Dad.”

It’s possible that Sam read forgiveness into Dean’s puckish attitude a little too soon.

He pictures being shut up in the truck’s cab with their father—listening to 70’s rock between bouts of NPR, trying to make small talk and managing little more than limp, stilted observations on the road or the weather, rehashing the three or four facts they have on their current case over and over again—and thinks that he’d almost prefer to be punished by his brother’s silence.

“One,” Dean drawls, starting the count.

Sam almost bowls him over getting out the door.
It’s two days to Clarton, another to figure out that they’re dealing with a kelpie, and then two more to hunt the creature down and dispatch it.

Dean deals the killing blow, confident and whole in the moment. He swings the iron machete like it’s a natural extension of his arm, easy as breathing, and Sam’s too busy trying to keep his head above water to worry that his brother will turn the blade on himself.

Dean’s at his side a moment later.

Plunging the machete deeply into the ground, he grabs Sam’s collar and hauls him onto the shore. As Sam coughs up brackish water, Dean hooks an arm low around his waist and pulls him further onto dry land. Off to Sam’s right, there’s a wan flicker of fire as Dad lights the kelpie’s corpse.

“Have a nice swim?” Dean pants in Sam’s ear.

Sam’s still choking on stagnant lake water, but between coughs he manages to let out a rough laugh.

And just like that, they’re off and running.
Chapter 30

It’s almost like old times. *Almost,* with a few minor adjustments that leave Sam actually enjoying himself. The open road and the tight-knit feel of family are the same, and the familiar adrenaline rush of the hunts, but ...

But.

Instead of barking orders, Dad *asks.* He brings Sam into their war councils, praises him for his research, trains with him morning and afternoon. When Sam nails a zombie with a make-shift blow torch in Clarkson, Indiana, he even gets a warm slap on the shoulder and a “damn fine job, son” from their father. The man slips up occasionally, of course—falls back into his old, infuriating habits—but he always catches himself before it goes too far.

For the first time, instead of feeling suffocated and claustrophobic beneath the Us-Against-the-World mentality, Sam feels embraced by it. He thinks he might understand a little now what Dean meant when he said that he already had a home.

Dean himself is clearly thriving on Dad’s presence—on having his family again, not just together but the closest to functional that they’ve ever been. The rough, forward-back progression he was making shifts into slow but steady improvement. He smiles more often and more genuinely. He touches his scar less frequently, leaving it alone for days at time. His confidence is returning with every slain monster, every saved life.

They always get two rooms, which means that Sam is able to share a bed with his brother as often as Dean wants him. The nights Dean can’t handle the contact are few and far between—and really, Sam is proud of how much his brother managed to keep it together after that frenzied chase through the fun house’s mirror room.

When they do sleep together, Sam wakes his brother in the morning with chaste, feather-soft touches along his jaw and cheekbones. Dean blinks awake with a sleepy smile and, more often than not, leans in to initiate a lazy make-out session. If those sessions sometimes leave Sam frustrated and aching in sensitive places, he doesn’t mind. He doesn’t mind because of the look they put on his brother’s face—because each languid kiss is teaching Dean that this is okay, that he’s safe, that Sam will *keep* him safe.

It hurts to know that Dean still has shadowed moments, when Sam can read in his brother’s eyes that he’s thinking the thoughts he voiced in Vegas—*freak, my fault, wanted it*—but Sam’s heart no longer kicks in his chest whenever his brother is around weapons. That particular bridge appears to have been crossed and burned behind them, and good riddance. He still gets nervous whenever Dean handles the Colt, which has taken on almost talismanic significance in their triad, but that’s a different kind of anxiety—not just for Dean but for all of them, for the confrontation that clings to the horizon like a heat mirage.

Sam hasn’t had much experience with demons—that’s more Bobby Singer’s bag than theirs—but he’s seen enough to know they scare him. One look into those beetle black eyes and his stomach drops in on itself and his breath crystallizes in his throat.

When Sam thinks of demons, he thinks of leaden, burnt skies, and dead grass the color of rust, and sonorous echoing voices speaking in syllables that make human ears bleed. He thinks of the darkness of space, and how cold the void, and how impossibly, inconceivably wide, and that’s the place where demons reside in his mind. In twisted dreamscapes and impossibilities.
Demons are more than unnatural. They’re Other.

Sam doesn’t want to have anything to do with the fucking things.

Oh, he isn’t bowing out of this fight—he wants some vengeance of his own for Jess, and for being forced into this world to begin with. He also wants answers. He wants to know what he and Max Miller have in common, and why the demon is so very interested in them. He wants to know why the two blonde, beautiful women in his life ended up bleeding and burnt on a ceiling.

Sam’s beginning to think that their father might know something about that. It’s in the man’s silences sometimes: in the way that Sam catches Dad looking at him every once in a while, with his face stiffened into an expression of cautious concern. As though Sam is a gun that might misfire at any moment and for no reason whatsoever.

No matter how much Sam wants to know, or how desperately he wants to put an end to the uncertain pit in his stomach, he never asks.

He’s too afraid that this new, open version of his father will answer.

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And the miles roll out behind them.

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In Amarillo, Texas, Dean insists on stopping at the Big Texan Steak Ranch. Sam isn’t surprised when his brother easily conquers the restaurant’s 72 oz Steak Challenge, consuming the whole monstrosity in a little under fifty minutes. Dean beams as he stuffs the last forkful in his mouth and lifts both hands in triumph.

Suddenly, people are pressing in from every side to offer shoulder claps and congratulations, and Dean, wide-eyed, moves closer to Sam and hunches his shoulders in an attempt to make himself smaller. Sam finds himself unconsciously shifting in an attempt to stay between Dean and his well-wishers, while Dad performs the same service on Dean’s other side.

The whole dance leaves a sour taste in his mouth—Dean should have enjoyed his victory. He should have been able to lean back in his chair and pat his stomach and belch and flirt shamelessly with the waitress when she refilled his beer. Instead, he’s all but hiding behind Sam and Dad, and when they finally get back to the safety of the Impala, Sam puts a hand on his brother’s neck and finds him shaking.

He’s sure, then, that the entire night is going to be a bust, but it doesn’t stop him from trying to lift Dean’s spirits anyway. He pops the Black Album into the cassette player and talks pretty much nonstop about their last hunt—compliments about the way Dean handled the churel, mostly.

By the time they get back to the motel, Dean is sitting tall behind the wheel again. One hour later, Sam and Dad are getting goofy, proud smiles from him as they sit around Dad’s motel room and tease him about his bottomless pit of a stomach. When they turn in three hours after that, Dean folds himself around Sam with a contented sigh.

Sam ends up chalking that one down as a win.

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In Clarkson, Louisiana, their main witness takes one look at Dean and falls in love. The man, Greg
Larkman, is the quintessential gay stereotype: a delicate-boned, slender hairdresser with frosted hair and a pink scarf around his neck and a Chinese Crested that takes an instant dislike to Dean.

Dean’s too annoyed with the dog barking and bouncing around his feet to notice the puppy eyes Greg is throwing him—Sam can see the urge to punt the Crested across the room in every twitch of his brother’s legs. Luckily for the dog, Greg picks it up before Dean gives in to the impulse, hugging the yapping Crested to his chest and going on and on about how Fifi is an excellent judge of character, and how it’s clear Dean is a wonderful man because she obviously adores him.

Giving Fifi—and Fifi’s bared teeth—a wary look, Dean offers Greg a wide, insincere smile and mutters, “Yeah, the feeling’s mutual.”

It isn’t until Greg makes his sixth attempt to ask Dean out for a drink that Dean catches on. He peers across the low coffee table while Greg twitters on about this FABulous new bar downtown and then, finally, his eyes widen in understanding.

Sam shifts in his own seat, ready to intervene when needed—he spent the entire interview waiting for his brother to figure it out and preparing for the panic attack that would inevitably follow.

Dean does tense, and his mouth goes uneasy and tight, but all he says is, “Sorry, I’m not gay.”

“Oh,” Greg says, deflating.

And that’s that.

After, when they’re back in the Impala and on their way to meet up with Dad, Sam rests his hand lightly on the back of his brother’s neck and says, “I’m proud of you.”

Dean rolls his eyes.

In Dalton, Oklahoma, they rid Diane Fletcher’s ranch of a particularly nasty black dog. Diane is twenty-six, athletic and sassy. Dad likes her instantly. Despite the warm, interested way she looks at Dean, Sam likes her too.

They stay at the ranch during the hunt, and for once there’s no reason to hide who they are or what they do—Diane got Dad’s number from an old boyfriend and called them in herself. It’s weird, getting up in the morning and coming down to breakfast to find Dean and Dad cleaning shotguns at the kitchen table while Diane fries steak on the stove. Strangely domestic.

Diane doesn’t try to poke her nose into their business—says that’s their job, not hers, and she knows better than to get her fool self killed—but once the dog’s dead she challenges them to come out riding with her. Dad takes to the horses with a natural ease that he claims comes from visiting his grandfather’s farm every summer when he was growing up, but Sam spends a miserable four hours getting laughed at and helped back into the saddle by a girl half his size. Dean’s just as lost and grumpy as Sam, complaining about his horse and asking why the hell people bother doing this when they have cars.

Diane throws back her head and laughs with the same open confidence that marks everything she does. Then, maneuvering her horse close enough to Dean’s to brush their legs together, she says, “Give me a couple months to work with you, sugar. You’ll swear off cars for good.”

From the heated curve of her smile, it’s clear that she’s offering to let Dean ride more than horses, and Sam can tell his brother understands that. Dean’s quicker at picking up cues from women than
from men—probably because he’s never been interested in another guy aside from Sam.

Sam wants to tell Diane to back the fuck off, Dean’s taken, but Dad is watching. Dad is less than four feet away and watching with a hopeful, approving expression, so Sam just tightens his grip on the reins and bites down on the inside of his cheek. His horse, Marigold, is a placid old thing, but Sam’s sudden stiffness disturbs her enough that she gives a nervous prance. The unexpected movement dislodges Sam from her back and sends him crashing to the ground. Again.

In the ensuing commotion and laughter—only you’d figure out how to fall off something that isn’t even moving, Sammy—Diane’s offer goes unanswered.

When Dean doesn’t raise the subject again on his own, Diane’s smart enough to let the matter drop, but Sam can tell that she’s still thinking about it as she hugs them all goodbye. She saves Dean for last, and holds onto him the longest. From the passenger seat of the Impala, where Sam’s already waiting, he’s pretty sure that he sees her sniff his brother’s neck.

When Dean finally starts to pull away a couple of moments later, Diane’s right hand drops down from his shoulder and she gooses him with a mischievous grin.

Dean jumps, but doesn’t jerk away. Blushing, he lifts his right hand—Sam tenses—and then ducks his head a little and rubs the back of his neck while he mumbles something Sam doesn’t catch.

Diane laughs and hugs him again before finally stepping back and giving them all a wave. As Dean heads toward the driver’s side of the Impala, she cups her hands around her mouth and shouts, “Hey, Winchester Senior! Your son’s got a nice ass!”

Even the tips of Dean’s ears are pink as he gets into the car, and his shoulders are hunched, but Sam can tell it’s from embarrassment and not any genuine distress. He doesn’t understand how he can be more upset by Diane’s words than his brother.

“Watch who you’re calling ‘senior’, girl!” Dad shouts as he revs past the Impala and down the drive, but he’s grinning good-naturedly and waving out the window. Probably picturing the 2.5 grandchildren Dean and Diane are supposed to give him.

Sam fumes all the way to Ohio.

Four days later, while they’re wrapping up a case in Dayton, Sam nearly has his head taken off by a hubcap. Dean tackles him to the ground just in time, and the rusted, serrated metal thunks into the auto shop’s wall behind them instead. Dad lights up the car pit a moment later, burning away the last, lingering traces of blood where the lift failed seven months ago and crushed one of the shop’s mechanics into paste.

“You okay?” Dean demands. His hands are moving all over Sam’s chest: patting, feeling for signs of injury.

“Fine,” Sam pants.

In truth, he’s a little winded from being slammed down onto the concrete floor by his brother, but that’s in no way distracting enough to make him overlook the fact that Dean is practically feeling him up right now. The adrenaline rush from the hunt isn’t helping matters, and Sam can feel his cock stirring. Getting up onto his elbows, he makes a weak attempt to push his brother off and Dean yanks
him closer and kisses him.

Sam is hyperaware of their father’s presence only a few feet away—and yeah, Dad is staring down into the burning pit right now, but he could turn around at any second, what the fuck does Dean think he’s doing? The kiss only lasts a couple of seconds, but it feels longer. Feels like forever. Then Dean plants a hand in the center of Sam’s chest and shoves him back down against the cement floor.

“Ow!” Sam complains.

Dad does turn around at that, one eyebrow raised as he tucks the book of matches back into his shirt pocket. “You boys okay?”

“Yeah,” Sam says at the same time that Dean responds, “I think Sammy broke a nail.”

Sam shoots his brother a warning glare—how the fuck can Dean be making jokes when he just, Sam’s lips are still tingling from that kiss, damn it, and Dean has to feel his cock throbbing where their lower bodies are still tangled together, and Dad is looking at them. Maybe a month ago, when their father first came back into their lives, Sam wouldn’t have cared if the man found out what they were up to, but that was then and this is now, as the saying goes. He’s just getting to know Dad—doesn’t want to lose him again. And Sam knows that Dean doesn’t want to alienate their father either, so what the hell is he playing at?

But Dad doesn’t seem to think there’s anything abnormal about the way that Dean is still blanketing Sam with his weight. He just snorts, shaking his head with a slight smile, and says, “Then get your asses in gear and stop horsing around. There’s a couple of beers down at the bar with our names on them. I’m buying.”

He turns away without waiting for them to comply, and so he misses the way that the teasing levity slides off of Dean’s face as he looks down at Sam. Misses the fingertips that Dean trails solemnly but swiftly across Sam’s throat before pushing up to his feet and holding out a hand.

Sam has to palm his cock, adjusting it so that it lies more smoothly against the inseam of his right pants leg, before accepting. He isn’t really surprised when his brother yanks a little too hard, sending Sam stumbling into Dean’s chest once he’s on his feet. Dean’s eyes are serious and dark as he holds Sam there. His mouth is unsmiling.

Without looking around to check for Dad—although Sam’s sure that his brother knows where the man is, that he’s been tracking the sound of his movements—Dean presses his lips to the side of Sam’s throat. Sam holds still, eyes locked on their father’s retreating back and cock throbbing against his inner thigh, as his brother opens his mouth and bites down delicately. Dean pauses and then, dragging his teeth lightly along Sam’s skin, draws off.

Sam is still trying to catch his breath when his brother releases him and turns away to follow Dad out.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

They beg off the beer. Or rather, Dean begs off the beer for the both of them while Sam stands silently at his side. Sam isn’t sure what sort of expression is on his face while his brother talks about being tired and getting an early start in the morning, but it must dovetail well enough with Dean’s story not to raise alarms because Dad looks disappointed, but not suspicious, as he nods.

The drive back to the motel is stiflingly silent. Dean doesn’t seem to feel like talking and Sam doesn’t know what to say. He keeps reaching up to touch the patch of skin Dean bit, even after the last traces
of his brother’s saliva has dried. He replays Dean’s expression in his mind, trying to decipher the look in his brother’s eyes. Trying to figure out what just happened. What’s still happening.

Sam is no closer to understanding when he steps inside their motel room, and then Dean makes things even more confusing by shoving him against the wall and all but mauling Sam’s mouth before the door has even finished closing.

“Mmph!” Sam says, surprised, and gets his hands on Dean’s biceps. It takes a couple of seconds to push his brother off—mostly because Sam’s conflicted about whether he actually wants to succeed—but finally he’s able to suck in a quick, gasping breath and say, “What are you—”

That’s as far as he gets before Dean forces himself forward again and starts reminding Sam why it is so very, very easy to forget himself when he’s with his brother. This time, Sam can’t help kissing back—it’s a reflexive response to the demand in his brother’s lips—and one of his hands snakes down to grip Dean’s ass and pull him close.

Instantly, the weight of Dean’s body—the warmth of his mouth—is gone. He hasn’t gone far, though: leaning close and staring directly back into Sam’s eyes. The deep, forest green of Dean’s irises is distracting, and it takes Sam a while to realize that his brother has pinned both of his hands to the wall on either side of his face. Licking his lips, he flexes his hands against Dean’s grasp and his brother clenches up on him with a low growl.

“No touching.”

No—how the fuck does Dean think that’s even remotely fair, jumping Sam out of the blue and then telling him he can’t actually have what his brother is throwing at him? Dean’s messed up right now, sure, and that earns him some allowances, but it doesn’t excuse deliberate cruelty. And if Dean hasn’t already crossed that line, then he’s rapidly approaching it.

“What the hell, man?” Sam manages.

Still staring into Sam’s eyes with an intensity that leaves him shaken, Dean says, “You almost died.”

Sam blinks, puzzled. “I—well, yeah. I’ve almost died lots of times.”

“Not since I—” Dean starts, and then bites down hard on the rest of the sentence.

Sam has no idea what his brother was going to say—what turning point they’ve passed that’s making Dean react so strongly—but he knows that his brother needs him. Something put that driving need in Dean’s eyes, and now it’s up to Sam to soothe him.

“Dean,” he says, expression softening. “I’m okay, man, I—”

“No,” Dean interrupts with a shake of his head. “I don’t want—I don’t want to talk about it. I just.” He grimaces, dropping his eyes, but doesn’t step back. Doesn’t release Sam’s wrists.

Sam gives his brother a couple of minutes to compose his thoughts, but eventually it becomes clear that Dean isn’t going to continue without prompting.

“You just what?”

“I need this.” The words are reluctant. Dragging. Dean sounds angry, but Sam knows instinctively that the emotion isn’t directed at him. “I need to feel you, that you’re okay. But I can’t—” He takes a ragged breath and finishes, “You touch me and it only makes things worse.”
It’s difficult not to be hurt by that announcement, but Sam does his best to push the pain to one side. He knows—intellectually, anyway—that it isn’t about him. It’s about Dean’s memories. Dean’s pain. It’s about that fucker Hanson.

“Just tell me what you need,” Sam says. He tries to keep the worst of the hurt out of his voice—tries not to let Dean hear how deeply his brother’s words have affected him—but he isn’t sure that it makes a difference. Now that he has a better idea where Dean’s head is at, it’s pathetically easy to read him—the harshness of his breathing, the wideness of his eyes, the pallor of his skin. He reads fear there. Panic. Desperation.

Dean’s way past deciphering the nuances of tone.

“I need you to stay there and let me do this,” Dean answers, still not meeting Sam’s eyes. There’s a hesitancy about him suddenly, as though he thinks Sam is going to deny him, turn him away.

He should know by now that denying him anything is impossible.

“Okay.”

Dean’s eyes flicker up at that, surprise pushing back some of the fear, and Sam meets his brother’s transparent, frantic expression with calm devotion. Slowly, some of the tension eases out of Dean’s face and his grip on Sam’s wrists loosens. When Sam still doesn’t move, Dean’s hands reluctantly fall away.

Now that he’s free, Sam is all but vibrating with the need to touch, but he stays still like he promised, waiting for his brother to do what he has to. Dean shifts a little and that’s it. He seems stalled out, hesitant and awkward, and eventually it occurs to Sam that his brother is waiting for more explicit permission.

“You can touch me,” he says—just that, but apparently it’s enough.

Dean immediately moves in again, covering Sam’s mouth with his own and stealing Sam’s breath. Sam kisses back—that much hasn’t been forbidden, which is a damned good thing because Sam wouldn’t be able to help himself even if it was. When Dean’s hands land on his waist and push up beneath his t-shirt, Sam moans inarticulately into the kiss.

God, Dean is doing the most obscene things with his lips and his tongue, and now he’s dragging his hands all over Sam’s skin as well. Rough, demanding gropes move up and down Sam’s sides, across his stomach, around to his back. Finally, Dean cups Sam’s shoulder blades with his palms and pulls Sam forward against him.

The new position leaves Sam’s cock—hard, because of course he’s fucking hard—snugged up against his brother’s hipbone, but Dean doesn’t seem to mind. Dean actually seems to have been going for just that because, before Sam can process the shift, his brother starts rubbing against him in rhythmic thrusts.

If this gets any better, Sam is going to explode.

Dean pulls back just enough to mutter, “Let me, let me,” against Sam’s lips, and Sam doesn’t know what more he can offer than this, what Dean is asking for, but then his brother’s hands slide down his back and onto his stomach and those are Dean’s clever fingers opening up Sam’s pants and this is, it’s—

“No,” Sam groans, but it’s all he can manage. He isn’t strong enough to actually push Dean away, and his hips are moving without his permission, helping Dean slide denim and cotton down in a
single push. Christ, this is going to fuck Dean up so badly, and they were doing so well, but Sam wants, and all he can manage when his brother’s hand closes on his cock is a ragged whimper.

“I need you,” Dean pants, and kisses the moan from Sam’s lips as he starts to pump his hand. “I need you to give me this.”

God, Sam wants to give Dean this, but he doesn’t know—he can’t—

“Show me,” Dean demands. “Show me you need me too—fucking—come on, Sammy—said you couldn’t touch, never said you couldn’t move.”

Dean tightens his grip, just this side of painful, and Sam only has so much willpower. With a shudder, he bucks his hips forward, sliding his cock through his brother’s hand.

“That’s it,” Dean murmurs, encouraging. “Just like that, come on.”

He catches Sam’s mouth again, and fuck, Sam can’t get enough air. His head is spinning, his lungs burning, and he doesn’t care because Dean is sucking on his tongue and Dean’s heavy silver ring keeps dragging against Sam’s cock as he pumps his hips and God, Sam wants to touch...

Dropping his hands down to his sides, he clutches at the wall. The way that the faded, striped wallpaper peels beneath his nails only drives him to dig in deeper, as though he can reach through the plaster and into the neighboring room if he tries hard enough. He’s probably bruising his fingertips all to hell, but it doesn’t matter—he’ll do anything to keep from putting his hands on Dean’s body the way he wants to.

Sam can feel his orgasm edging in now, building low in his gut and spreading through his body in warm shudders. He tries to get his mouth free so that he can warn Dean, but his brother isn’t having any of it. Instead, Dean presses his mouth down more firmly over Sam’s, fucking his tongue forward as his strokes speed. Sam makes a muffled, pleasure-pained noise and comes, shooting all over his brother’s fingers.

In the midst of Sam’s orgasm, Dean’s other hand fumbles into his hair. Getting a firm grip, Dean yanks Sam’s head to one side. He releases Sam’s mouth (leaving Sam’s final, choked moans to spill directly into the air) and bites down again on the exposed line of his neck. He’s less careful this time, and even through the last, dizzying gusts of his orgasm Sam can tell that Dean intends this bite to leave a mark.

“Not,” Sam gasps, and then groans as his brother strokes Sam’s spent cock, coating it with semen. “N—not there. Dean. Dad’ll see.”

He doesn’t think Dean will hear him—isn’t sure Dean is capable of hearing him. But Dean must, because he immediately releases Sam’s hair in order to jerk the collar of his t-shirt down instead. He pulls violently enough that the thin material tears, giving him access to the line of Sam’s collarbone.

This time, when his brother lowers his head, Sam doesn’t protest.

He winces at the sting—and at the scrape of Dean’s teeth dragging against his bone—but doesn’t make a sound. Dean worries at Sam’s collarbone—not one mark, but several, like his claim will be stronger the more he leaves—and then, finally, lifts his head and lets go of Sam’s cock and staggers backwards.

Dean’s eyes are wide on Sam’s neck, his breathing ragged. His right hand is slick and shiny with Sam’s come, his lips red and swollen from their kisses. But he seems calmer. Less raw.
Sam has to swallow a couple of times before he can speak.

“You owe me a new shirt.”

It’s a joke—an effort to break the tension between them—but Dean doesn’t seem to have heard. He’s still staring, looking winded and stunned, and Sam drags one hand off the wall and (nonchalantly, he hopes) uses it to cover his softening cock.

“Dean? You okay?”

“I—” Dean says and then stops. He’s staring at Sam’s crotch now, and Sam can see it hitting his brother. What he just did. Sam tenses, ready to grab him if he tries to run.

Dean’s gaze shifts from Sam’s crotch to his own come-coated hand, which he lifts and flexes. When he raises his eyes again, they’re opaque and unreadable. He steps forward to wipe his hand on Sam’s shirt and then grabs the torn collar and stretches it down, moving the material so he can see the blooming bruises on Sam’s skin. Sam holds himself very, very still and does his best not to breathe.

“Yeah,” Dean says finally, ghosting one finger over Sam’s collarbone and setting off an ache. “I’m okay.”

His eyes lift to Sam’s, and they’ve thawed—not all the way, but enough for Sam to read truth there, and wonder, and a faint trace of heat. He sags against the wall, relieved.

Then Dean says, “I want you to mark me,” and Sam’s stomach drops through the floor.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“This—Dean, this was a lot for one day, okay?” Sam stammers.

He really, really wishes he’d pulled up his pants when he had the space to do so. Now Dean is right in front of him, crowding him up against the wall and demanding that Sam do what he’s wanted to for so long.

Sam’s always had a short recovery time but this is ridiculous.

Pushing more firmly down on his insatiable cock, he clears his throat and says, “I get that you, uh, you were scared. With the hubcap thing. But—”

“Not pussying out on me, are you, Sammy?” Dean taunts with a small, private smile. Stepping back, he draws his shirt off in a smooth motion and drops it on the floor. Then, holding his arms out, he says, “Pick a spot. Anywhere you can see and Dad can’t.”

Sam isn’t about to take what Dean’s offering, but Dean is rarely so unselfconscious and he can’t stop himself from looking. His eyes flit over his brother’s chest, down to his stomach, across the crest of his hipbones where they rise just above the waist of Dean’s jeans.

God, he’s gorgeous.

Sam knows why Dean thinks he’s asking for this—it’s Dean’s way of trying to make their relationship more concrete, make their claim on each other something real that he can see, something he can touch. And maybe there are elements of that in Dean’s reasoning.

But this is also his fear of abandonment raising its ugly head. It’s his belief that he isn’t good enough
and never will be. Marking isn’t a kink for Dean. It’s a safety blanket.

Sam wants it badly enough himself that he would probably mark Dean anyway, except for how he can’t stop thinking about the photos attached to his brother’s police file.

Dean’s torso littered with bites. His bruised back. The purple smudges on the insides of his thighs. Dean’s asking for it this time—it’s going to be Sam’s mouth leaving the mark—but the process is going to feel the same.

If Sam were still at the mercy of his libido, the way he was when he marked Dean’s collarbone in Vegas, then they wouldn’t be having this conversation. Dean would already be pinned down on the bed, hands held above his head while Sam licked and bit his way across his brother’s chest and stomach.

And all of their hard-won progress would be destroyed in a second.

But Sam has learned a degree of control since then, and he’s able to put his hardening cock almost completely out of his mind as he contemplates the decision before him.

Dean is asking for this—says he needs it, and maybe he does. But it’s a small miracle that he isn’t already freaking out about jerking Sam off, and who knows how he’s gonna feel in a couple of minutes, when he’s had enough time to think it over.

“You want me to pick?” Dean prods. “Make it easy for you?”

Sam chews the words reluctantly in his mouth for a moment—Dean’s not going to like this—and then says, “You’re not ready.”

Sure enough, the easy-going smile falls off Dean’s face like a landslide.

“You aren’t the only one who can say no,” Sam points out in return. It’s callous and he knows it—he means it to be, means to drive Dean a little closer to that wounded headspace so that he’ll realize what he’s asking for.

Sam expects his brother to get angry. He expects him to grimace and reach for his scar.

Instead, Dean shuts down. His eyes go blank and dead.

“Fine,” he says, turning away and reaching for his shirt.

Pausing only to yank up his pants, Sam stumbles after him. “I want to,” he says, glancing away from Dean long enough to do up his zipper. “God, Dean, I’d tattoo my name on your ass if you’d let me, I just—I don’t want to hurt you.”

Dean stands there stiffly for a moment, t-shirt in hand and back to Sam, and then says in a cold, clipped voice, “I wouldn’t ask if I didn’t think I could handle it.”

Sam should be shot for even considering giving in, but Dean is taking the refusal even worse than Sam thought he would. He’s gone and twisted Sam’s decision into some kind of judgment on his own progress—which is frustratingly ridiculous, but Sam can already tell that he isn’t going to be able to talk Dean around from this one. At this point, submitting to his brother’s demands seems to be the lesser of two evils.
“You pick.”

Dean glances back at that, uncertain and surprised. The t-shirt dangles, forgotten, from his right hand. “What?”

“I’ll do it,” Sam says, holding his brother’s eyes. “But you pick where.”

Dean looks at Sam over his shoulder, searching for the catch and about as trusting as Charlie Brown whenever Lucy offers to hold the football for him. Then, slowly, he turns around. His hand opens and the t-shirt falls back to the floor.

When Dean steps forward, the deliberate intent of the motion makes Sam nervous. He sort of wants to crack a joke to diffuse the tension, but that’s always been more Dean’s thing than his. He really wants to take it back, but he ... he can’t. Dean wants this—he needs it—and, if Sam is going to be completely honest with himself, he isn’t the only one.

Maybe this ritual (because that’s what it is, whether they’ve done it before or not; timeless and seared into their bones) is what Sam needs to get Diane out of his head.

Dean comes to a halt in front of him and stands there, staring into Sam’s eyes as though trying to gauge his sincerity. His jaw twitches minutely and then he reaches out and puts a hand on Sam’s shoulder. Sam lets himself be pushed down; he goes to his knees in front of his brother while tilting his face up, careful not to break eye contact. Dean’s eyes are darker than ever as he shifts his hand from Sam’s shoulder to his hair—the color of evergreens beneath a stormy sky.

“I love you,” Sam says. He doesn’t mean to speak, but the words come out anyway, natural as breathing.

Something flickers in Dean’s gaze at the declaration and his grip tightens on Sam’s hair. As he begins to draw Sam in, Sam’s heart flutters alarmingly. He can’t take this any more—can’t handle the naked need on Dean’s face—so he lets his eyes slide shut.

Dean pulls Sam in until Sam can feel the heat from his brother’s stomach on his face. The pressure slacks then, but a moment later there are fingers on Sam’s jaw, angling his face the way Dean wants it. Sam can smell sex, an overpowering musk from Dean’s hand on his skin, and his cock gives an interested twitch.

The fingers on his jaw fall away and Dean pushes at the back of Sam’s head again, urging him forward with the gentle pressure of his fingers. At the first brush of skin against his lips, Sam opens his mouth and bites down. His teeth scrape against bone—Dean’s hip, then—and he adjusts before his brother’s hiss registers, shallowing the bite and settling himself more firmly into place. His left hand lifts to rest tentatively on Dean’s right hip for balance. The other curls around his own upper thigh, a necessary grounding technique.

Sam pauses there, letting Dean adjust to his presence and waiting for a signal that his brother’s ready for him to continue. After a couple of seconds, permission comes in the form of Dean’s right hand stroking lightly through his hair while Dean’s left comes to rest on his shoulder. Sam licks the skin in his mouth in acknowledgement and then goes to work.

He’s as gentle as he can be while doing his job, concentration split between his brother’s hipbone and Dean’s hands on his skin. He has to trust that Dean will let him know if something goes wrong. His brother’s grip does tighten as Sam starts—fingers digging into Sam’s collarbone hard enough to bruise. The pressure would make Sam pause if Dean weren’t using Sam’s hair to jerk Sam’s face more firmly against his hip at the same time.
God, Dean smells good.

Sam holds on a little more tightly himself while he sucks on his brother’s skin, enjoying every hitch in Dean’s breath, every twitch of his muscles. Mine, he thinks, nipping with his teeth. You’re mine.

When he finally draws back and opens his eyes three minutes later, the slick patch of skin stretched across Dean’s hipbone is already purpling.

“Fuck,” Dean mutters.

His right hand is still tangled in Sam’s hair while his left rhythmically kneads Sam’s shoulder, and Sam leans in again without thinking. He licks a tender, slow line from his brother’s belly button over to his hip, where he latches onto his mark and sucks. Dean hisses, bucking, and both of his hands tighten. Sam lifts his right hand from his thigh so that he can cradle his brother’s waist with both arms and bites down again.

This time, Dean lets out a shaky laugh and pulls back. “Down, boy,” he says, pushing at Sam’s shoulder.

“Sorry,” Sam apologizes as he lets his brother go.

Shrugging, Dean takes another step back. There’s still an edge of fear to his expression, but his anxiety is already fading as he looks down and presses his fingers against his moist skin. The flicker of pleasure-pain that passes over his face as he touches the mark goes straight to Sam’s cock and his stomach trebles, heated.

Dean doesn’t look at him, concentrating on his bruised skin and on slowing his breath. When he drops his hand and starts decisively for the bathroom several minutes later, Sam can tell from his brother’s gait that this is over. Dean has what he wants and is moving on. The stern set of his shoulders denies even the possibility of further discussion.

But Sam has one more thing to say before he lets his brother shut this particular door.

“Dean.”

Dean pauses in the bathroom doorway, face tilted to the right and angled down toward the floor.

“I’m yours too—you know that, right?”

Dean’s fingers play across the doorframe for a moment and then settle. He turns his head back, offering Sam his profile. Letting Sam see the faint trace of a smile on his lips.

“Yeah, Sammy. I know.”
Chapter 31

It happens whenever they’re sparring anywhere even remotely civilized—the local boys seem to scent entertainment on the air and appear out of nowhere to watch. Sam used to feel self-conscious beneath the weight of all those eyes, back when he was closer to their own age, but he’s older now—more self-confident or, perhaps, just more jaded—and it’s easy to tune the world out and focus in on the business of winning.

Sparring with Dad is different than fighting with him. There’s no change in intensity—Dad didn’t hold back then, and he isn’t holding back now either—but the man’s focus is different. He’s worried less about scoring a hit and more about studying Sam’s technique. When he darts in to slap a hand against Sam’s shoulder or stomach, it’s intended to instruct rather than injure. That doesn’t mean that Dad’s taking it easy on him, of course—this isn’t a game, and pain provides excellent motivation to improve.

In fact, the third time Dad darts forward to land a stinging slap on Sam’s left side, Sam’s just quick enough to stumble back out of range.

“Better,” Dad says, coming out of his fighting posture. He isn’t smiling, though, and a moment later the expected reprimand comes. “But you’re not trying hard enough, Sammy. Never would’ve kicked my ass in Vegas if you were this sloppy.”

A couple of months ago, the rebuke would have set off another argument, but Sam’s gotten to know their father better in the last few weeks, and he’s able to recognize the concern in the man’s eyes. He can finally read love into the way that Dad continually pushes him to do his best. It’s been a difficult, strange shift to make in his head—disorienting as hell to finally grasp that their father doesn’t push them so hard because he’s a controlling asshole (not just because, anyway), but because he’s worried about their safety. This is the only way he knows how to keep them safe.

“Sorry,” Sam pants. “Late night.” He expects Dad to point out that the things they hunt aren’t going to care if he has a late night—will probably be thrilled if Sam is tired or sick or wounded—but instead Dad’s expression softens.

“Bad night?” From the hush in his voice, it’s clear that it isn’t Sam’s night Dad’s asking about.

As far as Sam knows, though, Dean had a relatively good night. He slept deeply enough not to wake with Sam, and he didn’t so much as stir when Sam slid out of his arms and hurried into the bathroom to throw up in the toilet and wash the sweat from his body. Sam doesn’t remember what terror woke him, but he remembers how he felt in that moment when he was tearing free from the nightmare.

The room had seemed alien and strange and hostile, filled with a thick smoke. It lay over everything, saturating the air with a nauseating reek. Made Sam’s head spin. Dean’s arm felt like a dead weight where it was carelessly tossed over Sam’s side—no, not dead. Restrained.

Because Dean seemed to be moving in that haze between dream and waking. His forearm seemed to flex, as though straining against some invisible chain. To Sam’s groggy eyes, Dean’s wrist looked bruised and chafed—the flesh there was raw, as though he’d been struggling for a long while. And suddenly, the bruising looked like finger marks, like a claim of ownership, and Sam’s breath came faster.

But in that moment, the worst had been the way Sam felt inside—unsettled and dangerous and hungry. His cock was hard and aching in his boxers, and Dean was pressed up close and warm.
against his back, and God, Sam had just ... he

wanted.

The smoke fled before he could actually do anything, sucked from the air even as he began to lift his head from the pillow, and Sam came back to himself with a harsh gasp. The dream was gone then, every last trace, but he still remembered the desire. He remembered how he hadn’t particularly cared if Dean wanted it or not (no, that’s not true: better if he didn’t, if he fought), and there had been a part of him that was screaming even in the midst of his daze, but the hunger was stronger, greedy and grasping.

And that was when he ripped himself from his brother’s arms (and recalling now how little he cared whether Dean woke, Sam marvels that his brother managed to sleep through his panic) and stumbled into the bathroom to spend the next four hours in a shaking, guilty fugue.

*The smoke was yellow,* Sam remembers unexpectedly. It was yellow and it smelled like rotten eggs. Like sulfur.

It comes together just like that—with a sudden, shocking jolt—and Sam stumbles a little under the weight of realization. Dad’s there immediately, gripping his elbow and holding him upright.

“Sammy?” he says, pitching his voice low to evade the straining ears of their audience. “What’s wrong?”

Sam shakes his head—not refusal to answer, just an attempt to clear it. He doesn’t even know where to begin—how to ask their father whether he’s ever heard of a demonic haunting without Dad flipping out on him. God, how did it get past the salt?

And how long has this been going on?

“I think—” Sam starts, lifting his head, and that’s when he catches sight of his brother.

Dean’s leaning against the building in the thin strip of shade cast by the overhanging roof. He has his arms crossed and his eyes narrowed in a squint as he watches them. Even glimpsed through the shadow, his expression is grave, and Sam knows, deep in his gut, what his brother came out here to tell them.

“Dean,” he says, and Dad’s attention immediately snaps outward as he turns to search for his eldest son.

Sam knows exactly when their father spots Dean—can feel it in the tension that stiffens the man’s body. They separate without discussion, Dad dropping Sam’s elbow and Sam squaring his shoulders as they head for the motel. Their gaits match, an unconscious accident that makes Sam feel uneasy—he’s never felt less like their father than he does right now, in the wake of his understanding of how monumentally stupid he’s been for the past—god, how long? And what does it say about him that he can’t even begin to answer that question?

As soon as he sees that his silent summons has been noticed and acknowledged, Dean turns and makes his way back inside Dad’s room where he was researching while Sam and Dad trained. Any other day he might have been outside watching—maybe calling pointers or encouragements or taunts—but he’s been uncharacteristically subdued all morning. Sam offered the small reassurances he was allowed, but the second time he went to massage Dean’s neck and got shrugged away, he took the hint and gave his brother the space he seemed to want. Even ran interference for Dean when Dad got the idea that a family training session was in order, convincing the man that he needed some one-on-one work and letting Dean stay behind in their father’s room to comb through weather patterns and news reports from across the country.
As Sam negotiates the admiration of their young audience with Dad, he finds himself, stupidly, wondering how long Dean stood there watching them spar with his news weighing heavy and cold inside of him.

By the time they make it back to the room, Sam’s stomach has twisted into new, nauseating shapes. His heart is pounding and his skin feels cold and clammy, despite the unseasonal warmth of the day. He has to squint in the sudden gloom of the motel room, straining sun-dazzled eyes to locate his brother. After a moment, he spots the blurred shadow of Dean sitting at the table with the laptop open in front of him.

“You found him,” Dad says, kicking the door shut and moving past Sam to look over his eldest son’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” Dean answers. “I think so, anyway.”

Sam’s eyes are adjusting now, but it doesn’t help him decipher his brother’s expression as he taps the screen.

“Alexandria, Minnesota,” Dean announces. “They’ve had the crop circles, cattle mutilations and temperature fluctuations. And yesterday they had a freak lightning storm—electricity came down out of a clear sky and hit an elementary school. Killed a couple of kids.”

“It’s him,” Dad agrees, leaning on the back of Dean’s chair. Grim triumph gleams from his eyes as he looks over at Sam. “We’ve got the son of a bitch.”

Sam tries to work up the proper emotions, but everything is moving a little too fast for him. Months of waiting, and drifting, and suddenly they’re hurtling toward the confrontation like a bullet from the barrel of a gun. It’d be a complicated, difficult moment even if it weren’t coming so quick on the heels of his recent, unpleasant realization.

Dad’s already in motion, rushing around like a miniature cyclone as he grabs things and tosses them into his bag. Sam wants to shout—wants to yell for him to just hold on for a goddamned second—and he’s working up to actually doing so when a hand closes around his upper arm. He jumps, and only just stops himself from shoving his brother up against the wall in a chokehold. Dean takes one look at Sam’s face—at his wide eyes and hectic cheeks—and frowns.

“Come on,” he says softly, tugging Sam toward the door. “We have to pack.”

“Dean,” Sam chokes out.

“We’ll talk in the room,” Dean answers as he maneuvers Sam in front of him, keeping a light hold on his arm and resting his other hand at the small of Sam’s back.

It’s more contact than he’s offered all morning, and it calms Sam enough to let Dean walk him outside and down a couple of doors to their own room. He expects Dean to let him go once they’re inside, but Dean keeps a firm grip on him, leading him over to the bed they’ve been sharing and sitting him down on the mattress before crouching in front of him with a concerned expression.

“Sam?” he says, putting a hand on Sam’s knee. “Hey, man, I’m gonna be fine, okay? I’m ready for this. We’re gonna take that son of a bitch out, no sweat.”

Sam takes a couple of seconds to process that and then blinks, coming out of his panicked stupor a little in the face of his brother’s earnest attempt to soothe.

“No,” he says. “Dean, I’m not. I’m not worried about that.”
Except now that Dean’s brought it up, he is worried about that. He’s worried about that a lot. Damn it.

“Then what’s wrong?” Dean asks, frowning. “And don’t say ‘nothing’. You’re white as a sheet, dude. I seriously thought you were gonna pass out in there.”

That isn’t all Dean thought Sam was going to do, and Sam knows it—he saw the minute flinch in his brother’s eyes before Sam reined in his initial, violent response to Dean’s touch. But if Dean’s willing to pass over that for both their sakes, then Sam’s more than willing to let him. Anyway, there are more pressing things to deal with right now.

“I—you’re not going to like it,” Sam says, and then pauses to drag a hand through his hair. “I don’t even—fuck, I don’t know how to say it.” Or rather, he does, but he doesn’t know if he can. If he can get the words out.

“Hey, it’s me here. Whatever it is, just spit it out and we’ll deal with it. Right?” There’s a subtle uncertainty to that final question—Dean’s faith in their relationship faltering in a way that’s normal but still makes Sam’s chest go hollow and hurt.

There was never any doubt that Sam was going to tell his brother what he just figured out—Sam’d have to be a moron to keep something like this to himself—but Dean has just given him the motivation to take a shaky breath and spit it out without any more delays.

“I think I’m being targeted. By a demon.”

Dean tenses, insecurity disappearing beneath a professional, strong mask. It’s the face he wears for strangers sometimes, and Sam tries not to feel hurt by seeing it directed his way.

“What, like the demon?” his brother demands, voice gruff.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.”

“You’d better fucking know, Sam!” Dean yells, pushing to his feet. The words are a harsh bark, angry, and although Sam knows his brother is only shouting because he’s scared, he hunches in on himself a little anyway. “What the fuck do you mean by ‘targeted’?”

“I’ve been having nightmares,” Sam answers. He keeps his voice low and even, hoping that his own softness will temper Dean’s response. Hoping that it will keep the wildly oscillating emotions in his own chest in check.

Dean nods curtly and makes a ‘get on with it’ motion with one hand. “So I noticed.”

“And sometimes, when I wake up, there’s a—a smell. Sulfur.”

Dean swears under his breath at that, turning away while wiping a hand over his mouth.

While his brother’s back is turned and he can get the words out without having to deal with Dean’s eyes, Sam adds, “And I—when I wake up, I don’t really feel like myself.”

“Like you’re possessed?” Dean demands, turning back sharply to look at Sam again.

“I don’t know,” Sam answers. “I don’t—I don’t think so.”

But Dean strides over to their weapons bag with a grim expression and fishes out their canteen of holy water. His movements are sharp, as though he wants to cut the air with his body, and Sam has
no idea what’s going through his brother’s mind right now, but he knows he’s afraid. Not of Dean, not really, but of the potential he sees in his brother at this moment. It makes him think, again, of the side of his brother he never really acknowledged before Dad handed over the Colt in Vegas.

Dean the soldier.

Dean the weapon.

Dean the killer.

When Dean returns and thrusts the canteen in Sam’s face, Sam flinches a little at the ferocity of the action. Dean keeps looking at him without a word, all of his thoughts and emotions locked up tight behind a flat, forbidding expression. It occurs to Sam that Dean will stand there waiting as long as it takes, that his eyes won’t even flicker, and his smile is forced as he reaches up and takes the canteen.

With shaking hands, he unscrews the cap and pours a trickle of water into one outstretched palm. It feels just like it always did—like nothing, like tap water—and although Sam didn’t expect anything different, he feels his chest ease a little anyway. When he casts a glance up at his brother, though—see? no smoke—Dean hasn’t relaxed at all.

“Drink it.”

Dean’s expression may not be giving anything away, but there’s a recognizable tremor of nerves in his voice. Sam’s not feeling great himself, of course, and his own anxiety is making him mulish in a way he knows he shouldn’t be right now. Not when Dean feels so foreign and threatening. But that knowledge doesn’t stop him from wrinkling his nose and protesting, “It’s been sitting in the car for months, man!”

“Drink it, Sammy,” Dean says again. This time, there’s a hint of pleading in the words, and Sam notices with a shock that his brother’s right hand is creeping around to the small of his back. He doesn’t know what weapon Dean has hidden there—probably not a gun, not in such a populated area, in daylight—but he knows his brother is carrying something.

Dean hasn’t gone unarmed since Sam agreed to start keeping the weapons bag in the room with them again.

“Would you really hurt me if I refused?” Sam asks softly. It’s a stupid thing to focus on, and an even stupider thing to feel hurt by—Dean’s just being practical, and there’s a part of Sam that’s relieved to see Dean’s blind devotion doesn’t reach quite this far—but he can’t help himself.

For a moment, as he looks up into his brother’s eyes, he thinks that the answer is going to be yes. Then, as Sam watches, the harsh outline of the killer smudges and blurs back into his brother, familiar and loved. With a voiceless sigh, Dean puts his hands in front of him.

“No,” he breathes, pleading with his eyes for Sam not to make him regret that decision.

And Sam understands, finally, that no matter how dangerous his brother is, he’s a weapon that is never going to be turned on Sam. Dean would self-destruct before hurting him.

Sam is stunned by the realization that all of Dean’s violence—all of his darkness—is bent towards protecting him. He’s staggered by the newfound understanding that Dean is dedicated to his protection, no matter what the cost to Dean himself. It’s wonderful, and terrifying, and so goddamn humbling that he can’t meet his brother’s eyes as he lifts the canteen to his lips.
The water tastes just as foul as Sam knew it would, but he makes himself swallow a mouthful and then takes another swig, opening his mouth this time to let Dean see the water on his tongue before swallowing.

Dean sags immediately, tension running out of him as he sinks down on the bed across from Sam. His hands are shaking as he leans forward on his knees and rubs at his face.

Sam wishes that he felt as relieved as his brother seems to be by the proof that he isn’t carrying around any passengers, but he can’t. He can’t because he remembers all too well how it feels to wake up from one of those dreams.

“This doesn’t solve anything,” he points out as he screws the cap back on and sets the canteen down on the bed beside him.

“No,” Dean agrees, lifting his head again. “I know that, I just. Fuck, man, you scared me.”

Sam lets out a hoarse laugh. “I scared you? How the fuck do you think I feel?”

Grimacing, Dean says, “Yeah, sorry. So, uh, nightmares?”

Sam doesn’t trust himself to speak around the swollen lump of nerves in his throat, so he nods instead.

“What about?”

That requires actual words, so Sam swallows and rasps, “I don’t remember.” Off of Dean’s skeptical look, he repeats more strongly, “I don’t, Dean. I wake up, and sometimes there’s—there’s a feeling, but that’s it. No images. No sounds. Nothing.”

“Come on, man, you’ve gotta give me something more than ‘it smells like sulfur and I feel funny’. Cause that ain’t demonic, it’s indigestion.”

“Don’t joke,” Sam snaps, pushing off the bed and pacing away to put some distance between them. “Don’t you fucking joke about this, Dean. You don’t know what it feels like, you don’t—” The words catch in his throat, bulky and sharp-edged, and he has to swallow before he can make himself say it. “You don’t know what it makes me want to do to you.”

When he sneaks a glance back at his brother, Dean has gone pale. He’s still smiling weakly, though, and now he says, “What, like stick your smelly pit in my face? Cause that’d be pretty damned evil.”

Sam doesn’t want to say it—he doesn’t want to go there—but Dean’s still clinging to denial and has his defense mechanisms running full steam, and Sam needs him to admit that they have a problem. He needs Dean in his corner on this one, needs his brother to bring the weapon and the soldier to bear on whatever’s causing his nightmares.

He needs his big brother to ride in and save the day, the way he always has.

So he steels himself and draws himself up to his full height and says, “I wake up hard, Dean. Every single time I wake up so fucking horny that I don’t care whether you’re interested. Because I know I could make you. I know that I could hold you down and fuck you regardless of whether you want it or not.”

That wipes the smile off of Dean’s face.

Sam feels a little liberated by the admission, which he wasn’t expecting, but his relief is all but
submerged in a vicious surge of triumph at having finally exposed himself for what he is. Now Dean knows what he’s been spending his nights with, and he’ll cast Sam away like he should—to the other bed if not to their father’s room. He’ll put an end to this mockery of a relationship before it goes too far. Oh God, please, Dean has to put an end to it because Sam sure as hell can’t and Dean won’t—he isn’t safe around Sam, that much has just become abundantly clear.

Except ... except Dean doesn’t actually look very surprised. Disturbed, sure, but ... but there’s too much understanding there. Too much dull resignation.

“You knew,” he whispers.

Dean turns his face further away at that, jaw tight and leg jouncing up and down like an out of control piston.

Anger blossoms in Sam’s stomach, warm and liquid, and he strides across the room to grab Dean by the front of his shirt and haul him to his feet.

“You knew!” he shouts, shaking his brother. “You fucking knew what was going on and you still got into bed with me! Do you have a fucking death wish, Dean? Do you—Jesus, do you hate yourself that much?”

Dean hangs limply in Sam’s grip and lets himself be shaken. The eyes he raises to meet Sam’s are soft, and fill Sam with the desire to rip and hurt and tear until Dean figures it out. Until he gets it through his thick skull that Sam isn’t to be trusted, that he isn’t fucking safe. With a growl, he spins them and shoves Dean toward the wall, heedless of the way his brother’s body knocks the lamp from the nightstand in the process—of the awkward way Dean ends up half-sitting on the stand with the alarm clock propping up one ass cheek. He has a hand around Sam’s wrist now, but not to fight. Just to hang on and give himself a little balance.

The continuing submission just makes Sam even more furious.

“You’d let me do anything to you, wouldn’t you?” he snarls, and then shakes Dean hard enough that his whole body jerks. The radio on the clock blares to life, blasting some generic pop song Sam has never heard before. He isn’t really hearing it now, too focused on his brother’s eyes, which are way too fucking calm.

“Answer me!” he yells, and his whole body is vibrating with rage—or maybe it’s terror, yes, that feels right. It’s terror and horror and the weight—the crushing, damning weight—of responsibility that he never asked for and doesn’t want.

Dean can’t just hand himself over like this. He can’t. Sam thought he wanted his brother’s devotion—thought he wanted a lot of things, but he doesn’t, not like this. It’s too much, too selfless, and Sam can’t fucking handle this. He can’t even take care of himself, let alone someone as precious and fragile as Dean.

He’ll break him. He’ll break Dean, inevitably, whether he wants to or not.

But Dean’s still looking at him with that steady, soft faith, and the hand on Sam’s wrist is sliding up his arm to cup his cheek.

Sam bares his teeth and tosses his head, shaking Dean’s hand free. “Don’t!” he says, and it’s meant to come out a growl, but instead his voice is shaking, and weak, and he can taste salt on his lips. Oh God, is he crying? Dean’s hand brushes his face again, and then strokes through his hair, and Sam is, he’s crying in weak, hurt gasps.
“You would never hurt me,” Dean says.

“You don’t—Dean, you don’t know that!” Sam insists. He should be punching Dean—should be proving it—but instead his grip has weakened and now, as the pop song fades into another, Dean’s hand slides around to cup the back of Sam’s neck.

“Yeah, I really do,” Dean says, and kisses him.

It’s a light kiss, and chaste, but there’s no hesitation in it and Sam finds himself falling with a weightless, wild sensation. He kisses Dean back, silently making an endless litany of promises that he knows he can’t keep but wishes he could. God, he wishes, more than anything, that he could be strong enough—good enough—to be the man his brother clearly thinks he is.

But touching Dean is as calming as it always is, and eventually Sam’s chest stops aching so fiercely and his tears dry up. He doesn’t resist when Dean unhooks Sam’s right hand from his t-shirt and moves it down to Dean’s left hip. Sam reads permission in the motion and automatically eases his fingers up beneath his brother’s t-shirt to touch his skin.

The bruise doesn’t feel any different from the rest of Dean, but Sam has refreshed the mark often enough over the last month to know exactly where it is. Dean strokes Sam’s wrist reassuringly a couple of times before reaching out to rest his fingers over his own mark, which shifted around for the first couple weeks but finally settled in a mirroring position on Sam’s hip. The dull ache that the pressure of Dean’s fingers sets off is calming.

Brings him down faster than Sam has any right to expect. Grounds him.

“You wouldn’t hurt me, man,” Dean repeats. “You don’t have it in you.”

God, Sam wishes he could believe that as readily as his brother.

“You aren’t,” he whispers, keeping his eyes lowered. “You aren’t worried that I’ll—”

“No,” Dean answers firmly. “Now go plant your ass on the bed and start talking.”

Sam doesn’t want to give up the connection they have right now, but he eases away slowly anyway—Dean can’t be comfortable perched where he is. Sure enough, Dean grimaces a little when he climbs off the nightstand, which brings a guilty twinge to Sam’s chest, and then rubs an absent hand over his ass as he turns around to shut the radio off. For once, thankfully, the sight isn’t even remotely appealing.

Sam does as Dean says and tells his brother everything he can remember while Dean finishes righting the lamp (bent a little but not broken), and starts moving around the room and packing their things. He doesn’t spare himself at all in his recitation, telling Dean every dark thought he’s ever entertained in that smoke-filled world just after waking. But Dean doesn’t flinch, and Sam is left wondering how much his brother heard of his dreams—if he talked during them, if he ever said anything.

He knows he did at least once, in Vegas, and it makes him think again about the way Dean seemed to sleep right through last night, despite the frantic, careless way Sam bolted from his arms. It makes him regard his brother’s mood this morning in a completely different light—makes him wonder if Dean actually kept watch with Sam those four hours he spent in the bathroom. If maybe his brother was lying out in their bed, awake and cold and waiting for Sam to pull himself together and creep back out into his arms.

He doesn’t ask, though. He’s not quite that much of a masochist.
Whether Dean is disturbed by Sam’s words or not, when Sam has finished talking he makes it a point to come over and kiss him again, deep and thorough.

“That’s not you, Sam,” he says when he’s done, still bent over and holding Sam’s face. “You gotta remember that, okay?”

Sam’s more reassured by his brother’s confidence than he really wants to be, and he shifts a little on the mattress, shamed by his own willingness to lean on Dean’s strength yet again. “Okay,” he mumbles.

Giving Sam a quick smile, Dean ruffles his hair in a way that reminds Sam of countless noogies when they were growing up, and then heads into the bathroom. “You think this has anything to do with your Jennifer Love Hewitt impersonation?” he calls through the open door.

“What?”

“The psychic stuff, dumbass.”

“Uh, I didn’t even think about that,” Sam admits, feeling like ten different kinds of moron.

There’s a clatter from the bathroom—Dean dropping something—and his brother swears softly before calling back, “So think about it now.”

It doesn’t take long to do as Dean asks, and when Dean emerges a moment later with a baggie stuffed full of toothbrushes and pastes and shaving supplies, Sam says, “Maybe. Fuck, probably.”

Dean nods, crossing the room and shoving the baggie into his bag. He zips the bag closed and then turns around to pin Sam with a look.

“We can’t tell Dad.”

Sam blinks. After a couple of moments, he shakes himself and says, “Could you repeat that? Cause I could have sworn you just said that we can’t tell Dad.”

“I did,” Dean confirms, unsmiling. “We tell Dad that you’re having dreams that are possibly demonic in nature and apocalyptic isn’t gonna be a strong enough word for how he’ll react.”

“But Dean, we can’t go after the demon when I might be compromised!” Sam argues.

Dean lifts one eyebrow and mouths ‘compromised’ to himself as though Sam said something funny and then shakes his head. “I’m not so sure I buy that it’s a demon, dude,” he announces dismissively. “I mean, it’s more likely that you picked up an incubus or something, all that sexual frustration you’re carrying around.”

Sam opens his mouth to argue—mostly because he doesn’t like the bitterness in Dean’s voice, like he’s blaming himself for Sam’s frustration—and Dean cuts him off by continuing, “I’m not saying we go in blind. I’ll give Bobby a call on our way to Alexandria. He’s gotta have a way we can check, maybe a protective charm or something you can try. But you do not want to bring Dad in on this too soon, Sam.”

There’s more than a hint of warning in Dean’s tone and it catches Sam’s attention.

“You’re not just saying that, are you?” he asks.

The guilty way that Dean drops his eyes and carries his bag over to the table to continue packing tells
Sam that he’s right.

“So what happened?”

“Nothing.” Clipped, almost angry. And very obviously false.

“I thought you weren’t going to lie to me anymore,” Sam accuses softly.

Dean sighs at that, dropping his head forward and leaning on the edge of the table. “It was a long time ago, Sam, okay? And you and Dad have been—you’re doing better, and I don’t want to set you off again.”

Sam gets that, he does, but he isn’t going to ignore their father’s mistakes just because he’s discovered a newfound respect for the man. And he especially isn’t going to ignore any of Dad’s mistakes that involve Dean.

“Was it you?” he presses. “Was there something—did something happen while I was gone?”

“What, you mean aside from the rape?” Dean snaps, and then immediately pinches the bridge of his nose with one hand and turns away, offering Sam his back. “I’m sorry. That was ... I’m sorry.”

Feeling like even more of an asshole than a moment ago, Sam waves his brother’s apology off with one hand. “That’s okay, I shouldn’t have pushed. If you don’t want to talk about it, we don’t have to.”

Dean’s silent for a moment, unmoving, and then he says, “His name was Ferguson. I don’t know if that’s his first or last name, never asked. We ran into him on a hunt—some South American demigod was running around New Mexico driving people cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs—and we’re talking about the homicidal brand of crazy, not the fun, imaginary friend kind.”

Even though Dean isn’t looking at him, Sam nods.

“Anyway, long story short something Ferguson said made Dad think the son of a bitch had gotten to him. He told Ferguson to turn around and put his hands up on the wall, and Ferguson told Dad to go fuck himself, and ... yeah.”

Dean turns his head then to look at Sam. “There wasn’t a cure, Sam. It isn’t like Dad could’ve dropped the guy off at the nearest loony bin. He would’ve—if he was nuts, he would’ve torn the head off of every orderly who came in to give him his shot.”

“If he was nuts,” Sam echoes.

Shrugging with studied nonchalance, Dean turns away again. “He probably was. He was acting funny, anyway. Doesn’t matter now. I just—I don’t want to jump the gun on this, okay?”

“You really think Dad’d hurt me?”

“No,” Dean replies. No hesitation, which means he believes it, even if Sam isn’t quite so convinced. “I don’t. But this is one time I can’t handle being wrong, okay?”

Sam doesn’t have to struggle at all to understand. His brother’s biggest fear has always been losing one of them—Dean’s never dissembled about that. And Sam just handed him a new fear that dwarfs his previous ‘worst’ tenfold. He can’t even begin to imagine how Dean would react if it came down to a choice between the two of them. If he had to pick a side and watch while one of the most important people in his life killed the other.
“Okay,” Sam agrees softly. “We won’t tell Dad. Yet.”

As promised, Dean calls Bobby when Sam takes his own turn behind the wheel midway through Ohio. Something strikes Sam as odd about the way that Dean greets the man, and his brother is midway through explaining Sam’s problem before he realizes what it is. No mention of Dad. Which seems to indicate, for whatever reason, that Bobby doesn’t know they’re with their father.

Which means that Dad hasn’t called the demon expert in for advice on a demon hunt.

It isn’t hard to guess why. Dad’s temper has alienated other hunters before—Sam still vividly remembers a fistfight their father got into with a tall, swarthy-skinned hunter in Detroit: watching Dad hurl the man through a plate glass window is one of those memories that just sort of sticks out, even in their freakish lives. And although all of their father’s relationships with his allies (Sam isn’t sure John Winchester has any ‘friends’) are fraught with tension, he and Bobby have always seemed to be a particularly volatile combination. More than once or twice, Sam has been sure Bobby was about to pepper Dad’s ass with shotgun pellet.

It’s half the reason Sam always liked the man so much.

He makes a mental note to ask Dean for the story later and tunes back into his brother’s explanation in time to hear Dean tell Bobby that the dreams leave Sam with “weird urges”.

Sam really doesn’t want to know what the man thinks Dean means by that.

For the next hour, Bobby talks Dean through every test he can think of. Some of Bobby’s tests they’d already done—Dean checked Sam out with holy water first thing, and he tossed an off-handed “Christo” at him before they left the motel room. Others—like dosing Sam with fennel and reciting Sumerian-based exorcisms at him—are easy enough to accomplish in the car. Sam puts his foot down when Dean starts feeling up his lymph nodes (Dean prodding at his throat and armpits is distracting enough, if he starts groping Sam’s crotch, Sam’s going to drive them into a ditch), but luckily Bobby agrees that Dean would have found something above the waist if there’d been anything to find with that particular test.

Finally, Dean puts Bobby on speakerphone and holds the cell out in Sam’s direction. “You’re on, Bobby,” he announces.

“Sam?”

Sam knew that Bobby was guiding this checkup, but there’s a difference between knowing and hearing the man’s competent, steady voice and he feels himself relaxing instinctively. “Hey, Bobby.”

“How you holding up?”

Sam utters a soft laugh. “I’ve been better. Please tell me you know what’s going on.”

“Well, as far as I can tell, you’re clean,” Bobby answers.

Far from reassuring him, Sam finds his heart sinking in his chest. Because something’s wrong, quite clearly, and if Bobby can’t figure it out then Sam doesn’t have a chance in hell.

“There’s a couple other things we could try,” Bobby continues, “but anything that can hide from that lot isn’t getting caught unless it wants to.”
“Great,” Sam sighs. “That’s real reassuring.”

“I’m not here to hold your hand, boy,” Bobby responds dryly. “You want comforting, try one of them 900 numbers.”

“Is there something we can do?” Dean puts in, leaning forward a little in his seat with a creak of leather. “Y’know, to yank the welcome mat in?”

“I’ve got a couple anti-possession charms I can lend you if you want to swing by.”

“Yeah, we’ll do that, but we’re, uh, kinda on a schedule right now. There must be something we can use in the meantime.”

Bobby’s sigh is a little staticky over the speaker. “I’ve got a couple of protection symbols I could shoot your way in an e-mail, I guess, but you gotta let Sam do the drawing, Dean. You’ve got the artistic skills of a three year old and these things have to be precise.”

Dean rolls his eyes a little as he replies, “Yeah, yeah. Just send them over, will you?”

“I’ll get on it as soon as I hang up, princess,” Bobby shoots back. There’s a brief pause and then, in a more serious tone, he says, “You’re going after it, aren’t you?”

After the omission of their father from the conversation, Sam’s a little surprised by how accurate Bobby’s guess is. He expects Dean to lie, but instead his brother says, “Yeah. You got any words of wisdom?”

Bobby snorts. “Sure. Don’t let John do anything too stupid.”

Sam can’t resist a little laugh at that.

“Man’s his own keeper,” Dean answers as he shoots Sam a warning look.

“Yeah, well, don’t you do anything stupid either. And call if you need me.”

Dean smirks at that, and there’s enough of his old self in the smile that Sam wishes he could take his eyes off the road for longer than a quick glance. “You’re gonna regret saying that when I wake you up at three in the morning.”

“You wake me up at three in the morning and you’d better have a damned good reason for it, son,” Bobby replies dryly, and hangs up on them before Dean can say anything else.

“Ornery bastard always has to have the last word,” Dean grumbles, but he’s still smiling fondly as he closes his phone up again and puts it away.

When they stop late that afternoon and check into a Motel 6, Sam checks for Bobby’s e-mail while Dean sprawls on the bed and watches the Steelers get their asses handed to them by the Raiders. There are six attachments to Bobby’s e-mail, each one containing the blueprint for a different protective symbol. All of the symbols are about equal in power. All of them need to be positioned directly over the heart in order to function. Bobby’s e-mail suggests they use henna for the actual application and touch up whichever design they chose every couple of days to maintain full effectiveness, but neglects to offer opinions on which symbol would be most likely to help ward off the dreams.
Probably, Sam admits to himself glumly, because Bobby doesn’t know what’s going on here any more than either of them.

With a sigh, he settles down to study the different symbols, familiarizing himself with the varying scope of protection offered. According to Bobby’s terse blurbs on each option, one design protects against possession. Another wards off Eastern demons. Still another acts as a kind of blessing, turning the wearer’s blood into the equivalent of holy water.

Any other time, the diversity would be fascinating, but right now it isn’t anything but frustrating. Sam wants, desperately, to pick the right symbol for Dean’s sake, but it’s a little difficult to do so when he has no fucking clue what he’s trying to protect himself from. He doesn’t think he’ll be able to find much more information on the different symbols than Bobby has already given him, but he also isn’t willing to leave any stone unturned, so he opens another window in the web browser and goes to work.

By the time the game has finished and Dean heads next door to talk strategy with Dad, the focus of Sam’s research has shifted. He doesn’t mention it to his brother—doesn’t want to jinx himself—but he’s beginning to think that there might be a way to combine several of the symbols into a single composite. He just needs to find the right binding rune, do a little work making sure none of the lines are going to overlap or cancel each other out.

When his brother returns at eleven o’clock to get ready for bed and finds Sam still hunched over the computer, he gives him an exasperated look. “Dude, just pick one already,” he mutters, tossing his flannel shirt onto the bed and heading into the bathroom. “You don’t like it, you can always switch. Henna comes off, y’know.”

“I know,” Sam says absently, but he doesn’t get up, and he resists Dean’s admittedly weak attempts to coax him into bed.

It takes him all night, but by morning he has a working version of a composite symbol. He sends it to Bobby for approval before shaking his brother awake, and half an hour later all three of them are back on the road.
Chapter 32

There’s something wrong with Alexandria. Sam senses it as soon as he gets out of the car. It has nothing to do with the black ribbons and flowers that bedeck all of the wooden power line posts—memorials for the children killed in the freak lightning storm less than a week before. No, this is something deeper. More elusive.

Despite the chill of the season, the ground feels burnt beneath his shoes. It seems to crackle with every step he takes, heat radiating up into his bones and making him sweat. The air tastes dirty and thick—Sam keeps on touching his fingertips to his cheeks and expecting them to come away smeared with ash.

Dad and Dean don’t seem to notice a thing.

Oh, Dad’s wary as he heads in to the motel’s main office to get their rooms, and Dean’s going to get a stiff neck if he keeps craning it around like that, but they aren’t any more keyed up than Sam expected them to be. This hunt isn’t like any of the others. Their guardedness is calculating—that of soldiers scouting the lay of the land in hostile territory. It doesn’t carry any trace of the uneasy disgust it would if they were sensing the filth covering the city the way that Sam is.

Shutting his eyes, Sam leans against the Impala next to his brother and concentrates on listening to Dean’s breathing. The familiar sound is calming, but it doesn’t help nearly as much as the casual brush of his brother’s fingertips against his hand. Sam sneaks a glance at the office to make sure Dad’s still busy—he is, standing by the desk with his back to the bank of windows and his cell phone up to his ear—and then twines his fingers together with Dean’s.

“Thought I’d run out and get some henna,” Dean comments, rubbing his thumb against Sam’s palm. “Once we’re settled in.”

Sam glances over and finds his brother still scanning the parking lot in a restless, seeking way. He’s as gorgeous as ever, with his hair meticulously styled and the collar on his leather jacket popped up the way he prefers. But his mouth is pulled tight, with tiny lines around the corners, and his eyes are watered down beneath the over bright sky—almost colorless. The skin beneath them looks puffy and bruised.

As his brother’s thumb continues to stroke against Sam’s skin, Sam wonders whether Dean is reciprocating the contact for Sam’s sake or for his own. He hasn’t been paying as much attention to Dean’s mood these last few days as he probably should have—especially now, here, with the finale Dean’s been dreading hurtling toward them with an inevitable rush. He’s been too distracted by his own problems, by the nightmares, and the fear of what they might mean.

When he looks closer now, he doesn’t like what he sees. Aside from the obvious signs of stress, there’s a quiet air of tension surrounding Dean. Something subtle enough that Sam can’t quite figure out where he’s picking up on it from, but which makes the incessant, assessing motion of Dean’s eyes feel less like a soldier’s and more like a rabbit’s. The thought of letting his brother go off on his own anywhere suddenly feels about as tempting as putting a gun to his head and pulling the trigger.

“I can come with you,” he offers, twisting his hand to catch Dean’s and stilling his brother’s thumb.

Dean lifts one shoulder in a disinterested shrug and watches a family of four pile out of a station wagon.
Sam gives him a couple of moments to actually respond to the offer and then asks, “You doing okay?”

That gets Dean’s attention, of course, but not at all in the way Sam wants. His brother’s jaw tightens and his eyes go flinty. He shifts an inch or so to the side, away from Sam, and disengages their hands.

“Peachy,” he grunts.

It isn’t an honest answer, of course, but Sam figures he’s lucky his brother didn’t slug him for asking the question. Dean has gotten better at letting Sam know how he feels over the past few months, and sometimes he’ll even allow Sam to conduct his clumsy interrogations without lashing out.

But that’s in private, when it’s just them. Not out in the Motel 6 parking lot, where everyone can see.

God, Sam’s an idiot.

As the silence stretches out between them, awkward and thick, Dean looks away to glare in the vague direction of the street and offers Sam the back of his head. Sam’s stomach flips unhappily as he looks at the collar-protected nape of his brother’s neck, and he finds himself remembering Dean’s weak attempt to get him to come to bed last night. At the time, he was preoccupied enough to brush it off, but suddenly it seems like a flashing, neon warning sign.

Sam wants to believe that his brother’s cooler attitude stems from the revelation about Sam’s nightmares, but he knows better. After all, Dean has known about Sam’s nocturnal desires for months, and it hasn’t stopped him from curling close to him in bed, or indulging in quiet make-out sessions, or shuddering silently while Sam refreshes the claiming bruise on his hip.

No, Dean’s distance has nothing at all to do with fear and everything in the world to do with resignation. This is Dean trying to disengage, trying to protect himself in preparation for his coming abandonment. Despite everything Sam has done to convince his brother otherwise, Dean still believes Sam and Dad are going to leave once the demon is dead.

And he still did the research. He still came out to get them two days ago, to let them know what he’d found. He’s still striding toward that final confrontation with steady, unflinching determination.

Sam doesn’t know whether to be proud of his brother’s good heart or horrified by how easy it is for him to dismiss his own needs and desires.

“You remember that this isn’t the end, right?” he says, unable to keep quiet any longer in the face of his realization. “Once the demon’s dead, we’ll figure out something. Whatever you want to do, okay?”

Dean’s hostile, motionless silence mingles with the city’s polluted atmosphere and leaves Sam with the phantom feel of filth on his skin. Offering the back of his brother’s head a weak smile, he rubs his hands thoughtlessly on his jeans.

“Hey, maybe we can get Dad to take us to Disneyworld,” he tries joking. It has a shot at breaking the tension, at least—Dean was always fascinated with the concept when they were kids, talked about the Tower of Terror practically nonstop the summer it opened. Stupid, maybe, for Sam to be hanging their hopes on a childhood dream, but he doesn’t have anything else to offer now—nothing that Dean would ever accept, anyway.

“For once in your life, Sam,” Dean says thickly without turning his head. “Just shut up.”
There’s no way Sam is going to be able to obey his brother’s plea, but Dad chooses that moment to come back out of the motel office. Sam takes one look at their father’s face and straightens, concern tensing his muscles and catching his breath.

Dean isn’t leaning up against him anymore, but they’re still standing close enough for him to sense Sam’s reaction, and he throws a glance back over his shoulder to see what caught Sam’s attention. The glance turns into an intent stare as he takes in Dad’s expression, and an instant later he’s moving forward to meet the man. There’s no trace of the roiling emotions Dean was caught up by only a moment before, and Sam understands with a sick, reluctant sensation that this is how his brother has always operated—that he’s trained himself to shut his own emotions down at a moment’s notice in order to dance attendance on Dad and Sam.

It has to stop. It has to stop now, really, but judging from Dad’s face, this isn’t the time to deal with Dean’s emotional repression. And fucking around with Dean’s habits and patterns of thought right before they take on the demon would probably be the worst timing in the history of the world, if Sam wants to be smart about this. Dean’s already going to be vulnerable enough without being pushed even further off balance.

“What is it?” Dean asks. Sam catches the words only faintly—Dean’s voice is pitched low in deference to their exposed position out in the parking lot—and he moves forward himself so that he can follow along.

This close to Dad, Sam can see fury in the man’s eyes, but it isn’t anger tightening Dad’s mouth. It’s grief. Sam has seen that look on their father’s face before, and he knows what it means as well as Dean must.

Someone’s dead.

“I just got a call from Caleb,” Dad answers, his voice just as low as Dean’s.

“Is he okay?” Dean asks, although Sam can tell that his brother knows full well that it isn’t Caleb who put that look on Dad’s face. Not if Caleb’s up and making phone calls. Dean’s eyes flicker as his mind plays the same game as Sam’s—filling up a roulette wheel with every familiar face they know and setting it to spin. Double zero, no matter who it comes down on. Everyone loses. House wins.

Fuck, Sam hates this part of the job.

“He’s fine,” Dad answers, and then drops his eyes to the pavement for a moment, visibly gathering himself. When he lifts his head again, it’s to announce grimly, “Jim Murphey’s dead.”

And just like that, the roulette wheel stops.

“Pastor Jim?” Sam hears himself say dumbly, as though they know more than one man by that name. But he still finds himself hoping otherwise, and Dad’s confirming nod sends a sharp stab of grief through his chest.

Pastor Jim taught him Latin. He took both Sam and Dean fishing when they were kids. He showed Sam how to pray, encouraged him to hope for better things. More importantly than any of that, though, is the fact that, after Bobby. Pastor Jim is the one who looked out for Dean the most. He’s the one who made sure Dean had at least a few moments of a normal childhood, who refused to let Dean be anything but a kid whenever they visited.

“How?” Sam asks once he’s confident he can speak without his voice cracking.
There’s always a ‘how’ in this business. It’s the question that comes right before, ‘did someone else get it, or are we heading out there?’

“Throat was slashed,” Dad answers with stark simplicity. “He bled out.”

This doesn’t seem like the kind of conversation they should be having here, out in the open sunlight, and it suddenly strikes Sam as absurd. When he exchanges a glance with his brother, he can tell that Dean is feeling just as lost. He wonders what memories Dean is sorting through, what moments he’s mourning.

“Caleb said they found traces of sulfur at Jim’s place,” Dad adds. There’s a new weight to his words, and the anger in his eyes seeps into his voice and leaves it cold.

“A demon,” Dean says and, when Dad gives a tight nod of agreement, his eyes sharpen as he demands, “The demon?”

“I don’t know,” Dad admits. “Could be he just got—he got careless, he slipped up.” But he doesn’t sound like he believes it, and he finishes by saying, “Maybe the demon knows we’re getting close.”

And isn’t that a cheerful thought. From everything Sam has heard, this demon is bad news to begin with. If it knows they’re coming for it? Then they’re completely screwed.

Dean’s eyes are a little too wide as he swallows, looking just as unsettled by the thought as Sam, but it doesn’t stop him from squaring his shoulders and asking, “What do you want to do?”

Dad takes a second to glance at Sam before answering, “Now we act like every second counts. There’s one hospital and two health clinics in this city. We split up, we cover more ground. I want records. I want a list of every infant that’s going to be six months old in the next week.”

Sam blinks, startled from his grief by the sheer impossibility of what their father’s suggesting. He looks to his brother for support, but Dean doesn’t seem to have noticed any flaws in the plan. He and Dad are doing their silent communication thing, parceling out the search perimeters between them without uttering so much as a word. Sam could ride this out, just keep his mouth shut and go along, and he’s almost confused enough to do so.

But in the end, he can’t help pointing out the plan’s obvious flaw.

“Dad, that could be hundreds of kids. How the hell are we gonna know which one’s the right one?”

“We’ll check them all, that’s how,” Dad answers instantly.

Sam doesn’t even bother trying to hide his incredulous expression and Dad turns to face him more fully.

“You got any better ideas?”

The question is a little cutting, and Sam tenses defensively without even thinking about it. But Dad isn’t looking at him with scorn, he’s just ... waiting. Belatedly, Sam realizes that the curtness in Dad’s tone wasn’t meant to be dismissive. Dad’s just in a hurry to get moving, mind already three steps ahead and five miles away.

If Sam has anything to offer, the man will refocus and give his suggestion the consideration it deserves, but ... but of course Sam doesn’t actually have anything better to offer.

“No, sir,” he sighs.
“Okay then,” Dad says, swinging back into motion and handing an old fashioned, metal room key to Dean. Reaching into his back pocket, he pulls out a folded map that he must have picked up in the office and hands that over as well. “I’ll meet you boys back here tonight.”

Dad turns away before he can catch Dean’s nod, moving toward his truck with his head down and his shoulders lowered. Sam moves over to Dean’s side and watches with his brother as Dad pauses by the cab, one hand resting on the black metal and head bowed. There’s nothing but weariness and grief in the posture, and Sam is hit by a flash of memory.

His perspective is skewed in the memory—low to the floor and looking up at the rectory’s kitchen table, which seems immense. Dad is clean-shaven. He looks young and strong and, surprisingly, happy. He’s sitting at the table across from Pastor Jim, and the two men are passing a bottle of whiskey back and forth and telling stories that Sam’s boyhood self couldn’t follow and didn’t bother remembering.

Yesterday, when Sam was thinking to himself that Dad has no friends, he had forgotten this. He somehow overlooked this stolen moment, and the way that they always seemed to wind up in Blue Earth when things had gone particularly bad, or when Sam himself was being more troublesome than normal. He thinks about it now, though, searching through his memories, and recalls that Pastor Jim would welcome them warmly every time and then set Sam and Dean up with a board game before taking Dad away. When the men came back a couple hours later, Dad would be walking easier. His smiles would reach his eyes again.

And now Pastor Jim is gone.

When Dean steps forward, Sam’s right alongside him.

“Dad,” Dean calls, gently.

Their father sighs, slow and heavy, then lifts his head and turns around. If he’s surprised to see Sam standing shoulder to shoulder with his brother, then he doesn’t show any sign of it.

“It’s Jim,” he says. The words are simple and softly spoken, but Sam is uncomfortably sure that their father is fighting back tears. “You know, I can’t—” Dad’s jaw clenches the way Dean’s does sometimes, when he’s caught in the grips of strong emotion, and he glances away. When he looks back again a moment later, his eyes are still shadowed, but determination has pushed the sorrow from his face.

Sam wonders absently if this is where Dean learned that particular trick.

“This ends now,” Dad says. “I’m ending it. I don’t care what it takes.” He starts to turn away again, reaching for the door, and Sam grabs his arm. Dad looks back at him, surprised.

Sam doesn’t know what he’s doing—doesn’t have the first clue what the hell he’s supposed to say to ease the driving rage he knows their father must be feeling. He knows what it’s like, to be so goddamned angry he can’t think about anything but lashing out, can’t see past hurting the son of a bitch who hurt the one he loves—who hurt Dean. He knows that intimately, and that’s the problem right there, because he also knows that nothing he can say can ease their father’s fury.

After a moment, he settles for squeezing Dad’s arm once and then lets go.

Dad’s eyes do soften slightly at the show of solidarity, and the undisguised fondness in his gaze eases some of the pain in Sam’s own chest.

“You boys watch yourselves.”
“Yes, sir,” Sam answers, his words echoed by Dean.

Dad tosses Dean a warm look of his own, grips his arm for a moment, and then climbs into the cab of his truck. Shoulder-to-shoulder, Sam stands in the parking lot with his brother and watches as their father pulls away and disappears down the road. They stand there a moment longer, not quite awkward with each other, but not comfortable either—there’s too much grief between them, and concern, and dread of what this means.

Then Dean shakes himself slightly and moves back toward the Impala, clapping Sam on the shoulder as he goes.

“C’mon, dude. We’ve got a baby to find.”

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The clinic Sam chooses to tackle, Mercer Obstetrics, has a private records room and a pleasant receptionist named Mandy who brings Sam cup after cup of burnt coffee. After his sleepless night, and the exhausting events of this morning, Sam needs all the caffeine he can get, so he choke down every cup and smiles gratefully at Mandy when she brings another.

As he flips through manila folders, he jots down names and addresses and birthdates on autopilot while thinking about Dean, and Dad, and Pastor Jim. Memories of the swimming hole a mile behind the rectory on a worn, weed-choked path, and of turning the church pews into a Wild West wagon train and getting scolded for it (after Pastor Jim indulgently ‘died’ like the outlaw Sam and Dean pretended he was), and of watching Dean join the adults around the kitchen table for his first drink when he was sixteen.

When the memories become too painful, he thinks instead about the cover stories his brother and father used to gain access to the records—wonders whether they’re police officers like Sam or if they went the FBI route. Finally, perhaps inevitably, he wonders if Caleb has burned Pastor Jim’s body yet.

Blue Earth isn’t all that far away from where they are now, after all, and if Caleb is taking his time then there’s a chance they might be able to swing by when this is over and pay their final respects. He’s considering calling Caleb and asking him to hold off when the crack of pain rips through his skull.

Oh fu— Sam thinks, and then the records room is gone and he’s standing in a moonlit nursery. There are stuffed animals all over the floor, and a Mickey Mouse clock on the wall, and a woman with a brightly patterned scarf holding her hair back from her face is lowering a baby into the crib.

The pain sinks deeper into Sam’s skull and he hunches, cradling his head. Moving produces the eerie illusion that he’s separated from his body by a wall of water, and he digs his fingers into his skin and hangs on while different angles of a distant place flash before his eyes.

The baby waves a chubby fist.

—flash—

Rain shadows drip across the ceiling.

—flash—

The woman in the scarf opens the nursery door.
The curtains flap by the window.

The flashing is a storm, Sam realizes, and the disjointed snapshots are coming to him in the lightning blasts. But the wet, roaring soundtrack washing over everything isn’t rain.

Released by the vision, Sam crashes back into his own body with a pained grunt. Now that he’s centered inside himself again, he realizes that his skin is slick with sweat. His breathing comes with labored gasps, and he can’t seem to get his eyes to focus. And God, the pain … It’s never been this bad. Never.

“Fuck,” he moans, dropping his forehead onto the table and pounding the wood with one fist.

Images keep flickering through his mind—pieces of the vision caught on loop. He sees the baby, and then the woman’s scarf, and then the reflection of the rain slanting across the ceiling. He hears that sound, liquid and immensely heavy.

“Waves,” he grunts, forcing his head up again. He fumbles in his bag for the map Dean left with him and spreads it out in front of him on the table. Alexandria is landlocked, of course, so there’s no ocean here.

But there are lakes.

Sam follows his gut and takes a cab out to Crestwood Drive NE, which runs along the edge of Lake le Homme Dieu. He’s still having trouble seeing straight as he begins to walk down the side of the street closest to the water (calm now, but when the storm comes it will be white-capped and lashing against the land from the force of the wind), and his head throbs alarmingly, but none of that is important. What’s important is finding that house. That nursery.

He’s been walking for almost half an hour when another bolt of agony hits him. Sam grabs at his head reflexively, pressing his hands against his skull as though he can squeeze the pain out of it. Instead, the day-lit street around him vanishes, leaving him alone in the dark with the pain.

Stop, he thinks desperately. God, just make it stop!

The nursery again. The rain reflected on the ceiling. A woman standing by a window, pulling the curtain aside and looking out at the storm. A house, bone white in the lightning flash—raised panel shutters, wrap around side porch, rain-lashed gazebo off to the right. The woman’s face in one of those upper windows. That scarf.

Sam gasps in a shuddering breath as the vision releases him again and blinks blurred eyes at the sidewalk. He doesn’t remember collapsing to his knees, but the ground is a lot closer than it was a moment ago, and his knees are sore so he must have fallen. There’s a dog barking off to his left, dangerously close and loud. Sam hopes it’s on a leash.

“Are you all right?” It’s a woman’s voice, concerned and a little frightened, and a moment later a hand brushes his shoulder. “Sir? Should I call an ambulance?”

“No,” Sam manages. “Just give me a minute.”
The barking continues unabated, drilling into Sam’s skull, and he can’t help wincing away from it. The movement presses him into something soft and warm—the woman, crouching beside him—and the hand on his shoulder presses down harder, steadying him.

“God, Gus, would you shut the hell up!”

Gus—the dog, presumably—seems to become even more frantic instead, and the volume of the barking redoubles.

“Come on,” the woman says, gentler now, and grips Sam below the elbow. “Let’s get you somewhere quiet.”

Which is how Sam winds up sitting on the front steps of the house from his vision, making polite conversation with Andrea “Call Me Andy” Whitmore, who holds her ginger hair back with a scarf and rocks her baby Harriet in a fond, absent way while she commiserates with Sam over his “dog phobia”. Sam’s head is still pounding from the visions, but it isn’t as troublesome as the pit in his stomach and the chill in his chest as he lets Harriet grip his pointer finger in one pudgy fist.

He’s forgotten, somehow, in the midst of everything that’s been going on, that there are lives at stake. Innocent, young lives.

“How old is she?” he asks when he can get a word in edgewise.

“Harry? Six months today,” Andy replies with a smile. “You want to hold her?”

But Sam shakes his head and uses the wooden railing to haul himself to his feet. Six months today means they’re almost out of time. He can feel the pain in his skull building again, warning of another wave of visions.

“No, I—I have to—to be somewhere. But it was nice meeting you, Andy.”

Sam all but runs across her lawn, not caring whether it makes her think that he’s rude or insane. He makes it onto the sidewalk and behind a hedge before the vision smacks into him, submerging him so completely that he can’t feel his body or the pain at all.

Fire and wind and water all mixed up together. The stuffed animals on the nursery floor are smoking, their plastic eyes are melting and running down onto ash-flecked fur.

—flash—

The fire’s gone, the nursery quiet. The line of light on the floor spilling beneath the door from the hall flickers. The Mickey Mouse clock on the wall ticks once more and stills.

—flash—

The baby—Harry—is crying in her crib. There’s a shape, bulky and broad, moving toward her. Silent menace.

—flash—

Andy coming down the hall, no real hurry in her steps. Baby’s crying—needs changing or feeding or just comforting. She opens the door and freezes at the sight of the invader looming over her daughter.

“Who the hell—” she blurts, starting forward.

She hasn’t gone more than a step before she’s thrown backwards by an invisible force, crashing into
the wall hard enough to drive a pained cry from her lips. Her scarf has come loose with the impact, and as she starts to slide up the wall it flutters down to the floor.

“Harry!” she screams.

—flash—

Andy’s on the ceiling. Red blooms across the stomach of her blouse. Her mouth is moving, silently, like she can’t get any air. Sam can’t tell whether or not she knows she isn’t actually screaming.

Fire. Explosion.

Oh God, Jess.

The unexpected pang of horrified loss jerks Sam sideways out of the vision and he finds himself lying on his side under the hedge. The migraine ripping his head apart makes it hurt to think, but it hurts even more to breathe through the pain in his chest. The sun is blinding, and false, and hateful overhead.

Crying weakly, Sam fumbles his cell phone out of his pocket and presses the call button. The shrill, ringing sound makes him curl tighter in on himself and press the heel of his hand to his temple, and he nearly sobs in relief when it cuts off midway through its third cycle and Dean’s deep, soothing voice says, “Dude, what? I’m working here.”

“Dean,” Sam gasps.

“What’s wrong?” All of the laziness has been stripped from Dean’s voice, replaced by concern. Sam can hear something falling over in the background wherever his brother is, knows that Dean’s already on his feet and heading for the door.

“Come get me,” Sam pleads. “Come. Dean.”

“Where are you?” Dean demands, and then, not into the phone but clearly audible anyway, “Move, damn it!”

Sam turns his face more fully against the dirt beneath the hedge, trying to get away from the sunlight. Trying to get into the earth. Earth, where Jess is.

He can still smell her burning.

“Sam! Tell me where you are!”

Sam tries to understand what his brother wants from him, but all he can think about is Jess pinned to the ceiling. All he can understand is the pain—in his head, in his chest.

“Need you,” he sobs. “Dean, please.”

Dean swears, low and fervent. “I’m coming, Sammy, but I need—I need you to concentrate for a second. You need to tell me where you are.”

Some of that gets through and after a couple of seconds, Sam manages, “Lake. Crestwood. Hedge.”

“Okay, Sammy,” Dean says, soothing. “That’s good. That’s real good. You just hang in there, buddy. I’m on my way.”

Sam squeezes his eyes shut tighter and clings to his brother’s voice like a lifeline as the pain carries
him away.

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By the time Dean finds him, Sam’s feeling a little more human. He’s sitting on the curb with his throbbing head in both hands, and when Dean brings the Impala to a sudden stop on the other side of the street with a squeal of abused rubber, Sam winces. A moment later Dean is across the road and jerking Sam up to his feet and patting him down, eyes frantic as he looks for injuries.

“I’m okay,” Sam tells him hoarsely.

“You’re okay when I say you’re okay,” Dean snaps, running his hands rapidly over Sam’s stomach and chest.

Sam squints at his brother with scratchy, sore eyes—takes in his brother’s pallor, and the trembling in Dean’s jaw—and lets himself be examined. Finally, after almost a full minute of patting, Dean appears satisfied that Sam is, in fact, not hurt, and drops him.

“Christ, Sammy,” he says, lifting a hand to his temple and rubbing at the hooked, raised imperfection in his skin. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“M sorry,” Sam says, wincing at the anger in his brother’s voice. He reaches for Dean’s wrist, wants him to stop fussing with his goddamned scar, and Dean twists out of reach. He drops his hand on his own, though, which is a plus.

“You’re sorry?” Dean demands. “I thought you were dying, asshole!” He’s looking more closely at Sam, though—at his face—and now he stops, frowning. “What happened?”

“I had a vision,” Sam answers simply. “Can we—” He gestures at the Impala. “Can we do this back at the motel? I need some ice.” Grimacing, he rubs his forehead and adds, “Couple of Vicodin.”

Dean’s anger vanishes as quickly as it came, replaced with a calmer version of his earlier concern. “Shit, man, why didn’t you tell me?” Moving in, he puts an arm low around Sam’s back and reaches across to grip his waist with the other. “Come on, lean on me.”

Sam’s pride insists that he can make it to the car on his own, but his muscles are still trembling and he isn’t actually sure he can get all the way across the street without falling over. Hooking his own arm over his brother’s shoulders in return, he puts most of his weight on Dean and lets his brother move them both.

“It wasn’t this bad last time,” Dean grunts as he hustles Sam into the passenger seat.

“Didn’t have so many last time,” Sam responds, even though he’s not sure that’s the real reason. It’s one of them, maybe, but not the main one. That honor belongs to the demon, to the fact that its closer than it ever has been before—close enough that Sam can feel its pollution contaminating the air and sullying the earth.

As Dean straps him in, Sam rests his head against the back of the seat and shuts his eyes. He waits until they’re pulling away from the curb and then announces, “Her name’s Harriet. Andy’s the mom.”

Dean doesn’t say anything. There isn’t so much as a shift in his breathing to tell Sam what his brother is thinking.

“It’s happening tonight,” Sam adds.
Dean’s silence takes on a grim quality.

Sighing, Sam turns his forehead into the cool glass and hammers the last nail into his coffin. “Dean, we’re gonna have to tell Dad.”

“Yeah, Sammy,” Dean responds finally with a reluctant whisper. “I know.”
“A vision?” Dad says.

He’s been repeating the same thing for a couple of minutes now, and Sam’s anxiety has begun to bleed into annoyance. He shifts the ice pack he’s holding against his forehead in order to toss a glance at his brother.

Dean is sitting on the bed closest to the door, looking equal parts miserable and determined as he stares at their father. Sam shifts his own gaze over to the other bed, where Dad’s watching him as though he actually wants an answer this time—looks like the shock has finally begun to wear off. Sam doesn’t know what to call the expression that has replaced it, but whatever it is, it makes his stomach drop uneasily.

“Yes,” he says, trying to keep his response even. The splitting headache still fucking with his brain doesn’t help, though, making his voice sound pinched and strained. “I saw the demon burning a woman on the ceiling.”

“All right.” Dad nods—a carefully controlled motion—and then sits up straighter, both hands planted firmly on his thighs. “And you think it’s going to happen to this woman you met because ...”

“Because these things happen exactly the way I see them.”

Sam realizes belatedly that the mingled annoyance and apprehension churning inside of him have leaked into his voice, but by then it’s too late to do anything about it. And besides, he’s too tired and hurt to really care at this point whether or not Dad knows how he feels. He does make an effort to read the man, and bites the inside of his cheek as he notices the sharpness of Dad’s gaze, and the frown tugging at his mouth.

Before Dad can say anything, though, Dean pushes to his feet and catches everyone’s attention. “It started out as nightmares, and then he started having them while he was awake,” he says, coming to stand by Sam and placing a hand on his shoulder with a deliberateness that Dad can’t miss.

The reminder that Dean is with him in this chases away some of the pain, and Sam lowers the ice pack. He wishes he could drag his brother over to the bed and curl around him—he’s sure that would get rid of the rest of the pain, that kissing Dean’s lips would take away the taste of ashes in his mouth—but of course Dad is sitting there looking at them, and anyway time is slipping through their fingers, so instead Sam elaborates, “It’s like—I don’t know, it’s like the closer I get to anything involving the demon the stronger the visions get.”

Dad leans forward over his knees, exchanging palms for elbows on his thighs, and rubs at his face with both hands. When he looks up again, his eyes don’t take in Sam at all, but rest firmly on Dean’s face above him.

Before Dad can say anything, though, Dean pushes to his feet and catches everyone’s attention. “It started out as nightmares, and then he started having them while he was awake,” he says, coming to stand by Sam and placing a hand on his shoulder with a deliberateness that Dad can’t miss.

The reminder that Dean is with him in this chases away some of the pain, and Sam lowers the ice pack. He wishes he could drag his brother over to the bed and curl around him—he’s sure that would get rid of the rest of the pain, that kissing Dean’s lips would take away the taste of ashes in his mouth—but of course Dad is sitting there looking at them, and anyway time is slipping through their fingers, so instead Sam elaborates, “It’s like—I don’t know, it’s like the closer I get to anything involving the demon the stronger the visions get.”

Dad leans forward over his knees, exchanging palms for elbows on his thighs, and rubs at his face with both hands. When he looks up again, his eyes don’t take in Sam at all, but rest firmly on Dean’s face above him.

“All right,” their father says. “When were you gonna tell me about this?” It isn’t just a question—it’s a rebuke—and Sam is startled enough by his father’s unexpected reversion to his old habits that he sits there silently while Dean’s hand tightens on his shoulder.

After a couple of moments, Dean manages, “We didn’t know what it meant.” He sounds just as taken aback by the shift as Sam is—off balance and anxious—and Sam’s hand clenches around the ice pack in a reflexive response to the protective anger that swells in his chest. He opens his mouth to say something suitably scathing and then clamps it shut again as a fresh bolt of agony explodes
behind his left eye.

“Something like this starts happening to your brother, you pick up the phone and you call me,” Dad insists while Sam brings the ice pack back up.

Something about the order—and about the way Dad isn’t looking at him, hasn’t looked at him since he came to grips with what they were telling him—dings Sam as alarming in a big way, but he can’t think clearly enough to figure out what to do about it. He’s in too much pain, feels too saddened and sickened by the return of his visions. He’s too upset on Dean’s behalf to work himself up on his own, and anyway he isn’t sure that he doesn’t deserve it.

He isn’t safe, after all. His visions are linked to the demon, possibly his recent spate of nightmares as well (and isn’t Dad going to love hearing about those), and he therefore can’t be trusted. Dad’s right to shut him out.

He’s wrong to heap the blame on Dean, though, and just as soon as Sam catches his breath again he’s going to tell the man just that.

Only Dean beats him to it.

"Call you?" Dean says, voice unexpectedly sharp. “Are you kidding me? Dad, I called you from Lawrence, all right? Sam called you when I was dying.”

Sam twitches—he didn’t know Dean knew about that, doesn’t like the fact that Dean knows, that he’s aware Dad never showed.

“I mean, getting you on the phone ...” Dean scoffs. “I had a better chance of winning the lottery.”

In the silence that follows, Sam raises bleary eyes in their father’s direction. Dad’s looking down at the ground, glowering, but at least he isn’t giving Dean that stern, disappointed look anymore.

“You’re right,” Dad says finally, and Sam’s so shocked that he almost forgets about the pain in his skull. Dean’s just as surprised—Sam can feel it in the minute twitch of his brother’s hand where it still rests on his shoulder. He wishes he could see his brother’s face, try and read the expression there, but the angle’s all wrong.

Then Dad lifts his head and adds, “But we’ve been hunting together now for months. We’ve been hunting the damned demon side by side and you—what? Forgot to mention that Sam’s got psychic powers that are connected to the son of a bitch?”

There’s enough vehemence in his voice that Sam flinches, and maybe that’s what drives his brother to move forward and stand between them.

“No,” Dean answers, head held high and shoulders squared defensively. “No, I didn’t forget. But I didn’t forget about New Mexico, either.”

Sam hears his father suck in a deep breath and really wishes he could see the man’s face. Instead, he has to settle for looking at the small of his brother’s back while his father’s disembodied voice breathes, “You think I’d hurt him? My own flesh and blood?”

“So prove me wrong,” Dean challenges. “Cause I gotta say, Dad, you ain’t doing such a good job of that right now.”

“I haven’t laid a finger on him!” Dad yells. The protest is accompanied by a creak of the mattress and the thud of boots on the floor as the man pushes to his feet.
“You didn’t fucking have to!” Dean shouts back. “He’s right here, Dad! He’s my brother and he’s your son and you’re talking around him like he’s—like he’s a goddamned case.”

It’s the echo of his own words that pulls Sam out of his pained stupor—because it wasn’t warranted when it was Dean, but it sure as hell is now: Sam is a case, he’s very definitely a case—and he reaches out to wrap a hand in the back of his brother’s shirt. He didn’t notice it before, but Dean is shaking, fine tremors running through his entire body.

“Dean,” Sam calls softly, dropping the ice pack onto the table and reaching out to rest his other hand on his brother’s hip. “It’s okay.”

Dean whirls on him, looking down with an expression that can’t decide whether it wants to be fear or rage—although there’s more panic in his wide eyes than anything else, Sam thinks. His head still aches, but he pushes the pain aside in the face of his brother’s distress and stands, reaching out with the intention of massaging the nape of Dean’s neck the way he usually does when his brother gets this agitated.

But Dean flinches back, coloring, and cuts his eyes back over his shoulder toward Dad.

And yeah, Sam must still not be thinking straight because doing something like that in front of their father really isn’t a great idea.

“No, it’s not okay.”

At the unexpected sound of their father’s voice, Sam shifts to the side and looks past his brother. Dad’s standing at the foot of the bed he was sitting on, with his hands shoved into his pockets and a rueful look on his face.

“I’m sorry,” he continues, meeting Sam’s gaze. “I—There’s some things that we need to discuss, I guess. I haven’t.” He grimaces. “I haven’t been all that forthcoming with you boys either.”

And Sam knows with cold, dread certainty that this is about all those evaluating, cautious glances. This is about the way that Dad sometimes looks at him like he’s a stranger, and a dangerous one at that. This is shit that Sam really, really doesn’t want to hear.

Even if he knows he needs to.

“Can you boys—” Dad gestures to the other bed, the one Dean was using before. “Can you have a seat?”

Dean catches Sam’s eyes—questioning, still upset but ready to follow Sam’s lead—and after a second of hesitation Sam nods back. When they make their way over to the bed, Dean sits down close enough to him that their shoulders brush together. It hopefully looks accidental to Dad, but Sam can tell that Dean’s doing it deliberately—this whole confrontation has left him on edge and he clearly wants Sam as close as possible. So that Dean can protect him or so that he can draw comfort from him, Sam isn’t sure.

He isn’t sure Dean would see a difference between the two.

Dad doesn’t seem to notice at all, though, sitting down on the other bed with a heavy, weary motion and leaning forward on his knees again. He looks down, and his right hand finds its way over to his left and starts toying with the wedding ring he refuses to take off.

“Is there anything else?” he asks as he toys with the band. “Anything besides the visions?”
Beside Sam, Dean is carefully still, leaving the decision whether or not to tell up to him. But of course, that was never even a question in Sam’s mind.

Sam waits until his father glances up at him and then, in a carefully controlled voice, says, “I’ve been having nightmares. Not—not like the ones I had about Jess and our old house, but. They’re bad.”

“Nightmares about what?” Dad asks. His voice is just as empty as Sam’s is, but he isn’t hiding anything in his eyes, which are concerned and earnest.

A knot in Sam’s chest, which he hadn’t even been aware of until now, loosens beneath that look. The pain in his head lessens as well, and he sits up straighter as he answers, “I don’t remember. But when I wake up, for a couple of seconds I—I want to do things. Terrible things. And I can smell—it always smells like sulfur.”

Dad’s knuckles have gone white, but just as with Dean, there’s no surprise on his face. Instead, there’s fear, and worry, and reluctant resignation. As though he has been expecting something of the sort.

Jesus Christ, did everyone know what was going on with Sam except for him?

“We called Bobby,” Dean puts in. “He put Sam through every test he could think of and then gave him a clean bill of health. He also sent over some protective symbols.”

“They help?” Dad asks, glancing between them.

“I haven’t tried any yet,” Sam admits. “He just sent them yesterday. But I looked around online last night and I think I found a way to combine a couple.”

Dean perks up beside him at the news—Sam didn’t want to tell his brother until Bobby gave his design the thumbs up—and then asks, “You run it past Bobby?”

Sam nods. “I haven’t had a chance to check for a reply yet, but yeah. E-mailed him this morning.”

Dad nods toward the laptop. “Check it now,” he says. “The rest of this can wait for a couple of minutes.”

It’s not quite a command, but it isn’t exactly a request either, and part of Sam stiffens a little in reflexive protest. But there’s no point in getting into an argument over doing something he would have been doing anyway, and Sam’s still too nervous about whatever secrets Dad has up his sleeves to work up anything more than mild annoyance.

Without another word, he gets up and goes over to the table to do as Dad asked. He finds Bobby’s response waiting in his inbox as expected, and the reply is short and sweet:

Should work.

Without waiting to be asked, Sam brings the computer back with him and opens up the jpeg file with the new version of the protective symbol. He hands it to Dean first and then sits back down on the mattress while his brother leans across the space between the beds to pass the laptop over to Dad. Their father studies the design for a couple of minutes, frowning thoughtfully, and then spends several more clicking around—checking Bobby’s original e-mail, most likely—before finally closing
the laptop and setting it down on the mattress to his left.

“I picked up some henna on my way to the clinic,” Dean announces. “As soon as we’re done, Sam can—”

“No,” Dad breaks in with a decisive shake of his head. “If you’re gonna have protection, it might as well be permanent.”

“What, like a tattoo?” Dean asks skeptically.

“You have any objections, Sammy?” Dad asks in response. Turning his attention away from Dean, he arches an eyebrow in Sam’s direction.

Sam fidgets on the bed as he considers it. On the one hand, having the symbol permanently inked into his skin is a logical precaution, and it isn’t like it’s a bad idea to continue carrying around some extra protection after the demon’s dead—if for no other reason than the fact that there’s no evidence Sam’s nightmares are connected to this particular black-eyed bastard. On the other hand, tattoos don’t come off, which means that he’ll have to spend the rest of his life explaining away the damned thing to everyone who sees him without a shirt.

Not that Sam plans on running around half naked, but it’s the principle of the thing.

In the end, though, necessity trumps inconvenience and he sighs.

“Well, I’m not thrilled with the whole needles in my skin thing,” he says glumly. “But other than that, I guess I’m okay with it.”

Dean bumps their shoulders together to get Sam’s attention. When he looks over at his brother, Dean’s grinning at him with a teasing expression that doesn’t look quite genuine, but is still light years better than the anger-fear he was radiating before.

“Don’t worry, Sammy. I’ll hold your hand.”

Dad snorts from the other bed. “You’re getting one too, kiddo.”

Dean is still smiling as he looks over at Dad—probably because he thinks the man’s joking—but when he takes in Dad’s serious expression, his face shuts down. “Like hell I am.”

Dad doesn’t even bother saying anything. He just looks at Dean, steady and sure, and after a moment a tick in Dean’s jaw jumps.

“Why the hell do I need one?” he demands. “Sammy’s the one with the demon on his ass.”

“Because I want you two boys as safe as possible, that’s why.” Shifting his attention over to Sam, Dad finally cracks a smile. “And it’s a damned fine design. Best I’ve seen, actually.”

Sam has been following the conversation silently, trying to figure out why Dean is reacting so poorly to the idea, but he takes a moment to smile back at his father, surprised and pleased by the praise, before turning back to his brother and saying, “I thought you always wanted a tattoo. You couldn’t shut up about it when you were in high school.”

If he hadn’t been so afraid of the wrath of Dad—identifying marks weren’t a great idea for a family trying to stay off the grid, and anyway their father could be surprisingly conservative about some things—Dean probably would’ve had a small collection by now, the way he always talked about it.
“A cool tattoo, sure,” Dean agrees, shifting up on the bed in an agitated motion that moves him away from Sam and sets his back against the headboard. “You know, like a skull and crossbones or something,” he continues, glowering. “Not something that looks like it came out of a Tribals-R-Us catalogue.”

After Dad’s unexpected compliment a moment before, Sam isn’t hurt by his brother’s words—if Dad says something’s good, it is, plain as that—but Dean physically distancing himself makes Sam’s chest pull tight.

He can’t call Dean on it, not in front of Dad, so instead he focuses on the insult and says, “Sorry the aesthetics aren’t up to your standards, but I was more worried about, oh, I don’t know, keeping myself clean and demon free.”

“That thing couldn’t be more frou-frou if it tried,” Dean replies with a mutter, crossing his arms in front of his chest and giving Sam a defiant, hostile stare.

Dean’s spoiling for a fight, clearly, and Sam knows that it’s a cover for something else—that this is just Dean’s defenses snapping into play—but he’s upset, and tired, and hurt, and he feels his grip on his own emotions slipping away as he opens his mouth to respond.

“Boys.” Dad’s voice, sharp and commanding, cuts through Sam’s irritation and jerks him back to himself. Shutting his mouth again, he clenches his right hand into a fist where it’s resting on his thigh.

“Sorry, sir,” Dean says, but he doesn’t sound at all convincing. It’s just habit that has him responding, and when Sam looks back over at him, he finds Dean resolutely staring past their father at the wall. His shoulders are still and bulky—tensed—and Sam can see his brother’s forearms flexing where they jut out beyond the rolled-up cuffs of his shirt.

Something’s clearly wrong—something about the thought of getting a tattoo, or maybe that particular tattoo—but now isn’t the time to get into it. Not with Dad watching, not with their confrontation with the demon hurtling toward them. Not when Dad still hasn’t told them whatever he’s been holding back about Sam.

But as soon as this is over, Sam promises himself, he’s sitting Dean down for a couple of hours and having all of this out with him.

“If it makes you feel better,” Dad says from the other bed, “I’m getting one myself. We’ll need every advantage we can get when we hit the son of a bitch tonight.”

Dean jerks at that, uncrossing his arms and sitting up straighter. “Tonight? You mean you want us to get inked now?”

“Tattoos aren’t gonna do a lick of good if they’re not there,” Dad points out. He either hasn’t noticed how wide and freaked out Dean’s eyes are, or he’s ignoring it. Sam’s bet is on the latter—Dad’s too observant and Dean’s being too obvious. Sam isn’t sure that riding roughshod over Dean’s reluctance is the way to go in this case, but then again he doesn’t know what else to do himself.

“Couple of grand should be enough to guarantee a rush job,” Dad adds as Dean stares at him. “I’ll have to max out a couple of cards to get it, but better broke than dead.”

That last bit is loaded with significance—meant as a reminder to Dean that Dad isn’t insisting on this for his own amusement—and Sam can tell that his brother gets that. His jaw works for a second, uncomfortable and frustrated, and then his eyes cut over to Sam in a brief flicker before Dean turns
his face away to look at the far wall. He doesn’t say anything, but then again he doesn’t have to. They all know he’s going to do as he’s told.

Now that Dean isn’t looking at him, Dad’s expression softens and he shares a quick, worried glance with Sam. Sam offers their father a shrug—slow and slight, so Dean won’t catch the movement from the corner of his eye. He wants to insist that Dean stay away tonight, that he hang back where it’s safe, but he can’t. This is Dean’s fight too, after all, and he hasn’t ever let them down in the field before. He’s too good at locking all of his damage and pain away and focusing on the task at hand.

More than ever, though, Sam’s sure they’re in for a long, serious conversation once the demon’s dead. Whether Dean wants to talk or not.

Dad sighs softly as he studies the back of Dean’s head—probably thinking along the same lines as Sam—and then shakes himself and says, “Something you need to know before we do this.”

When his gaze returns to rest on Sam, his face has gone locked and distant again. It’s Dad’s hunting face, worn when he doesn’t want to give anything away, and the sight of it drives all of Sam’s worries about his brother from his mind. His heart beats faster in his chest and he wants, more than anything, to get up and walk out of the room before their father says anything else.

Instead, he swallows and whispers, “Sir.” He feels the bed shift as Dean turns around again, but can’t take his eyes off of Dad.

“I ran across a demon—about a year ago, I guess. Managed to trap it and had myself a little chat. It had a lot of interesting things to say.”

He stops then, watching Sam with the same, heavy gaze, and Sam feels his mouth go dry. His voice is little more than a rasp as he asks, “Like what?”

“The babies the demon visits, they’re special.”

“Special how?” That’s Dean, voice low and tense enough that it makes Sam’s stomach twist unpleasantly.

“Telekinetics, clairvoyants, fire starters.” Dad pauses and then, with a flicker of reluctance in his eyes, finishes, “Psychics.”

A part of Sam has been expecting this ever since Dad told them about the demon’s affinity for six-month-old babies in Vegas, and he’s known longer than that the visions were connected to the demon, but the confirmation still hits him with an icy shock. His breath gusts out as though he’s been punched. He can feel his brother’s eyes on him like a solid weight, but can’t bring himself to look over.

“So,” he says instead. “Mom, Jess. They’re dead because of me.”

“They’re dead because of the demon,” Dean growls from his right.

Dad nods without taking his eyes off of Sam. “Dean’s right, son. This isn’t anything you did.”

Sam knows that—he does—and beneath his shock, he can feel the old, familiar stir of anger. It’s been a couple of months since he entertained that particular emotion more than in passing, but he welcomes its return now. He’s going to need all the strength it can offer to end this once and for all.

But the last, lingering threads of his self-pity are slow to let go.
“No, it’s something I am,” he hears himself saying bitterly. “That’s even worse.”

“It’s not your fault, Sam,” Dean insists. The mattress jounces as he leans forward and puts a hand on Sam’s shoulder.

For once, Sam can’t stand being touched by his brother. Not when he feels like this. “Yeah,” he bites out, jerking his shoulder to dislodge Dean’s hand. “You’re right, it’s not my fault, but it’s my problem.”

“It’s not your problem, Sam,” Dad corrects, pulling Sam’s attention back. “It’s our problem, and we’re gonna take care of it together.”

As Sam meets his father’s gaze, his anger swells—this isn’t fucking fair. He didn’t ask to have visions, he didn’t ask to have his mother killed and his family driven into a bloody life that left his brother messed up and fucked over. His anger feels like a living thing, twisting just beneath his skin, and Sam’s hands shake with how much he wants to shoot off the bed and hurl the lamp against the wall—break it, break everything he can get his hands on.

But another part of him wants to get down on his knees and beg Dean’s forgiveness, and Dad’s. Intellectually, Sam knows that it isn’t his fault, but his heart always seems to be miles behind his head in that department. Hell, only in the last week or so has he allowed himself to admit that Dean’s rape might not be entirely his fault. Now, with this sudden revelation, that old guilt is joined by the new and leaves him floundering.

Sam can feel his control slipping away from him, and he isn’t sure which way it’s going to go—whether the rage or the guilt is going to win through. He isn’t sure he can keep himself from lashing out, from snarling and pushing in an effort to punish—not Dad or Dean, but himself, although in the end he knows he’d be the one least injured by the impending explosion.

Digging his fingers into his thigh, he struggles with himself for a moment and then, surprisingly, everything goes numb. He takes the opportunity to ask, “So, why is it doing it? What does it want?”

“I’m not sure,” Dad answers, watching Sam with the grave, cautious expression Sam has noticed from time to time over the past few months. “But I tracked down a handful of those kids, Sam, and some of them went ... wrong.”

Sam’s chest gives a pulse of dull pain. “Define wrong,” he says tonelessly.

Dad just looks at him with those dark, serious eyes without saying anything, and Sam goes cold. After a moment, he nods, swallowing the bitter lump in his throat.

“Yes,” he rasps. “Okay.”

“Sam’s not like that,” Dean says suddenly. “Dad, you can’t—you can’t think Sammy’d hurt anyone.”

“I don’t want to,” Dad answers with honest reluctance. “But I can’t deny that it’s a possibility.”

“Dad’s right, Dean,” Sam says. He can’t look at his brother. Can’t meet Dad’s gaze, either, now that it’s gone pitying and regretful. Dropping his eyes, he looks down at his hands. “As long as I’m having these nightmares, you can’t—you can’t trust me. I don’t even trust me.”

There’s a beat of silence in the room and then Dean says, “Well, boo hoo.”

His tone is cutting enough that Sam looks over, startled. Dean’s watching him—everyone’s staring at
him, at the monster—and his expression is angrier than Sam has seen it in a long time.

“Let me know when you finish feeling sorry for yourself, Sam,” Dean sneers. “Cause I’m really getting sick of the whole pity party you’ve got going on.”

Sam’s own anger rouses again in response to the attack and he responds, “I’m a ticking time bomb, Dean. I think I’m entitled to—”

“Oh, come on,” his brother interrupts. “That’s crap and you know it. And this nightmare stuff? That’s crap too.”

Sam’s thrust back in time at the reminder, and all of his previous fear and frustration over Dean’s attitude—over his brother’s inability to guard himself, to understand—comes rushing back to the surface.

“Goddamn it, Dean!” he yells, pushing up to his feet. “You can’t trust me! What the fuck is it gonna take to get that through your thick skull?”

“Oh, okay,” Dad says, standing as well. “That’s enough. Sit down, Sam.”

There’s enough space between the beds that they aren’t touching, but Dad’s still close enough for Sam to tense reflexively. The snapping command in their father’s voice isn’t helping calm his rage, either.

Shifting his angry gaze to Dad, Sam curls his hands into fists and doesn’t budge. His nostrils flare and his throat cords, broadcasting just how pissed he is right now. What isn’t showing—what Sam is desperate to keep from showing—is the icy shard of dread at the anger’s core.

Fuck, he is going to hurt Dean. Dad just as good as promised that.

Sam can’t stop that from happening, and he doesn’t know how to turn all of the rage and hate and despair into a weapon to use on himself, much as he’d like to, so there’s only one place for all of it to go.

Outward.

“Sit. Down,” Dad says again, more firmly, and steps forward into Sam’s space.

Sam’s fist starts to come up—it won’t end so easily this time, he isn’t going to stop until one of them is in the fucking hospital—and then Dean is there, pushing between them and knocking Sam back down onto the bed. Sam lands heavily, with a crack of bedsprings that means the mattress just broke, and before he can even push up into a sitting position, Dean’s finger is in his face and his brother is barking, “Stay down!”

There’s nothing but anger in Dean’s voice, but his eyes are frightened, and hurt, and as he meets his brother’s gaze Sam realizes that he almost attacked their father in the middle of their motel room. He almost fucked everything up because he can’t stand himself but can’t figure out how to turn the emotion inward where it belongs. The fear-fueled anger snuffs out, extinguished by a black wave of despair, and Sam hides his face in his hands.

“Fuck,” he breathes.

“I don’t know how many ways I can say this, Sam,” Dean announces from somewhere above him. “You aren’t gonna hurt me or anyone else. You can be an asshole, but you’re not evil, okay?”
But it’s not true, Sam knows it isn’t. He remembers too well how he feels when he wakes up. He can picture too vividly the things he wants to do. “The nightmares,” he choke out.

“Are a problem, yeah, but the tattoo’s gonna take care of that, isn’t it? Besides, that fucker’s gonna be dead after tonight. I’d call that a pretty fucking final solution.”

Sam doesn’t know what to say to that. God, he wants to believe his brother, wants to believe in the faith Dean has in him, but he isn’t sure he’s capable of it. He knows he isn’t worthy of such pure devotion.

“And you!” Dean continues, but his voice is softer now and Sam can tell his brother has his back to him. “Stop freaking him the fuck out. Christ, Dad, what the hell did you think you were doing, dropping it on him like that?”

Dad reacts to Dean’s confrontational tone of voice about as well as Sam would have expected.

“I thought he could handle it!” he yells back. “It’s his goddamned life and he’s an adult now, he’s old enough to hear a few unpleasant truths. Or would you rather I left him in the dark about the risks?”

The word snaps through the despair and brings Sam’s head up again. “Risks,” he says, hardly daring to hope that it means what he thinks it does. “You mean I might not ....”

Dad looks down at him and, whatever expression Sam’s wearing, it erases the anger from their father’s face.

“Truthfully,” Dad says, “I think it’d be a cold day in Hell before you did anything that son of a bitch wanted you to. You’re my son, Sam, and I trust you. There isn’t anyone else I’d rather have covering my back than you and your brother. But you deserved to know the truth.” He glances at Dean quickly before returning his eyes to Sam. “You both did.”

Sam’s chest expands painfully as his anger and his fear slip away in the face of Dad’s confidence. They’re replaced by pride and a terrible, worshipful kind of love that Sam didn’t think he had in him, not for Dad. His eyes water as he sniffs and nods, a wavering smile on his face.

“Thanks,” he says.

Dad looks away, embarrassed. “Yeah, well, don’t let it go to your head. You’re still getting that tattoo.” Clearing his throat, he looks back at Dean. “And I expect you to keep an eye on him just in case.”

“What am I supposed to do if he starts acting funny?” Dean snaps. “Shoot him?”

Sam would be surprised at his brother’s attitude, but he’s beginning to understand just how firmly Dean’s belief in Sam’s goodness is entrenched, and he can see how his brother might be slower to forgive. Even when the offender in question is their father.

Dad hesitates—which might make Sam doubt himself again if he let it, if he let himself think about all those evaluating, worried looks—and then shakes his head. “We’ll figure something out if it comes to that, but I don’t think it will.”

And that’s what’s at the heart of the matter, Sam realizes. Dad’s nervous, yes, but he’s always nervous. Dad’s still alive because he doubts everything. Just because Dad’s being cautious when it comes to Sam doesn’t mean he isn’t also being truthful when he says he doesn’t think anything’s going to happen. Sam’s chest gives a second, gentler pulse as the certainty of Dad’s faith sinks in.
Above him, Dean’s expression is easing as he finally, grudgingly, backs down. With a quick glance at Sam, he shoves a hand in his pocket and gives a nod.

“So,” Dad says into the silence. “Are we settled here, or do you boys want to hug this out?”

Dean snorts at that—still a little too tense to give Dad the good-humored roll of his eyes he otherwise might have, but there’s a relieved air as he steps away from the beds, giving Sam room to stand up again. Dad offers a hand and helps him, then claps him on the shoulder when he’s on his feet.

The easy gesture means more to Sam than anything Dad could have said, and he’s disappointed when the man releases him almost immediately. Womanish or not, Sam for one would have liked that offered hug right about now. But Dad’s leaning down to pick the laptop up from the bed, and the moment’s past.

“I’ll find us a tattoo parlor,” Dad announces. “You boys gear up.”

Sam’s stomach flutters uneasily at the reminder of tonight’s business, but he obediently turns to ask Dean where he put the weapons bag. The ring of his cell phone interrupts him before he can get so much as his brother’s name out. Sam doesn’t recognize the number, and he’s tempted to ignore the call. Then again, ignoring any possible warning or tip off is a risky proposition in their business.

Pressing the green button, he puts the phone to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Sam?” It’s a woman’s voice, and familiar in an unsettling way.

Sam frowns as he searches his memories in an attempt to place it. “Who is this?”

“Think real hard,” the voice drawls. “It’ll come to you.”

And, with a sinking, falling sensation in his stomach, it does.

“Meg,” he breathes.

In the room, Dean jerks around to look at him with wide eyes.

“Last time I saw you, you fell out of a window,” Sam says, staring past his brother.

The world has gone false around him—everything feels disjointed and weightless. Christ, he’s talking to a dead girl here. She was bleeding from her mouth the last time he saw her, and from one of her eyes. There was glass littered all over her body, caught in her hair.

And Sam was filled with vindictive joy at the sight because she’d been ... her hands had been ... Oh God. He focuses on Dean and, sure enough, his brother has gone white and is rubbing furiously at his scar.

“Oh yeah,” Meg’s voice drawls in Sam’s ear. “Thanks to you. That really hurt my feelings, by the way.” There’s a hint of a pout in her voice, but mostly Sam thinks she just sounds amused, which is all sorts of wrong. She shouldn’t be feeling anything anymore.

“Just your feelings?” he asks, while in his mind he watches her crash through the window again, glass falling around her in a deadly rain. “That was a seven story drop.”

Meg makes a soft noise—the one a cat might make, if it could laugh at the mouse trapped between its paws—and then demands, “Let me speak to your dad.”
Sam turns to their father automatically, and something in his eyes pulls Dad to his feet and brings him closer. “My dad,” he says, fighting to sound calm and clueless. “I don’t know where my dad is.”

“Oh please,” Meg scoffs. “Like the entire world doesn’t know you three have been thick as thieves for the past four months. How’s Dean, by the way? He miss me?”

Rage flushes through Sam’s body. “You don’t get to talk about him, bitch,” he snarls.

Meg tsks at him. “See now, that’s why I asked to talk to Daddy. Boys are just ... so emotional.” Sam can actually hear the smirk in her voice. He doesn’t know how he ever could have thought she was sweet. Or, apparently, human. “How about you let the grown-ups talk?”

Frowning, Dad holds his hand out for the phone. Sam has a few more things he wants to say to Meg, though, and he steps back out of range.

As though she can see what’s happening, Meg adds, “Put John on now, Sam, and I won’t tell him that you and Dean have been fucking like bunnies.”

Sam’s breath catches at the threat—how the hell does she know—and Dad snatches the phone from him before he even knows what’s happening.

“This is John,” he says into the phone as he walks back toward the window, his back to Sam. Dean comes over to stand next to Sam while their father listens to whatever Meg is saying and then, abruptly, Dad freezes. Sam’s stomach flips—Meg told him, she must have—and he leans into Dean’s space as Dad says, “I’m here.”

The man’s shoulders are tight as he goes back to listening, and Sam both wishes he could see their father’s face and dreads him turning around. Dean, who has no idea what Meg’s undoubtedly announcing right this moment, is watching Dad with nowhere near the amount of concern he should be.

“Caleb,” Dad says again, and then, on the heels of that, he growls, “You listen to me. He’s got nothing to do with anything. You let him go!”

Dean’s gone tense next to Sam now, reaching out stiffly and gripping Sam’s arm. Sam stands there numbly, unable to make his body work well enough to return the touch.

There’s another pause in the conversation as Meg makes her response and then Dad says, in a completely different tone of voice, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He’s turned a little to one side now—not far enough that Sam can see his face, but enough that he can make out his father’s white-knuckled grip on the cell.

“Caleb,” Dad calls a second later, shouting the word as though he can stop whatever Meg is doing with just the sound of his voice.

Sam’s stomach twists sickly.
“Caleb!” Dad repeats, even more frantically, and now Sam’s hand moves up to fist Dean’s shirt over his heart. He can feel Dean’s heartbeat against his knuckles, fast and terrified. Dean’s hand on Sam’s shirt tightens in response.

When Dad’s free hand smashes down on the table a moment later, Sam flinches even though a part of him was expecting as much. Dad turns around, his eyes raging and dark, and Dean’s breath stutters out beside Sam.

Sam doesn’t move. He just looks into their father’s eyes and waits for the knowledge that Caleb is dead to sink in. Waits for it to feel real and less like a nightmare.

“I’m gonna kill you, you know that?” Dad growls into the phone.

Whatever Meg says in response clearly doesn’t improve his mood, because his expression hardens further and he turns and begins to pace across the room. Almost immediately, though, his steps slow. His shoulders hunch. Sam watches as the weight of his father’s years come home to roost, one by one, until he’s standing by the wall and propping himself up with one hand.

“Okay,” Dad sighs hoarsely. There’s a pause, and he clears his throat and repeats, louder, “I said okay. I’ll bring you the Colt.”

Of course, as Dad explains thirty minutes later, by “bring you the Colt”, he means “bring you a ringer while my boys blow your boss away”. Sam is in no way comfortable with the plan—he still doesn’t trust himself, for starters, and Meg is either a demon or possessed, which means she’s dangerous as hell. Besides, Dad should be there when they take out the demon. He deserves to be there.

Dean doesn’t look any happier about the turn of events, but he’s more used to following Dad’s orders without question and it doesn’t take him that long to fall in line. He even offers to go with Dad to the pawnshop and help pick out the decoy. Sam sort of wants to go along himself—mostly so that he has another chance to talk Dad out of doing this—but even with Dad’s two thousand dollars as incentive, the tattoo artist is going to need to start the job now if they want to be sure she’s done before the impending storm front hits.

Sam does his best to look confident when his family drops him off at the tattoo parlor, but the way that Dad squeezes his shoulder as they stand between the man’s truck and the Impala indicates that Sam isn’t doing as good a job as he means to.

“Guess I’ll have to wait until another day to get inked,” Dad jokes.

“You shouldn’t go without it,” Sam responds in a last ditch effort to stop this from happening.

Dad shakes his head. “I know, but I have to. I’m gonna be cutting it close enough as it is. Don’t worry, kiddo, I’ll be careful.”

“Be safe,” Sam corrects, gripping his father’s shoulder in return. “Don’t—Dad, don’t do anything stupid, okay? We—Dean needs you.”

“Dean, huh?” Dad says with a wry smile. Sam can’t manage one of his own in return—he’s doing his best not to cry right now, can’t manage the false bravado Dad and Dean are so fond of—and after a moment their father sobers. “Watch your ass, Sammy. And take care of your brother.”

It’s an order Dad never needs to give, and one that Sam will never disobey. He swallows the lump in
his throat and nods. “Yes, sir.”

Dad squeezes his shoulder one more time and then drops his arm. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. “Later.”

But inside his stomach, where apprehension and dread have hollowed him out, it doesn’t feel like anything but a lie.
Chapter 34

The tattoo hurts less than Sam thought it would. Probably because his thoughts are miles away, with Dad and Dean. Instead of stinging pain, there’s little more than tingling warmth in his chest as the needle moves, tracing over the lines of the design. The buzz of the machine is actually soothing, and by the time Dean shows up halfway through Sam’s session and sits down wordlessly in a chair to watch, Sam has drifted into a trance-state.

He looks back at his brother—at the heavy way that the right side of Dean’s coat is hanging—and through the drifting numbness feels the Colt’s presence crackle, electric and deadly. Dean is deadly too, of course, and beautiful. Right now, he looks nothing but confident, all of his inner turmoil and pain locked up tight inside until tonight is over. Sam’s certain that he’s feeling something, though. Knows that his brother must be worried like hell about Dad.

But Dean’s expression is still as bland as it has ever been when the tattoo artist—Trish—finally taps Sam on the side and announces, “Okay, you’re done.” Pointing at Dean, she adds, “Boyfriend. Strip.”

Suddenly, Sam’s glad that Dad isn’t there with them, because instead of laughing off the assumption the way he normally does, Dean goes beet red. It means that Dean’s emotions aren’t locked up anywhere near as tightly as Sam thought, and he watches consideringly as Dean takes off his coat and his flannel shirt and the t-shirt beneath that, peeling away the layers until Sam can see the freckles speckling his brother’s chest and the mark of his mouth on Dean’s hip where his brother’s pants hang low.

Too low. He’s lost weight, Sam realizes—not much, only a couple of pounds—but lost weight means lost muscle mass. Sam starts to frown, worried about the why of the change, and then stiffens as Trish whistles.

Before he can make a complete ass out of himself by going possessive and hostile, she clears things up by asking, “Are you two in a gang?”

Sam’s used to Dean’s body, doesn’t see the scars anymore when he looks, but he guesses that he can see where the whistle and the question would come from. He has a few of his own, of course—they come with the territory—but not nearly as many as his brother, not enough for her to have commented on. Dean, though—Dean runs into danger headfirst, and he’s always the last to retreat. Add that to his masochistic, martyrish tendencies and his habit of jumping between Sam and anything even remotely dangerous and it’s a wonder he’s as intact as he is.

Dean isn’t fazed at all by the question, which is one they’ve been asked in countless clinics and emergency rooms. He actually looks reassured by it, and tosses her a smile as he passes his clothes to Sam. It’s almost the same smile that Dean uses to get himself free slices of pie and pretty waitresses’ numbers scrawled on the back of receipts. Sam guesses that he and Dad are the only two people who’d notice that it’s a hair too wide to be genuine.

“Rangers,” Dean lies blatantly, no trace of unease in his voice, and then flutters his lashes at Sam. “But don’t ask, and we won’t tell. Isn’t that right, honey?”

Sam manages a slow smile that doesn’t feel cheerful at all, but it must be good enough because Trish throws her head back and laughs. “Excellent! Then you should be good at following orders.” Pointing at her workstation, she demands, “Chair. Now.”
Some of Dean’s flirtatious, carefree mask slips as he obeys. It isn’t replaced by the competent expression he wore when it was Sam’s turn, either. He looks nervous, lips pursed tightly together and movements stiff. Not alarming for Trish, who must be used to seeing nerves from some clients, but Sam knows how wrong this is. How uncharacteristic it is for his brother to show even the slightest sign of fear.

“You ticklish, Ranger?” Trish asks, reaching for the same pencil she used to outline Sam’s tattoo.

“No,” Dean answers. Just that, no teasing or jokes, and Sam frowns a little as he tries and fails to catch his brother’s eyes.

“Good,” Trish responds. “Then don’t move.”

Dean swallows as she starts drawing on his chest and rests his head against the back of the chair. His eyes are open, but from the stiff expression on Dean’s face, Sam would be willing to bet that his brother isn’t really seeing the ceiling. He sits down in the chair his brother was using before, still holding his brother’s coat (and the Colt) in his lap, and studies the minute twitches and tics of Dean’s facial expressions. His chest has finally begun to sting a little beneath the gauze Trish taped over the tattoo, but it’s easy to ignore the slight pain in favor of the sharp-edged suspicion creeping up his spine.

Now, with Dean’s uneasiness clear and present before him, Sam can’t help remembering how poorly his brother reacted to Dad’s insistence that he be tattooed. Sam didn’t want to push the issue then, with Dad there and the confrontation with the demon looming, but Dad’s gone now. The confrontation might be closer than ever, but Sam’s beginning to think the right choice here would be to talk about what’s bothering Dean because he’s clearly not as settled as he should be about tonight, about what they’re going to do.

Sam doesn’t want to go in there with Dean this vulnerable. If there’s even a chance that talking might shore his brother up, he’s going to take it.

“So how come you didn’t want to do this?” he asks.

“Can we have this conversation later?” Dean grunts in response. His face is still tilted up toward the ceiling, but even from this angle Sam can see that there’s too much white and not enough green in his brother’s eyes—clear evidence that Dean’s not just nervous, but riding the fine edge of panic.

“I’m a little busy here.”

Trish rolls her eyes as she traces the symbol onto Dean’s chest but doesn’t say anything. Probably thinking about how the most macho guys are always the ones with the needle and pain phobias.

Sam himself is pretty sure neither of those things are Dean’s problem.

“Later like we’re gonna see Da—uh, John later?” Sam says, catching himself at the last moment. Trish seems pretty cool with the whole gay thing, but he’s guessing she’d get a whole lot less cool if he accidentally let it slip that they’re related.

Dean lowers his head so that he can look at Sam, and his gaze has sharpened the way Sam wanted it to—Dean can’t have a panic attack when he’s angry.

“Yes,” he says firmly. “Just like.” There’s determination behind the anger in his eyes: a fierce light as though Dean can keep Dad alive through sheer willpower alone.

And he thinks he’s no good at faith.
“Come on, man. I know it’s not my kickass design, so what is it?’”

“Not now, Sam,” Dean growls, cutting his eyes toward Trish.

Without pausing in her work, she switches the pencil to her left hand and uses her right to smack Dean in the back of the head.

“Ow!” he complains, shooting her a hostile look and jerking away. Luckily, Trish seemed to be expecting something of the sort and lifts the tip of the pencil just enough to avoid marring the design.

“I said hold still,” she says, smacking Dean’s stomach. “And stop tensing so much. I haven’t even gotten to the tough part yet.”

“Jesus Christ,” Dean mutters as he settles in again. “You’re like the freaking Gestapo, lady.”

“Oh, stop being such a baby and answer Stretch over there. Not like I haven’t heard it all before anyway. Tattoo artists and bartenders, babe. We hear more fucked up shit than most shrinks. Trust me.”

Dean glances over at Sam—he’s got his ‘do you believe this chick?’ face on—but Sam isn’t in the mood for camaraderie. He and Dean are walking into the middle of a shitstorm in a couple of hours, and Sam wants Dean as grounded as possible when that happens.

If that means Dean has to be uncomfortable now, while they’re lancing the wound, then so be it.

“Is it because it’s supernatural?” Sam asks.

Although Dean’s never been a huge fan of using anything too closely related to the things they hunt, it isn’t a serious guess. Dean’s never been shy about voicing that kind of disapproval. But Sam guesses it’s as good a way as any to get Dean to respond, and the speed with which his brother’s face turns red proves him right.

“Christ, Sam,” Dean hisses, shooting a look at Trish. “That’s—that’s private.”

Sam can read volumes of rebuke in Dean’s eyes—what they do is supposed to be a secret, Trish is a civilian, blah blah blah. But ‘Rule Number One, We Do What We Do And We Shut Up About It’ isn’t what’s really bothering Dean about Sam’s question, and Sam knows it. No, the problem here would be the million and one injunctions Dean has against discussing his feelings at all, let alone in front of a stranger.

Injunctions that Sam is determined to plow through full steam ahead, if that’s what it takes.

On the other hand, if he pushes too hard or too fast, Dean could break in the wrong way—lash out or clam up for good.

After a moment of consideration, Sam leans forward and asks, “Hey, Trish. You have an iPod laying around here?”

“Hang on, just—” Trish draws one more curving line, completing the outline, and then sits back triumphantly. “Boom, baby! Okay, so. IPod, you said? Yeah, I’ve got one. You two need a little alone time?”

“Something like that,” Sam answers. Dean glares at him but doesn’t protest. He’s probably planning on using the opportunity to chew Sam out.
“No problem, Stretch,” Trish agrees, rolling her chair over to a drawer and pulling out a pink iPod. She pops the buds into her ears, scrolls through her playlists, and then the muted, tinny sound of Goth metal bleeds out into the air.

No way is she hearing anything past that racket.

Without sparing them another glance, Trish starts setting up her station with new needles and ink containers.

“You are so goddamned lucky that we’re going after the demon tonight,” Dean hisses. “Hell, I might still kick your ass. The *supernatural*, Sam? *Really?*”

“That’s exactly why you have to tell me, Dean,” Sam shoots back. “*Because* we’re going after the demon. This is obviously messing with your head and you can’t be distracted right now.”

Dean’s lips thin as he presses them together. “I’m handling it,” he says, and then promptly proves himself a liar by jumping when Trish rests a hand on the oval, poker-shaped burn scar on his shoulder.

“Seriously,” she says, her voice louder than it needs to be to compensate for the music blaring in her ears. “You need to stay still for this part.”

Dean gives her an insincere smile and an OK gesture with his right hand. Then, without looking at Sam, he wraps both hands around the chair arms and holds on with a death grip.

“How about I guess and you tell me hot or cold?” Sam offers as Trish starts up her tattoo machine.

“How about you shut the fuck up and let me do this?” Dean snaps, and then thunks his head back against the seat as Trish finally sets the needle to his skin.

Sam quiets for a few moments, letting Dean get used to the sensation while he searches around in his head for a plausible theory. Finally, he asks, “Does it have to do with the demon?”

Dean ignores him.

“Dad?”

Still nothing.

“Me?”

Dean’s fingers twitch involuntarily. It could be the needle plunging in and out of his skin, but Sam gets the feeling that he’s the one who just struck a nerve. Still, that minute twitch isn’t a strong enough reaction to account for the depth of nerves Dean’s displaying, so Sam presses on with the one question he really doesn’t want to ask.

“Is this about what happened in Vegas?”

Dean reaches quickly enough for his head that he smacks himself in the face on the way before correcting with a grimace and pressing his fingers against the hooked scar at his temple.

Bingo.

“Shut up, Sam,” Dean says. “I mean it.” His voice lacks the conviction he probably intends it to have, though: too breathless to sound at all threatening.
“So,” Sam says, feeling like a heartless bastard for pushing, but helpless to stop when getting Dean’s head on straight is so important. “It has to do with me and Vegas. I’m gonna guess maybe you don’t feel worthy of the protection?”

Dean laughs, dropping his hand back down to grip the arm of the chair again. “You get your shrink license out of a cereal box or what, dude?”

“Cold,” Sam translates, and then falls silent again, frowning.

He honestly has no clue why Dean has such a problem with this. Sam has stitched him up tons of times, and that had to hurt a hell of a lot more than getting tattooed. So did Dean’s rape, for that matter. But his brother is gripping the chair arms like he’s in agony, and his breathing has gone funny, and ... oh.

Oh.

“Is it just the fact that you’re getting off on the pain, or is the problem that I’m watching you get off on it?” Sam asks, keeping his voice soft and gentle and completely nonjudgmental.

Dean winces and turns his face toward the wall. There’s a flush across his skin now—face and chest and stomach, even the tips of his ears are reddened. Trish has only just started, but now that he’s looking, Sam can tell from the sprawl of his brother’s legs that Dean is already half-hard at least—maybe more than that. He’s come close to managing a full erection a couple of times in the last few weeks, so it isn’t out of the question.

Dragging his eyes up from the crotch of his brother’s jeans, Sam finds Dean’s eyes firmly shut. As he watches, Dean swallows—a shamed, reluctant ripple of his throat. Sam wants to go over and touch his brother, reassure him, but he doesn’t think that the contact would do anything but make Dean feel even worse.

Tightening his grip on his brother’s coat instead, he says, “Dean, it’s okay.”

“You weren’t ever supposed to see,” Dean whispers in a hushed voice. The sliver of face that Sam can make out from this angle is twisted into an anguished mix of arousal and embarrassment and shame.

“You really think it’d make a difference to me?” Sam replies. “I told you, man, I don’t care about that. It doesn’t—it doesn’t make me think any less of you.”

“It’s different. You didn’t—you didn’t see it, you—” The rest of Dean’s admittedly disjointed explanation cuts off with a hiss as Trish’s needle hits a particularly sensitive spot. The way his groin twitches up tells Sam that it wasn’t precisely a hiss of pain.

Trish notices the movement as well and, without pausing in her work, shouts out, “Down, boy!” She shakes her head a little and, in a slightly lower voice, adds, “Swear to God, some days I feel like I should charge by the hour. Be sunbathing on my very own tropical island right about now.”

Dean blinks his eyes open at that, looking over at her with a foggy, disoriented expression as he tries to process her words.

Sam, who doesn’t have his brother’s skewed world-view tossing up roadblocks between him and comprehension, immediately says, “See? You’re not the only one who gets off on this kind of thing.”

But instead of looking comforted by the knowledge, Dean squeezes his eyes shut for a second time and turns his head away again. “I think I’m gonna hurl,” he groans.
Sam does move at that, putting his brother’s coat down on the chair and going over to stand by his head. He can’t really get at the nape of Dean’s neck right now, but he can and does stroke his brother’s hair. Dean tenses at the first touch, eyes fluttering open, and Sam hesitates as he waits to see whether the contact is helping or just freaking Dean out more.

After a moment, his brother’s eyes focus—Sam can see Dean figuring it out, sees him understand that it’s Sam standing there—and some of the tension runs out of him. Cautiously, Sam touches Dean’s hair again, and when his brother continues to look up at him, dazed but trusting, increases the pressure.

“Don’t think about him,” he murmurs as he starts to massage his brother’s scalp. “Stay here, okay, Dean? I need you to stay here with me.”

Dean licks his lips—a quick, nervous dart of tongue—and then pants, “Frau Blücher over here’ll kill me if I move. Where the fuck do you think I’m gonna go?”

Sam knows that his brother understood what he meant, though, and Dean is craning his neck back so that he can watch Sam more easily, so he doesn’t correct him. Instead, he leans over and catches his brother’s mouth with his own.

For a long moment, Dean lies there unresponsively and Sam’s heart begins to speed with the terrifying thought that he misread his brother. He’s about to move back again and apologize when his brother’s lips tentatively part beneath his and press back. With gentle care, Sam tilts his brother’s head up a little further, trying to get better angle so that he can deepen the kiss.

“If you two get spunk on my chair,” Trish announces, “You’re buying me a new one.”

Sam’s face heats quickly enough that it hurts—he can’t believe he forgot they had company—and he immediately straightens.

“See?” Dean says. “Horses whinny in fear before her.” He licks his lips again—with intent, this time, Sam thinks: tasting the kiss—and then adds, “Like to see Dad try and handle her.”

Sam smiles a little at the thought of their father, and what he’d make of Trish, and then remembers where Dad is right now, and what he’s doing, and how unlikely it is that they’re going to see him again at all, and soberes. Luckily, Dean has allowed his eyes to sink shut and doesn’t see Sam’s expression sour—the last thing Dean needs right now is to have Sam’s fears dumped on top of his own.

Sam clears the blockage in his throat as softly as he can and starts massaging again, providing Dean with a comforting distraction while Trish does her job. His eyes travel down over his brother’s torso as his fingers work in Dean’s hair, taking in all the minute, helpless twitches of Dean’s muscles, and finally land on the mouth-shaped bruise on the crest of his brother’s right hip. He watches Dean’s groin twitch, sees the outline of his brother’s cock take shape against the inseam of his jeans as Dean hardens.

Truth be told, now that he’s had time to get used to the idea, Sam isn’t surprised that Dean gets off on a little pain. All the times Dean got hurt when he was growing up—badly, sometimes—that particular switch in his brain would have gotten flipped as a defense mechanism. If Dean wasn’t already wired to appreciate that kind of stimulation, that is. And Sam can’t pretend he hasn’t considered mixing a little pain in with his own pleasure—can’t deny that he’s gotten hard at the thought of his hand and Dean’s ass.

But he doesn’t know whether that sort of thing is something that his brother is ever going to be
comfortable with, not after what happened with Hanson. He wouldn’t blame Dean at all if the answer turns out to be no—he’s too aware of the fact that it would have been an uphill battle getting Dean to embrace his desires even without the complications from the rape thrown into the mix. The lost possibilities make Sam’s chest ache, but one glance at his brother’s face is enough to soothe the worst of it.

Because Dean might enjoy a little pain, but he’s also come to enjoy this, to welcome the gentle caresses Sam offers. Now, when Sam kisses him tenderly, Dean responds in kind instead of going defensive and frightened the way he did in Vermont. Even if the sex has to be gentle, Dean’s still going to enjoy it.

And God, Sam would still consider himself lucky if this is all he ever gets: Dean lax and trusting and calm beneath his hands.

As his gaze drifts back to his mark on his brother’s hip, Sam frowns, considering. He’s probably not going to be able to convince Dean to come back to another tattoo parlor—his brother is still too embarrassed by his reactions, despite Sam’s reassurances—so he might as well take advantage of the moment while it’s available. And a glance at the clock is enough to tell him that there’s plenty of time to do this and still get out to Andy’s in time to play guard dog.

Sam isn’t going to spring it on Dean until the last second, though. The more quickly it happens, the less time Dean will have to overthink things and worm his way out of it.

It takes Trish another forty minutes or so, but finally she finishes and sits back in her chair. “Ta dah!” she proclaims, brandishing the tattoo gun. Am I good or what?”

Dean blinks for a moment, clearly surprised that the ordeal is over, and then starts to get up. Trish immediately pushes him back down with her free hand.

“Woah, cowboy. Still need to do a final wipe down and get you covered up.”

Dean mutters something under his breath that’s too soft to make out, but which is undoubtedly a swear. He complies, though, lying quietly while Trish puts down the tattoo machine and rips open a packet of antiseptic wipes. Dean’s sweating, his hair damp beneath Sam’s fingers, and Sam shifts one hand down to rest on his brother’s right shoulder.

“Relax,” he says.

“Easy for you to say,” Dean responds, and then flinches as Trish brusquely wipes down his new tattoo and the surrounding, reddened skin.

Sam waits for Trish to finish taping Dean’s bandage in place before leaning across his brother and pulling one of her earplugs free. She looks up at him with a grin.

“Done sexiling me, huh?” she asks, and then pats Dean’s side and adds, “Okay, you’re set.”

Sam tightens his grip on his brother’s shoulder as Dean tries to sit up again, keeping him in place.

“Dude, what gives?” Dean demands. Sam can sense the urge to fight his way free in the way Dean starts to twist, so he slides his hand further up Dean’s neck and catches one of his brother’s pressure points in a warning grip.

“Do you have time to do a couple smaller jobs?” he asks.

“Oh, hell no!” Dean growls, and now he’s definitely struggling. Sam tightens his hold in response,
making his brother wince and still.

“Amount you two are tipping, I’ve got nothing but time,” Trish answers, but she pushes back a little from the table anyway, shaking her head. “But I’m not inking anyone who doesn’t want to be inked. He says he’s done, he’s done.”

“Damn right I am. Leggo, Sam.”

Instead, Sam leans down, getting his mouth right next to Dean’s ear and whispering, “I want to mark you.”

Dean goes still again, breath coming quick and light. When Sam slowly eases up on his neck, he still doesn’t move, eyes flitting back and forth on the far wall. He isn’t protesting anymore, but he isn’t agreeing either, so Sam reaches down with his right hand to press against the bruise on his brother’s hip. Dean sucks in a sharp breath, hand shooting up to grip Sam’s bicep in a loose hold.

“This is good, but it isn’t enough, is it?” Sam says, pitching his voice low and for his brother’s ears only. “Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it, Dean. Haven’t wanted something a little more permanent.”

“One matching tattoo’s gay enough, dude,” Dean manages, but he doesn’t sound so sure about it, and he isn’t shoving Sam away.

“That’s practical,” Sam responds. “This’ll be different. Just for us.”

Dean doesn’t say anything, just lies there noiselessly panting. His stomach is rising and falling in short, enticing jerks. Sam has to avert his eyes to keep from getting distracted from the matter at hand.

“Come on, man,” he urges. “We’re already here.”

“Christ,” Dean breathes. And then immediately follows the exhalation up more strongly with, “You don’t get to ask for anything for the next five years.”

Although he’s been pushing for this, and although he could sense Dean weakening, Sam still can’t quite believe that his brother actually agreed to it. “Okay,” he says quickly.

As he starts to straighten, Dean catches his wrist and adds, “And I want compensation. Steak. You’re buying me steak.”

Despite his nervous excitement, Sam laughs at that, and can’t resist planting a quick kiss on his brother’s forehead. “Soon’s we’re done here, okay?”

Trish has edged closer again, looking a lot less nervous now that Dean seems on board with Sam’s request, and now she clears her throat to ask, “So what’re we doing?”

And that’s the question, isn’t it? The one that has Sam’s heart beating faster in his chest, and his mouth going dry, and his palms sweating. He wipes his hands on his jeans in what he hopes is a surreptitious manner and catches Dean’s eyes with his own.

“You trust me?”

Dean knows Sam far too well to miss the nervous tenor of his voice, but if he does notice Sam’s anxiety then he doesn’t acknowledge it at all. Instead, rolling his eyes, he mutters, “Why the hell not.”
Reassured by his brother’s typically juvenile response—if Dean’s hiding his nerves again, then it means he’s feeling better, which means Sam is on the right track—Sam grins and moves around the side of the chair. Dean watches him calmly until he reaches for the top button on Dean’s jeans.

Then he barks, “Woah!” and scrambles upright in the chair.

Sam freezes but doesn’t take his hands back where the tips of his fingers are hooked beneath the waistband of his brother’s pants. He can feel Dean’s panic radiating off of his skin like heat. Sees his brother’s pulse jump in his throat.

“I’m not taking anything off,” Sam explains, keeping his voice soft and gentle. “But she needs more room to work if she’s going to put anything on your hip.”

Dean continues to look at him, wide-eyed and breathless, and after a moment Sam offers, “You want me to go first?”

He’s prepared to negotiate location if that doesn’t calm Dean down either, even though the hipbone appears to be the spot they mutually agreed on when all of this started a month ago, but Dean finally shakes his head. He doesn’t look much calmer, but his jaw is set in a determined way that Sam is more than familiar with.

“No. I’m already here, right? Just ... watch the goods.”

The words are joking, but Sam can hear the earnest plea in his brother’s voice—can see it in his eyes—and it makes him pause. He doesn’t know if Dean is so upset because of how clearly he enjoyed getting the protection tattoo, or if it’s Trish’s presence that’s throwing his brother off, but he does know that he doesn’t like seeing Dean like this.

No matter how nice it would be to have some kind of permanent, visible claim on his brother, freaking Dean out this badly to do it isn’t worth it. Sam meant the second tattoo as a calming influence—a way to settle Dean’s faith in their relationship, at least. Taking this step was supposed to leave Dean reassured. It was supposed to make him happy, prove to him that Sam’s here, that he belongs to Dean and vice versa, that he’s not fucking leaving after tonight.

Instead, it looks like he’s just fucked up again.

Grimacing a little at the bitter taste in his mouth, Sam shakes his head and takes his hands back. “Another time,” he says as he steps away, giving his brother room to stand.

But Dean’s eyes narrow. He uncurls his hands from the chair arms, where they flew when Sam made his latest misstep, and starts opening his jeans himself. “Fuck that,” he growls, pushing the denim not just open but halfway down his thighs. Defiant, he swings his gaze from Sam to Trish as he hooks his fingers in the waistband of his boxers. “How much skin do you need?”

“Depends on what we’re doing,” Trish answers, politically not commenting on the push and pull of their argument. A little dazed by all of Dean’s mood shifts himself, Sam wonders if they’re the weirdest couple she’s ever had in here.

Probably not.

“You’re the man with the plan, Sammy,” Dean says. “What’re we doing?”

Sam’s tempted to keep his mouth shut—Dean will probably back down without any clear direction at hand—and then sighs. If Dean does back down now, he’ll be testy and out of sorts all night, which will probably get one of them killed. Probably Dean, the way his luck runs. No, at this point
it’s better to push through and hope that the end result will leave Dean a little more sorted than he is right now.

Otherwise, Sam’s seriously considering dosing him with some sleeping pills and leaving him in the car.

But that’s an issue for later. Right now, Sam has more immediate, pressing things to worry about. The flutter is back in his stomach—stronger this time than it was before, now that so much is riding on how Dean takes this—but he does his best to ignore it as he looks at Trish and asks, “Paper and pencil?”

Trish wheels back over to the counter and its bank of drawers to retrieve a small pad and the business end of a broken pencil. When she tosses them over, Sam catches them easily and then turns around to use the wall as a makeshift table. He’s had this planned out for a while, and even with the last-minute addition he made to the design while Dean was getting tattooed, it doesn’t take more than a couple of seconds to sketch out. He hesitates, seeing it on the paper, but it’s too late to back out now, so he curls his left hand around the pencil and then turns around to hand the pad to his brother.

Almost immediately, one of Dean’s eyebrows rises. “That’s Ehwaz,” he points out.

Sam’s tongue feels like it’s glued to the roof of his mouth, but somehow he manages to croak out, “Yeah.”

“In a circle,” Dean adds.

“Yeah.”

“With your name around the edge.”

“Looks that way.” Sam doesn’t think he’s been this nervous before—not even when he was steeling himself to tell Dad and Dean about Stanford. He can’t seem to get a full breath—maybe because his stomach is twisting into new and interesting shapes, maybe because it’s taking every ounce of determination to stay where he is instead of sprinting for the door.

He can’t read Dean’s expression.

Dean looks at the paper long enough that Sam is starting to sweat and then says, “Ehwaz is the marriage rune.”

No matter how hard he tries, Sam can’t say anything to that. He shifts in place a little and then makes himself stand still, waiting.

Finally, Dean peers up at him. He seems to have forgotten his distress, at least, even if the incredulous expression on his face isn’t doing anything good to Sam’s insides.

“Dude, are you proposing?”

_No_, Sam thinks, but that wouldn’t be true and Dean can smell a lie on him from a hundred miles away. He swallows, forcing his heart back into his chest where it belongs, and then makes himself say, “Maybe?”

“We can’t get married, you asshole, we’re—” Dean catches himself before he actually says it in front of Trish, but Sam can see the word swimming around in his eyes.

Brothers. We’re brothers.
“You know, Canada isn’t that far away,” Trish puts in helpfully, and then raises her hands when Sam shoots her a glance. “Okay, keeping out of it.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this now!” Dean exclaims. Sam isn’t sure his brother even noticed Trish’s comment.

This couldn’t be going worse if Dean had thrown the pad back in Sam’s face, and Sam has to blink his eyes rapidly to keep the tears back. He doesn’t know why he’s so upset about this, except that he’s tired, and he’s been on edge for one reason or another for the past two days. It’s stupid—this is stupid, Sam doesn’t even know why he thought it was a good idea in the first place.

“Christ, Dean,” he says, hiding the debilitating ache in his chest behind a mask of annoyance and reaching for the pad. “If you’re gonna be such a jerk about it, I’m sorry I did it at all.”

Dean holds the pad out of range. “Oh no, you don’t get to propose and then call do over.”

Sam doesn’t know what he’s supposed to be feeling anymore. He doesn’t know which option is more appealing: crying or hauling off and punching Dean. He can’t actually do either—he refuses to let Dean know how much he wanted this, how much he wanted Dean to want it as well—so instead he clings to his irritated facade and snaps, “If you don’t want to, then just say so.”

This time, when he reaches over his brother for the pad, Dean leans sideways off the chair to keep it from him. Sam’s reach is always going to be longer, though, and Dean seems to realize that, planting an elbow in Sam’s stomach to keep him away long enough to toss the pad into Trish’s lap.

“You’re doing that,” Dean announces as he drives the elbow up into Sam’s ribs. “Get off me, bitch.”

Sam’s too shocked by his brother’s acceptance to resist being pushed back out of Dean’s personal space. Stunned, he stands next to the chair as his brother haggles with Trish over size and exact location. He’s still trying to process when Trish pulls a lever on the side of the chair and tilts it back, bringing Dean’s bared hip up so that she can work on it.

When Trish has started up the tattoo gun again and Sam still hasn’t moved, Dean finally reaches out and thumps Sam’s thigh with one fist. “Dude, shut your mouth,” he says. “You look like a frog.”

“Dean,” Sam manages. His brother’s name comes out small and choked, which isn’t surprising considering how much crap it has to push aside in Sam’s chest in order to get out.

“Yeah, whatever,” Dean mutters. “For this you owe me pie too. Steak and pie.”

But he’s smiling gently, and there are hardly any shadows in his eyes, and when Sam stirs himself to grab his brother’s hand, Dean holds on right back.
When they finally leave the tattoo parlor two hours later, the first drops of rain are starting to fall, so
they don’t actually have time for dinner. Hungry or not, Sam can’t stop grinning as they drive across
the city toward Crestwood Drive. He knows that this is serious business, that one or both of them
might die tonight—Dad might already be dead, for all they know—but he can’t help himself. Can’t
stop touching the stinging patch of skin on his hip, either.

It isn’t until Dean pulls up across the street from Andy’s house and turns off the engine that Sam’s
elation finally dampens slightly.

There are lights on downstairs, and through the rain-slick distortions on the car windows, Sam can
make out shapes moving around on the other side of those curtains—Andy or her husband, maybe,
whom Sam never met but Andy mentioned in passing. At this hour, Harry has probably already been
tucked into her crib.

They sit there in silence for a while, as Sam’s eyes drift from the house to his brother. Dean has his
head twisted to the side, leaving Sam with just a sliver of his face, but Sam doesn’t need to see his
brother’s expression to know that Dean’s as settled as he can be under these circumstances. It’s clear
from the absent way he keeps running his fingers over that spot on his own hip—from the deceptive
laziness of his slouch.

“So I was thinking,” Dean says suddenly.

Sam waits for him to finish the statement, but he’s gone quiet again, the only sign that he’s still
awake the absent motion of his fingers at his hip. Finally, Sam clears his throat and prods, “So, you
were thinking ...”

Dean shifts in the seat without turning around and then says, “When we’re done here, I was thinking
you could blow me.”

Sam’s heart stops.

“Say something,” Dean says after a few minutes, voice strained.

“Dean,” Sam obeys immediately. “Dean, that’s—I mean, you know I want to, but—”

“If you say it’s too soon, Sammy, I swear to god ...”

“No,” Sam hastens to reassure him. “No, I just. I wasn’t expecting this.” He chews his lip for a
second and then adds, “This isn’t why I wanted to get the tattoos.”

“I know that,” Dean responds, and now Sam wishes he could see his brother’s face, because Dean’s
voice is unreadable: carefully neutral.

“Dean?” Sam calls, keeping his voice low and coaxing.

Dean stiffens for a moment and then, grudgingly, looks back at Sam. In the storm-dark of the car, it’s
still hard to make out his expression, but Sam leans closer and does his best. It isn’t reassuring.
Dean’s too tense, his eyes too guarded. The hopeful flutter in Sam’s stomach dies and congeals to
ash.

“No,” he says, shaking his head and leaning back against the door again. “Not until you mean it.”
He’s surprised by Dean’s harsh swear and the thud of his brother’s hand hitting the steering wheel. More surprised still when one of Dean’s hands fists his shirt and hauls him in across the front seat. Surprised or not, he knows what to do when he feels his brother’s mouth against his, and he parts his lips immediately. Dean’s in complete control of this kiss in a way he seldom is, but then again, they don’t ever really kiss like this: all hunger and heat and promise.

By the time Dean lets him go a couple of minutes later, Sam’s dazed and flushed. His cock is a hard, throbbing weight against the inseam of his jeans.

“You don’t fucking get to tell me whether I mean it or not, Sam,” Dean pants, and he looks flushed too—but not, Sam realizes, scared.

Sam takes a second to gather his scattered wits and then says, “I’m not, I swear. I just don’t want to try this and have it not ... not work.”

Dean laughs. “Dude, it’s probably not gonna work. I’m not—I’m not expecting some kind of miracle here.” He soars, reaching out to hook a hand around the back of Sam’s neck and thumbing his hair. “But I want to try, okay? Because I don’t think I’m gonna be able to suck you until I can get through one myself and I really, really want to suck you.”

“Jesus,” Sam bites out, pained, as the thought of his brother’s mouth wrapped around his cock slams into him.

The knowing twinkle in Dean’s eyes says that his brother knows exactly what his words did to Sam, and that it was maybe even an intentional sally. That, more than anything else, convinces Sam that Dean is serious about this, and when he can manage more rational thought in the wake of his desire, his chest fills with a soft, painful glow of wonder.

“You know how huge this is, right?” he asks, unable to help himself.

“Oh Christ,” Dean mutters, releasing Sam and rolling his eyes as he turns away to look back out the window. But he doesn’t elbow Sam off when Sam follows to press a soft kiss to the side of his brother’s throat before finally settling back on his own side of the car.

He doesn’t know how long they sit there in companionable silence while the rain picks up outside the car, but eventually it’s coming down fast enough that it resembles nothing more than a wall of water. Sam keeps expecting the storm to lighten a little—this kind of heavy rain never lasts for long—but it just keeps going. Apparently demonic storms don’t bother obeying the laws of nature.

Next to him, Dean grunts in annoyance. “At this rate, a whole fucking circus could prance across their lawn and we wouldn’t see shit,” he complains.

Sam agrees, but he doesn’t see what either of them can do about it. “It isn’t like we can go over there and ask them to invite us in for coffee,” he points out.

“Well, you could,” Dean says, glancing over at him hopefully. “Thought you and Suzie Q Homemaker bonded this afternoon.”

“Yeah, before I bailed on her like a freak.” Sam snorts. “She probably thinks I’m nuts.”

Dean gives a shrug that indicates what he thinks of that, but now that Sam is thinking about it, another problem with that idea has occurred to him.

“Besides,” he adds, “We go that close and the demon might be able to sense us. Sense me.” He tries to keep the moroseness out of his voice, but from the sharpening of Dean’s eyes he doesn’t do too
good a job of it.

Dean doesn’t call Sam on it, though: just says, “Thought your super duper protection tat was supposed to make us invisible to that kind of thing.”

“It’s supposed to,” Sam agrees. “But we won’t know for sure until we test it. You really want to do that tonight?”

Dean sighs, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. “No,” he admits. “But I don’t like being so far away. Especially in this weather. I can’t see for shit. That son of a bitch could come and go and we’d just be sitting here with our thumbs up our asses.”

Sam thinks for a moment and then offers, “They have a gazebo. Around the back to the right. It’d be closer than the car, anyway.” And Sam doesn’t think that Andy or her husband will be able to make them out through the storm, which means they aren’t going to have to deal with well-meaning police officers coming to investigate a pair of trespassers.

Dean perks up at the suggestion. “Really? What the hell are we doing sitting around here, then?”

Without waiting for Sam to answer, he pockets the keys, pushes open his door and throws himself out into the night. Sam scrambles after his brother, squinting to maintain any kind of vision at all through the downpour. He’s soaked within seconds, rain running down the back of his collar and making him shiver—it’s fucking freezing, a couple of degrees away from being snow this late in the year—and Sam’s pretty sure that they should have stayed in the Impala. But he sprints after Dean’s vague outline anyway, splashing across the street and then squishing through the lawn and then finally thundering up the three wooden steps and into the cover of the gazebo.

Lightning crashes overhead, giving Sam a still-frame of his brother shaking water from his hair like a dog. Behind Dean, the lake spreads out, wild and white-capped in the wind. The storm has transformed its earlier stillness into waves, just as Sam’s vision told him it would, and the water hurls itself against the shore with mindless fury.

Sam realizes he’s still getting rained on as the wind slants water in beneath the overhang, and he takes another step to get out of the way. Then immediately jumps back again as his foot comes down on something with a snapping sound.

“Fuck,” Sam mutters, and Dean is there immediately, flicking on his pocket flashlight and shining it at Sam’s feet long enough for them both to register the broken remains of a jack-o-lantern.

“Happy Halloween,” Dean grunts, turning the light off again and pocketing it.

“Really?” Sam asks as he brushes his dripping hair back from his face and steps—carefully—further into the protection of the gazebo’s roof. He’s noticed the increasingly chill air, of course, and the abundance of scarecrows and pumpkins on front steps, but he hasn’t really been paying too much attention to the date. He’s had other things on his mind.

“Well, it’s tomorrow, but close enough.” Dean spreads his arms a little and looks down at himself. “So much for keeping them dry for the first five hours.”

Sam grimaces at the reminder and shifts awkwardly. The sagging weight of the bandages is more than a little uncomfortable, now that Dean mentions it. “Maybe we should have stayed in the car.”

Dean shrugs. “Would’ve had to take the plunge sooner or later.”

Reaching beneath his shirt, he peels the sodden bandage off his chest and drops it onto the floor of
the gazebo. The bandage on his hip follows suit. Sam hesitates for a moment and then pulls his
bandages off as well. The drag of clothes directly against the new tattoos is just as raw as Sam
thought it would be, especially where his sodden jeans are concerned. But he’s had a lot worse, and
it’s easy enough to push the pain from the front of his mind.

He wonders if Dean is doing the same, or if he’s walking around half-hard right now.

That isn’t exactly a thought designed to help his own concentration, though, so he shoves it aside as
Dean locates a bench up against one side of the gazebo and pulls it into the relatively dry center so
they can sit down. Sam joins his brother as Dean pulls the Colt out of his jacket. Sam’s startled—
he’d forgotten all about the gun, which is way too old to be able to work after getting soaked—and
then, as he realizes that Dean is taking it out of a plastic bag, relaxes. Dean sees him looking and
offers him a slight smile.

“You said it’d be raining, so I came prepared.”

“Boy scout.”

“Damn straight.”

Sam isn’t sure how much time passes before the lights in Andy’s house go out, but he and Dean
have been waiting long enough to be mostly dry again. An odd feeling has been growing in his
stomach—anticipation and dread and eagerness all mixed together. And if he’s feeling this wretched,
God only knows what’s going through Dean’s head.

“This is weird,” he says finally.

Dean shifts, glancing over. “What, the part where we’re sitting in some nice, suburban family’s
gazebo in the middle of a freaking thunderstorm, or the part where we’re basically married?”

“Um. Both. But more—after all these years, we’re finally here, you know? It doesn’t seem real.”

It’s an opening for Dean to say what he needs to, to communicate, but his brother just rolls his
shoulders, cocking his head to one side to stretch his neck. “We just have to keep our heads and do
our job, like always.”

“Yes,” Sam sighs. “But this isn’t like always.”

In the next lightning flash, he sees that one corner of Dean’s mouth has quirked up. “True.”

Sam’s been thinking it off and on all day, but it hits him hard suddenly—how very dangerous this
hunt is. How final.

“How this might be the last conversation he ever has with his brother.

“Dean,” he says, pitching his voice just loud enough to be heard over the storm. “I, uh, I want to—”

God, what? Telling Dean that he loves him again doesn’t seem like enough. It isn’t ever going to be
enough to describe how he feels about Dean—about everything Dean has been and done for him
over the years.

“Spit it out, dude.”

“I want to thank you,” Sam says. It isn’t exactly right—nothing would be exactly right—but it’s at
least close. Dean doesn’t get thanked nearly often enough, and Sam—Sam wants his brother to know how grateful he is, at least.

“For what?” Dean asks. His voice is perplexed enough that Sam can clearly picture the confusion that must be painted on Dean’s face right now.

“For everything,” he answers, clasping his own hands in his lap to keep from reaching over and grabbing Dean’s. “You’ve always had my back, you know? Even when I couldn’t count on anyone, I could always count on you. And now ... I don’t know. I just wanted to let you know. Just in case.”

“Woah woah woah,” Dean says, getting up to stand in front of Sam so that he’s facing him directly. “Are you kidding me?”

Uh oh. Sam casts his mind back over the last few moments and can’t figure out what he did to upset his brother. He can’t find anything other than the obvious care and share that Dean, yeah, isn’t the biggest fan of, but he hasn’t been this agitated about it for months.

“Don’t say ‘just in case something happens to you!’” Dean insists, and now Sam gets it. Feels like a moron for not having anticipated this kind of reaction, actually. “I don’t want to hear that fucking speech, man,” Dean continues vehemently. “Nobody’s dying tonight. Not us, not that family—” he points off toward the darkened house “—nobody. Except that demon. That evil son of a bitch isn’t getting any older than tonight, you understand me?”

Even in the darkness of the night and the storm, Sam can feel the intensity of his brother’s gaze. He wishes that Dean’s speech made him feel better, but there was too much desperation in it and not enough certainty. Dean can be a determined son of a bitch, but not even he can will things to be all right. No matter how much Dean needs for all of them to come through this unscathed, he can’t make it happen just by wishing it.

But Dean’s upset enough by the thought of losing one of them, and Sam doesn’t want Dean off balance now of all times, so he keeps his mouth shut and nods.

Dean stands where he is for a couple more seconds and then, shaking his head, sits back down. After several silent minutes, he shifts up to pull his cell phone out of his back pocket and flips it open. Sam leans over to get a look at the time himself and is surprised to see that it’s already half an hour past midnight.

“Dad should have called by now,” Dean says. In the dim glow of the screen, his expression is grim.

“Maybe Meg was late,” Sam suggests, although the pit in his stomach tells him that isn’t the case. “Maybe cell reception’s bad.”

Dean’s jaw tightens. “I’m gonna call him,” he announces, and shifts his thumb onto the keypad. Before he can actually press anything, the display flickers and scrambles. Ripples roll through the plain blue background and send the date and the time drifting off opposite sides of the screen.

Sam looks up toward the house automatically, searching for confirmation. The storm wasn’t anything to scoff at before, but it actually seems to be increasing in intensity, and he can barely make out the building’s outline anymore. But he can see the wild flickering of the back porch light through the pouring rain.

“It’s coming,” he says—a stupid and unnecessary comment to make, but the air has gotten caught in Sam’s lungs and he needs a way to push it out, to start breathing again.

Dean swears as he shoots to his feet, pulling the baggie-wrapped gun out again and shoving it at
Sam. “I’m gonna want that back when we get inside,” he says. Sam would ask why his brother gave him the gun at all, but then he sees Dean pulling a small, black bundle out of his other pocket and realization hits him.

The doors are probably locked, of course, and on a house as nice as this one, the hinges aren’t going to be weak enough to kick them in. Which means that Dean’s going to have to muck around with the lock, and that’s going to require all of his attention in this kind of weather. The uneven weight of the Colt in his jacket would likely be more of a distraction than keeping hold of it is worth to his brother.

Lock picking kit in hand, Dean plunges out into the storm. Sam trails close behind, hunching over to keep the gun more shielded from the elements. Everything seems overly loud and fast—the lightning flashes are blinding—and they’re at the back door before Sam has finished processing the fact that they’re moving.

Dean throws the screen open and crouches down so that he’s eye-level with the doorknob. He flips his kit open on the ground and slides out one of the picks, shielding his eyes from the rain with his left hand as he works. Sam shifts closer and does his best to spread his jacket over his brother so that he doesn’t have to deal so much with the water dripping and running into his eyes. The added protection must help, because Dean drops his left hand immediately and starts in on the lock with renewed vigor, and after a couple of seconds the door pops open.

“Go,” he says, tapping Sam’s leg.

Sam obediently steps over his brother and into the relative silence of the house. That filthy feeling that hit him when they first arrived in Alexandria returns full force—God, it reeks in here. Smells like sulfur and corruption. For no real reason Sam can put his finger on, it smells yellow.

Gagging on the scent, Sam opens the baggie and pulls out the Colt. The gun is warm and dry in his hand. It seems to hum, as though charged with a low voltage of electricity. Dean steps in next to him and eases the door shut behind himself.

Wordlessly, Sam offers his brother the gun and Dean takes it without pausing as he moves forward to take point through the kitchen. Sam’s hands itch for a weapon of his own as he follows, but he doesn’t have one. There wasn’t a point to bringing another gun: nothing’s going to stop the son of a bitch upstairs except for the Colt his brother’s carrying.

Andy’s house is nice, Sam notes in an absent way as they move through the dining room. Eclectic and funky, but nice. There’s a snapshot of Andy and Harry and a man who must be Andy’s husband on the dining room wall, and Sam glances at it in a lightning flash. They look happy, all of them—Andy’s almost glowing, and grinning widely enough to show off all her teeth. The sight helps refocus Sam a little, taking his mind off of his fear and reminding him of what they’re here to do.

He thinks, briefly, of Jess. And then of the blonde woman he saw for a moment at their old house in Lawrence—the stranger who should have been his mother. Pastor Jim, Caleb, God knows how many others throughout the years.

The fear compresses into sudden, iron bonds of anger.

They’re going to put this son of a bitch down.

Sam starts to follow Dean through the dining room arch and then flinches back as his brother lets out a startled swear and ducks to the side. He catches sight of something swinging through the air where Dean’s head used to be, and a moment later there’s a man’s voice—Andy’s husband, must be—shouting, “Get out of my house!”
Dean dodges another swing (baseball bat, Louisville slugger) but he’s already over his surprise and this time he catches the bat in his left hand before it flies out of range. With an underhand throw, he tosses Sam the Colt and then steps forward, around the edge of the arch and out of view. Sam hurries forward in time to see his brother pin the middle-aged, bearded man from the photograph against the wall with his own bat.

“Be quiet and listen to me,” Dean growls. “We’re trying to help you, okay?”

“Honey?” Andy’s voice comes tentatively from upstairs, and Christ, doesn’t anyone sleep in this house? “Is everything okay down there?”

“Get Harry!” the pinned man yells back, struggling with Dean for control of the bat. “Andy, get Harry and get out of here!” He’s looking at the gun in Sam’s hand, Sam realizes, and God knows what the man thinks Sam’s going to do with it, but he couldn’t have given a stupider order right now.

“Don’t go into the nursery!” Sam yells. He’s already moving before Dean’s “Go, Sam,” registers—sprinting for the stairs and taking them two at a time. Dean and Andy’s husband are still struggling behind him, but Sam can’t think about that, he can’t think about anything but getting to the nursery and stopping his vision before it happens, before the demon claims another victim.

There are six doors leading off the upstairs hallway, but Sam knows from his vision which one he wants and he runs straight for it, thumbing off the safety on the Colt as he goes. It smells even worse up here—the air thick with that reek and doing funny things to his head, making his vision pulse in murky shades of yellow.

Sam slams into the closed nursery door hard enough to snap it back off its hinges and stumbles to a stop inside the room.

Andy is already high up on the wall, almost on the ceiling, but she isn’t bleeding yet, thank God. Sam spares her a single glance and then focuses on the dark shape standing over the crib. The shape turns, lifting its head, and in the next lightning flash Sam has a moment of sheer, uncomprehending panic where he thinks he’s looking at his father.

The illusion passes a second later—it’s a superficial resemblance, nothing more than the same bulky outline and short, dark hair—and he lifts the gun, sighting down the barrel as the demon finishes turning. He can see its eyes now, it’s looking at him, and they aren’t black after all.

They’re yellow.

The color throws Sam—so familiar, makes him thing of rotten eggs and slick heat and moaning—and, as he hesitates, he realizes that the demon’s eyes are the same color as the smoke he sees sometimes after his nightmares.

You fucking son of a bitch, he thinks as the demon’s mouth twists in a mocking smile.

His finger moves before his brain has finished giving the order, squeezing off a shot, but the shock of recognition delayed him long enough that the bullet passes through smoke instead of flesh. The pulse of furious disappointment is sharp enough that Sam thinks he’s having a heart attack, and then Andy lets out a shriek as she falls from the ceiling to the floor.

Sam wants nothing more than to howl his futile rage at the storm, but he’s too well trained to give into that impulse while danger continues to press in from all sides. Swallowing his anger, Sam shifts his grip on the gun and hurries over to pull Andy up with his left hand. His right is busy with the gun as he continues to scan the room—he didn’t even know demons could do that, that they could
evaporate at will. But if it could disappear, then it can also reappear, and the air is still tainted, which means the demon’s close. Maybe even in this very room, invisible. Laughing at him.

“Harry!” Andy is screaming, struggling against Sam toward the crib. “Harry!”

“Hey, no,” Sam insists, getting a grip on her arm and keeping her close. The demon might be anywhere in the room, but it was by that crib when he last saw it. It might have to rematerialize where it vanished. It might be waiting for Andy to come over so that it can grab them both.

The baby’s crying loudly in its crib, tiny fists waving in protest at all the commotion—or maybe it can smell what Sam can—and Andy keeps lunging against Sam’s arms and screaming and Sam can feel himself starting to panic. One corner of the nursery goes up in flames and he flinches back from the flare, momentarily blinded by the unexpected brilliance.

Dean bursts into the nursery while Sam is still blinking his vision clear. His brother blows right past him toward the crib, not even tossing Sam a passing look.

“Get her out of here!” he yells. “I got it!”

Another corner of the nursery explodes into flame, making Sam flinch away as he pulls Andy toward the nursery door. His head is still spinning—confusion and anger and despair and fear all mashed together in his chest and leaving no room for breath—and obeying Dean may or may not be the smart thing, but it’s all he can think to do right now. Andy is still fighting him, making it difficult to move as she tries to get to her baby, and Sam gets a firmer grip on his shoulders, juggling the gun to do so, and yells, “Dean’s got her!”

Andy still isn’t hearing him, but the flames are everywhere and that smell is building and Sam’s had it. Ducking down, he scoops Andy up onto his shoulder and carries her down the hall like that. Her struggles lessen as they get to the stairs—maybe because she realizes he could drop her over the railing if he loses his grip—and then Sam is carrying her out the open front door and into the storm.

Her husband is picking himself up from the lawn, an ugly bump on his forehead where Dean must have knocked him out. He looks groggy, but when he spots Sam carrying Andy, his expression clears and his movements gain intent. “Andy,” he calls.

Sam angles toward the man and sets Andy back onto her own feet, straightening again as Dean stumbles out to join him. Andy’s husband’s face goes from alarmed to pissed off as he takes in the sight of his baby cradled in Dean’s arms. The set of his mouth turns vicious.

“You get away from my family!” he snarls, starting forward.

“No!” Andy shouts, moving between Dean and her husband. “They saved us! They saved us!”

There’s an explosion from behind them and Sam hunches, jogging forward a few, instinctive steps. When he turns around and looks up, the nursery window has blown out. Flames are licking at the storm through the opening.

The demon stands in the middle of the fire there, looking down on them. Sam can’t actually tell from here, but he thinks that the son of a bitch is smiling.

His anger surges, shoving aside all rational thought and driving him back toward the house. The Colt is still in his hand, and it may or may not work after being out in the rain, but Sam’s sure as hell going to find out. He’s almost to the steps before Dean grabs the back of his coat and spins him around.
“No!” Dean yells.

“It’s still in there!” Sam insists, trying to push past his brother as the window to the left of the nursery blows out.

“Sam, no!” Dean has a hand on each of Sam’s shoulders now, is leaning into him and using all of his weight to block Sam’s progress.

“Dean, let me go!” Sam shouts as he strains forward. “It’s still in there.”

“It’s burning to the ground!” Dean yells back. “It’s suicide!”

It isn’t, though—Sam has the Colt, he knows he can get off the shot this time before the demon has time to do more than blink. Gritting his teeth together, he makes another try to get past his brother and Dean’s feet slip in the grass a little, bringing them both closer to the front door. Sam can feel heat on the right side of his face, where the flames are eating their way through the house.

What’s wrong, Sammy, a voice curls through his mind, noxious. He’s never heard it before, but it’s familiar all the same—leaves him feeling nauseous and hungry for the slip and thrust of sex. Don’t you appreciate the dreams I sent you?

Sam figured it out upstairs in the nursery—he understood then that this is the bastard that’s been haunting his dreams, making him want to hurt Dean, hurt his brother—but it didn’t hit him with the same, visceral intensity as it does now. His rage blazes inside him, incandescent as all of his old, futile need for revenge finds a focus it can work with. The demon didn’t rape Dean, no, but it’s been doing its damnedest to get Sam to do so, and Hanson’s dead so killing this bastard is the closest to justice Sam can come.

And he is going to kill it.

Snarling, Sam surges forward again. He can feel Dean’s hold on him loosening—he’ll break through this time for sure—but then, unexpectedly, the world tips around on him and he lands with a jarring thud on his back. As Sam shakes his head, trying to clear it, Dean’s face—furious and desperate—appears above him.

“You don’t get to leave me again, asshole!” Dean yells, pinning Sam to the ground. “Not like this!”

Rain falls into Sam’s upturned face, drips down onto him from his brother’s hair and nose and chin, soaks into him from the grass beneath his body, and he’s helpless to do anything but look toward the nursery window as the demon melts into the fire with a last, parting chuckle.

“No,” Sam breathes, sagging against the ground. “No.”

But it doesn’t change anything. The demon’s gone, and Sam has failed.

Again.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Is it still going to work?”

Dean’s been fiddling with the Colt ever since they got back to the motel room. He was taking it apart almost before he cleared the doorway, getting the pieces separated out so that he could dry each one individually. Sam figures that in the five hours they’ve both been sitting here, while Dean wiped down each piece and then put the gun together and then took it apart and wiped down each piece
over and over again, the gun has gotten as dry as it’s going to get.

He’s tried talking to his brother before this, has even reached out and touched him a couple of times, but Dean either ignores him or—in the case of the touching—jerks away from his hand. He won’t look at Sam.

More disturbing than the way he won’t leave the Colt alone, though, is the way he keeps calling Dad’s phone every five minutes like clockwork. Without so much as a single facial tic, he’ll put whatever piece of the gun he’s fiddling with down onto the mattress, reach over to his cell, pick it up and press send. And then he waits for a minute while the phone rings, staring blankly off into space, before trading the phone once more for the gun.

Outside, the sun has finally risen, but Dean isn’t responding to Sam’s latest attempt at conversation either, and Sam’s stomach is weighing him down like lead. The skin on his chest and his right hip, where he got tattooed, both burn like a bitch. Sam knows he should put some kind of ointment on them, but all of their medications are in the bathroom and he doesn’t want to move that far from his brother.

Dean isn’t responding and Dad’s not answering his phone—is probably dead—and the demon’s flown the coop yet again and Sam doesn’t know what the fuck to do.

Licking his dry lips with an even drier tongue, he does the only thing he can and to get his brother’s attention yet again. “It’ll still fire, right? I mean, we got back in time, right? It didn’t get too wet?”

He doesn’t know why he’s harping on the damned gun, which he could give a fuck about right now. Except that it’s easier to ask Dean that question than of the others that are bumbling around inside of him.

Why hasn’t Dad called?

What if he’s dead?

Why won’t you answer me?

Oh God, Dean, talk to me, look at me, don’t shut me out right now, please!

“Dunno,” Dean grunts, and God, but that one word sends a cool, relieved flush through Sam’s entire body. Dean still isn’t looking at him, staring down at his hands as he starts to reassemble the Colt yet again, but at least he acknowledged Sam’s presence.

Encouraged and desperate for more, Sam asks, “Should we—we could test it? To check?”

“Three bullets left,” Dean says. His hands continue to move, doing their magic.

Sam grimaces a little at his own blatant stupidity. He knows how many bullets there are—knows that they can’t waste any. He just ... It’s difficult to think straight right now, when Dean is so distant, and Dad could be ... when Dad’s probably ...

“It’s dry, though, right? I mean, you dried it off okay.”

Dean snaps the last piece back into place and then looks down at the assembled weapon with tightly compressed lips. “What the fuck were you thinking?” he asks, and the words are harsh but his voice is dull.

Sam flushes all over with relief at the rebuke. “I—I wasn’t,” he answers, fumbling the apology in his
eagerness. “I’m sorry, I know I should’ve, the baggie was right in my pocket, I could’ve—”

“I’m not talking about the goddamned gun,” Dean interrupts. He tosses the Colt down next to him on the bed with a disregard that says far more than his words about how little he cares what happens to it—which doesn’t make sense, after all the care he’s been lavishing on it for the past five hours, but Sam can’t deny the truth in his brother’s actions.

And now, finally, there’s an emotion in Dean’s voice.

Anger.

“Dean, what—”

“Motherfucking house is burning to the motherfucking ground and you want to run back inside,” Dean spits, still staring at the bedspread. “You want to leave me that much you can take the goddamned Greyhound like last time, you fucking asshole. I wouldn’t stop you—hell, I’ll even pay for your ticket, you want to leave that bad.”

Sam sways a little in the chair where he’s been sitting, dizzy from the shock of just how unexpected —how unwarranted—his brother’s accusation is. “I’m not—I don’t want to leave you. I love you. God, how can you even say that?”

But even as he asks the question, Sam knows how Dean can say it. Because he knows, intimately, just how terrified of being left alone Dean is. That’s half the reason that Sam’s hip is smarting right now, why he has Dean’s name inked into his skin around a rune symbolizing eternal unity and bonded partnership. The tattoo was supposed to help with that, to make Dean surer of him, and Sam isn’t sure that it won’t. In time. When Dean isn’t being torn and tossed by quite so much stress.

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“Dean,” Sam tries, getting up from the chair and walking toward his brother. “Baby, look at me, okay?”

“Don’t call me that,” Dean says, but he doesn’t sound quite so angry anymore. He sounds tired, worn out.

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“Okay,” Sam breathes. “Okay, I’m sorry, but can you just look at me already? Please?”

Dean’s head starts to come up—a reflexive response to the desperate, begging tenor of Sam’s voice —and then he gives it a shake. “I have to call Dad,” he says, dropping his chin again as he reaches for his cell phone.

Sam is close enough to reach now, and he leans down and pins his brother’s hand to the bed before he can pick the phone up. “Dean,” he says. “Stop.”

Dean blinks and, with a suddenness that leaves Sam winded, the apathetic mask is torn away and Dean’s face crumples. “I need to,” he chokes out, eyes wet and threatening tears. “I need to find him, I—I—Sammy, I can’t—without you and Dad, I can’t—I—”

He’s working himself up into a full-blown panic attack, and Sam does the only thing he can think of to halt it in its tracks. Keeping Dean’s right hand pinned to the mattress with one hand, he presses the pads of his fingers against the tattoo on his brother’s hip. Dean’s breath pushes out sharply at the pressure, and his left hand shoots up to grip Sam’s forearm. Sam eases up on the touch, fingertips barely skimming his brother’s t-shirt, but doesn’t move away.
“You’ve got me,” he promises firmly. “I’m not going anywhere. I wouldn’t have done this if I was, would I?”

Dean still won’t meet his eyes, but he gives a tiny shake of his head that Sam thinks is supposed to indicate agreement, and he doesn’t look quite so on edge anymore.

“And I’m sorry about what happened back at the house,” Sam offers. “I just—I lost control for a few seconds.”

Dean’s grasp on Sam’s forearm tightens as a tear slips down his cheek. “You can’t,” he insists. “I know it—that Jess, it killed Jess, but I can’t let you—”

“You think—you think that’s why I wanted to go back in?” Sam says, blinking. He’s startled enough that he releases his brother’s wrist and straightens slightly. “Because of Jess?”

Dean shrugs with a self-deprecating, bitter smile. “You loved her.”

“I did,” Sam agrees as he sits down on the bed next to his brother. Cupping Dean’s cheeks between his palms, he tilts his brother’s face up towards his own. “I loved her. But I loved you first. God help me, I love you more than I ever loved her.”

Dean jerks away from Sam’s touch, starting to shake his head before Sam follows, grabbing his face again to hold him steady and still. “No,” Dean says, harshly as he tries to pull back a second time. This time Sam’s ready for it, though, and he holds on, keeping Dean still while he leans their foreheads together.

“You can’t tell me who to love, dude,” he whispers, and then eases back a couple of inches as another tear spills down his brother’s cheek. Despite the tear, Dean seems calmer as Sam uses his thumb to wipe the moisture away and explains, “I lost it back there because the demon told me it’s the one that’s been sending the nightmares. It’s been—been trying to make me hurt you. And all I could think about was making it pay for that, and I just—I wasn’t thinking, man. I wasn’t thinking and I’m sorry.”

Dean takes a shaking, shuddery breath and finally lifts his eyes, which are wet and miserable and desperate. “You can’t do that to me,” he says. “I want to waste the demon, I do, but it’s not worth dying over. If hunting this demon means you getting yourself killed, then I hope we never find the damn thing.”

Sam understands what his brother is saying, he does, but he can’t bring himself to agree. For Dean’s own sake, he can’t ever agree with that.

“We have to kill it, Dean,” he argues, keeping his voice gentle. “Otherwise, I don’t know how long I can keep myself from—”

“We’ll find another way,” Dean insists, pulling away from Sam’s touch and wiping his eyes on his forearm. He’s obviously mostly settled again, and trying to rebuild his defenses, so this time Sam lets him go. “Bobby’ll find something.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Not gonna happen,” Dean maintains stubbornly.

Sam means to press the issue further—Dean needs to face up to the possibility of failure, at least, or he’s going to be even more devastated when it happens—but that’s when his brother’s phone rings. Dean grabs the cell before Sam has really registered the sound.
"'S Dad," he says, jumping off the bed and flipping the cell open. "Dad. Where are you? Are you okay?"

From the way Dean goes instantly still, Sam knows that it isn’t their father on the other end of the line.

"Where is he?"

It’s a growl, furious—Dean burying himself in the soldier to keep functioning in the face of fresh catastrophe. But just because Dean’s snapping the soldier into place doesn’t mean that he doesn’t need comfort—doesn’t mean that Sam doesn’t need comfort—so Sam stands, meaning to go over and get an arm around his brother, a hand on his shoulder at the very least. He hasn’t gone more than a single step when Dean whirls back toward him, already snapping his phone shut.

"They’ve got Dad," Dean announces, striding past Sam to grab his bag before turning back to toss it on the bed.

"Meg?" Sam asks, although he can’t imagine who else ‘they’ might be.

Dean nods but doesn’t cease his rapid whirlwind of movement, and after a couple of seconds Sam realizes that his brother is packing. Only it doesn’t look anything like it normally does, because Dean is shoving things into the bag indiscriminately, without any of the care he normally uses to keep things organized and sorted.

"What’d she say?" Sam prods, picking up his own discarded shirt from last night and trying to help. It doesn’t provide as much of a distraction from the lump of dread in his stomach as he wants it to.

"I just told you, Sammy," Dean snaps. He grabs the shirt from Sam and shoves it into the bag on top of everything else, then yanks the zipper closed. Jerking upright, he looks around the room with wild eyes. "Okay," he says. "Okay."

As his eyes land on the Colt, he reaches out and grabs it. Silently, Sam watches his brother shove the gun into the back of his jeans.

"Any of the crap in the bathroom you want to keep, grab it now," Dean says, hurrying across the room to grab Sam’s bag and bring it over to the chair beside the table.

"Dean," Sam says, trailing him. "Slow down, okay? We have to think this through, we have to—"

"The demon knows we’re in Alexandria, Sam," Dean says, and sweeps his arm over the tabletop, sending everything tumbling off indiscriminately. Some of it lands in Sam’s bag, some of it doesn’t. Sam runs around to the other side of the table and grabs the laptop before Dean can give it the same treatment.

"It knows we’ve got the Colt," Dean continues. "It’s got Dad. It’s probably coming for us next."

Part of Sam wants to say ‘let it come’, but he’s become self-aware enough over the past year to know, even through the numbing fog of dread, that he isn’t ready. Dean, very clearly, can’t handle another confrontation right now.

"Okay," he says, hurrying over to put the laptop in his shoulder bag. "But we need a plan. We can’t just get in the car and drive."

"We’re not. I know where we’re going."
“Where?”

“Bobby’s.”
Chapter 36

Dean doesn’t seem to feel there’s a need to call ahead and announce their arrival, but he doesn’t complain when Sam does it for him. Bobby’s harassed, slightly annoyed tone changes instantly to one of competent urgency as soon as Sam gets out the words “demon” and “took Dad”. The man briefly grills Sam and then hangs up without saying goodbye. No word of comfort, no “we’ll get him back”, but Sam knows better than to expect to pull Dad out of this one in one piece anyway.

The demons aren’t going to be holding Dad in some quaint little bed and breakfast, after all. Sam can’t even think of any reason for them to keep him alive, now that they have him. Not unless they want to torture him first, and even if that’s the case, Sam and Dean are still going to be picking up a body when they finally find him. The only question is how mangled and bloody Dad will be when they put him on the pyre.

It hurt, initially, that understanding. It felt like the world was ripping apart on him, untrustworthy and cruel. Because as much as Sam always worried about the consequences of this life, about Dad and Dean coming home safe and alive, he realizes now that he never really believed it was possible for either of them to die. He couldn’t even begin to conceive of the world without them in it, and so he chose not to, which left him completely and shatteringly unprepared for this.

He had a brief panic attack in the car—silently, and stealthily enough that he doesn’t think Dean noticed—but then his insides just ... shut down on him. He can still feel the agony of loss as they pull into the salvage yard, but it’s dull now, and a little vague. Confused, maybe, at how quickly and suddenly the ground dropped out beneath the home he was trying to build. But the confusion is more manageable than the panic was, and Sam’s able to push it to the back of his head as he climbs out of the car and looks around at the dusty ground and rusting piles of cars.

“Nothing’s changed,” he says with a faint pulse of surprise. Hunters are generally creatures of habit, of course, but Sam hasn’t been here in five years. Something should have changed, shouldn’t it? The world has been turned inside out and on its head since he was last here—shouldn’t some, small part of this dirty, car-strewn yard reflect that?

“Sure it has,” Dean says as he strolls toward the front of the Impala himself. Resting one hand on the hood, he lifts the other to his mouth and gives a piercing whistle. A clatter of metal accompanies the sudden sound of barking, and Sam looks over in time to see a Rottweiler the size of a small cow dashing out from a shady nook between the skeletons of a Buick and a Ford.

Dashing out of the wreckage and straight for Sam’s brother.

“What the fuck is he thinking?” he manages, sliding off the hood and gingerly coming to stand next to Dean.

The Rottweiler gathers itself for a leap, snarling, and then jerks to a stop less than three feet away from Dean. Belatedly, Sam notices the chain attached to its neck and leading back into the shadows it emerged from. The dog is still snapping and barking and snarling, spit flying everywhere, though, and despite the heavy restraint of the chain, Sam would really feel better about this if there were a couple of brick walls between that thing and his brother.

“What the hell is that?” he manages, sliding off the hood and gingerly coming to stand next to Dean.

“That’s Rumsfeld,” Dean answers, stepping even closer to the snarling animal. Sam’s already
wondering if this is another death wish rearing its ugly head, and then Dean kneels down, putting his face inches from the dog’s bared teeth. “Bobby got him off some contact of his about a year after you left for Stanford. He’s a guard dog, aren’t you, Rummy?”

“Told you to stop teasing the mutt,” Bobby’s voice calls wryly from behind them. “You’re gonna give him a complex.”

Sam turns from the unsettling sight of Dean so close to having his face torn off and finds Bobby walking toward them—same worn undershirt and billowing flannel, same faded baseball cap pulled low on his head and shading his eyes. He’s walking a little stiffer, though, and Sam doesn’t doubt that once he gets a good look at the man’s face, there’ll be more than a few new wrinkles there. Hunting isn’t a job that wears well.

“Couldn’t resist seeing the look on Sam’s face,” Dean says, pushing off the ground and then brushing his dusty palms off on his jeans. Something’s off about his voice—it doesn’t match the joking words—but they’re both a little messed up right now, and Sam would have overlooked it if Bobby’s steps didn’t falter.

Sam can’t see through the shadow cast by the man’s cap, so he looks at his brother’s face instead, and the expression he finds there isn’t anything he was expecting. He thought there’d be anger there, or maybe despair. Panic. Any number of shades on that end of the emotional spectrum.

Instead, Dean looks ... stiff. Awkward. Like he’s embarrassed by something.

Bobby has stopped moving completely.

Sam looks between the two of them, ears ringing with Rumsfeld’s barks, and the confused numbness in his chest deepens. Something’s going on here—something that has nothing to do with the demon or Dad’s capture, something that’s private and just between Bobby and his brother—and Sam doesn’t know what it is but he doesn’t like it. He doesn’t like it at all.

“Hey, Bobby,” he says, trying to break the moment apart so that he doesn’t have to look at it anymore.

Bobby shakes himself and looks at Sam, but Dean doesn’t relax. In fact, out of the corner of his eye, Sam sees his brother’s shoulders hunch a little. The posture threatens to break Sam’s tenuous calm. While Sam doesn’t know what that will do to him, he knows he’ll be useless for pretty much everything if it happens, and so he turns his head more firmly toward Bobby and focuses on the man’s welcoming smile.

“Well damn, son,” Bobby says, coming over and dragging Sam into a hug. “What’d they feed you at Stanford, growth hormones?”

“Good to see you too, Bobby,” Sam says honestly. He pats the man on the back a couple of times before letting go.

Now that Bobby’s close enough for Sam’s gaze to penetrate the shadows of his cap, Sam can see that there are a couple of new lines on Bobby’s face, but not nearly as many as Sam expected to find. He clings to that constancy, which felt so unnerving a moment before, and takes solace in the fact that Bobby’s changed as little as the salvage yard he owns.

“How about you come on inside and I’ll fill you in on what I’ve dug up?” Bobby suggests. “Quieter there. Also, there’s whiskey.”

“My hero,” Dean breaks in, and it’s disturbing how quickly Bobby’s attention snaps over to him.
Bobby’s eyes are a little too wide, his expression wary. Like Dean’s some strange, new creature that Bobby doesn’t quite know what to make of instead of an old friend.

It smacks of some sort of uneasy history between them, but of course that doesn’t make any sense. Dad clearly fell out with Bobby at some point over the last four years, but there hasn’t been anything to indicate that Dean was tainted by that disagreement. Especially not when Dean has called Bobby for advice a bunch of times over the past year—when he ran straight to Bobby’s door when Sam lost control in Palo Alto and kissed him.

That kind of trust and reliance is leagues away from the stiffness between them now, but try as he might Sam can’t understand what happened to change all of that—and in as little as three days, because Dean called Bobby when they were on their way to Alexandria with not even the slightest hint of hesitation.

But Dean is moving around to the front of the house now, Bobby trailing behind him, so Sam pushes his concern aside and follows. There’ll be time to figure it out later, once the demon is sorted out. Once they’ve gotten Dad’s body back and have some closure.

Sam’s chest pangs through the numbness and he rounds his shoulders a little. *Stop thinking about it, idiot,* he rebukes himself as he mounts the steps of Bobby’s porch and walks through the front door.

It’s the same inside as well—maybe a little more cluttered, but it’s difficult to tell: Bobby’s place was always a bewildering mess of books and research and spare car parts. Bobby always knows where everything he needs is, though, and now he goes straight over to an old desk, piled high with books and papers, and fishes two round, silver flasks out of the chaos. Sam catches sight of an ornate cross embossed on the side as Bobby holds one of them out in Dean’s direction.

“Here.”

Dean’s reaction is a little too slow to be comfortable, but after a beat he reaches out and accepts the flask. “What, no glass?” he asks, not quite meeting the man’s eyes.

“That’s holy water,” Bobby says, unscrewing the cap on the second flask. “This is whiskey.” He takes a swig and then offers it to Dean.

Dean moves faster this time, the interaction running more smoothly after the practice of the first hand off. It’s like watching a poorly oiled machine creak to life, Sam thinks: stiff and hesitant at first, but gradually picking up speed. His curiosity perks up again, more insistently this time, and he watches with narrowed eyes as Dean sets the second flask to his lips and tips it back.

Dean wipes his mouth with the back of his hand after, pocketing the holy water before holding the whiskey out in Sam’s direction. He isn’t looking at Sam, though: his restless eyes have finally settled on Bobby and are locked there, met measure for measure by Bobby’s sober stare.

What the fuck is going on?

When Sam still hasn’t moved forward to take the flask after a couple of moments, Dean takes another sip himself and then gives the whiskey back to Bobby.

“Thanks, Bobby.”

It means more than it should—more than just ‘thanks for the whiskey and the holy water and for helping us out.’ Bobby’s answering smile is warmer than it should be, too—sudden and almost relieved—and Sam could swear that there are honest to God tears in the man’s eyes as he tucks the flask into his back pocket. His other hand finds the brim of his cap and gives it a tug, pulling the bent
lid lower over his brow.

“Didn’t have nothing better to do,” he says, voice heartily gruff.

Sam’s feeling more and more like a moron, and it’s starting to frustrate him because all the pieces are right there in front of him—they have to be, he and Dean don’t keep secrets anymore—and he can’t seem to put them together. He wants to ask, but Bobby and Dean are moving onto business now, and while they’re still acting a little ginger around each other, the back and forth has begun to ease into more comfortable rhythms.

Dean in particular looks better than he has in days—ever since he first stepped outside the motel with news that the demon had popped up again, actually. There’s something about Bobby—his steady explanations maybe, or his protective circles and amulets, or maybe just the solid backing of memory—that leaves Dean feeling safe here. Leaves him looking ... not relaxed precisely, Sam doesn’t think he’ll relax until he accepts the fact that Dad’s gone, but focused. Like all the doubts and fears clamoring for attention in his head have quieted for once and left him free to do what he has to in order to get the job done.

Or maybe that doesn’t have anything to do with Bobby at all, and it’s just Dean, gearing up for yet another uphill battle.

Whatever’s causing it, Sam doesn’t want to overturn this particular apple cart. Sure, repression and denial aren’t the healthiest things for Dean to be engaging in right now, but Sam just doesn’t have it in him to handle another one of his brother’s breakdowns. Not when he’s so close to the edge himself.

If he’s too stupid to solve this particular mystery on his own, he can ask Bobby later. When Dean’s not around and can’t flip out about it.

It’s a toss up whether it’s the crumpled piece of paper hitting him in the face or Dean’s shouted “Sam!” that snaps him out of himself.

“Huh?” he says, blinking.

“Were you listening at all?” Bobby asks from where he’s perched on the edge of the table with his cap pulled low and his arms crossed in front of him.

Sam considers lying for a second and then remembers how sharp the man is. “No. Sorry.”

Bobby snorts. “He’s sorry. Look, I get that you’re worried about your daddy, but you’re gonna have to focus.”

“I’m not worried about Dad, he’s dead.” The words are on the tip of Sam’s tongue, but a single glance at his brother’s face is enough to make him swallow them without hesitation. “Sorry. I’m focusing. What were we talking about?”

“Devil’s traps,” Dean answers, picking a book up off the table and bringing it over. “Bobby got his hands on a complete copy of the Key of Solomon. Apparently, the version normally floating around is abridged.”

“Cliff notes version, more like,” Bobby agrees as Sam takes the book from his brother and starts leafing through the pages.

It doesn’t take more than a moment to see what they’re talking about. Sam has seen the Key of Solomon before, read it cover-to-cover one summer when he was trying his best to wrestle Dean’s
attention away from Dad. That phase hadn’t lasted long, of course: no matter what tidbit of information Sam came up with, Dad had always been there first, had always known just a little bit more.

This book is to that one what a bonfire is to a dying ember. It’s the real deal—old magic, and strong enough to thrum against Sam’s palms.

“Does it say anything about eye color?” he asks as he flips to the back. Of course. Too much to hope it has any sort of index.

“What do you mean?” Bobby asks.

“Sam saw its eyes,” Dean answers before Sam can. “They weren’t black, they were yellow.”

“A yellow-eyed demon?” Bobby whistles. “You boys have stepped into some serious crap, haven’t you?”

“How’s that?” Sam asks, looking up from the book.

“Normal year, I hear of, say, three demonic possessions. Maybe four, tops,” Bobby answers. “This year I’ve caught wind of forty seven so far. You get what I’m saying? More and more demons are walking among us—a lot more. And now you’re telling me that this particular son of a bitch is yellow-eyed?” He shakes his head, frowning. “Those’re general demons. Real Grand Duke of Hell stuff. Whoever this demon is, he’s strong.”

“So you’re saying, what exactly?” Dean asks, frowning.

“There’s a storm coming,” Bobby answers grimly. “And you boys, your daddy ... you are smack in the middle of it.”

Dean tosses a glance in Sam’s direction—frightened but not looking for reassurance. Frightened, Sam realizes after a moment, for Sam. He doesn’t know how to feel about that right now, so he looks away and tries not to feel the weight of his brother’s gaze on his skin.

After a couple of moments, the prickling at the back of his neck dies out and Dean says, “Meg’s gonna be tracking us.”

Sam glances back—sure enough, Dean’s looking at Bobby again—as Bobby huffs out a wry grunt.

“Kinda figured,” he agrees, and then grins. “I got a welcome mat all put out for her.” Ducking down a little, he points to the ceiling in the next room.

When Sam walks over with his brother to look up at the symbol painted there, it looks familiar. He thinks he might have flipped past something like that symbol in the Key of Solomon. Adjusting his grip on the book, he looks back at Bobby.

“What is it?”

“Devil’s trap,” Bobby answers. “You get a demon inside one, they’re trapped. Powerless. It’s like a satanic roach motel.”

Dean utters a dry laugh next to him, but Sam can’t even bring himself to respond to Bobby’s satisfied grin. He’s too empty inside to make even a pretense at the gallows humor hunters seem to enjoy so much.
“She shows,” Bobby continues, “And all we have to do is get her to walk underneath it. Then we can play twenty questions and find out where your daddy is.”

Sam shivers a little as the image of Meg’s face flashes across his mind. Her mouth is bloody, one of her eyes ruptured from the fall. But her other eye is beetle black, and she’s grinning, and in his head he hears her sneer, ‘He’s in Hell, that’s where he is. He died screaming and you’re never going to get him back.’

Now Sam feels like laughing, hysterical and loud, and he bites down on the inside of his cheek to control himself as Dean steps past him, lifting the book out of his hands and flipping through the pages as he asks Bobby how the trap works. The pain is the same as always, but for some reason it isn’t copper that floods his mouth, but sulfur. Thick and reeking.

In Sam’s head, Meg laughs.

When Rumsfeld starts barking again three hours later, Sam is sitting at Bobby’s desk with the Key of Solomon opened in front of him. Pulse racing, he pushes to his feet and sees Bobby and Dean doing the same from the couch where they were discussing strategy.

“Rumsfeld,” Bobby mutters to himself, moving toward the window.

The dog’s barking cuts off suddenly, without so much as a yelp, and Sam goes cold and breathless. He isn’t sure where to turn, what to do. Wants the Colt in his hands instead of tucked down the waistband of his brother’s pants so that he can shoot the bitch between the eyes as soon as she shows her face. Dean seems just as indecisive, standing in the middle of the room with a blank look on his face, and none of them are ready for it when the front door bursts open.

Meg is there, wearing a red jacket and looking not at all like someone who fell six stories and got up close and personal with the pavement. Sam has heard her voice, already knew that she was still walking around, but the sight of her hits him low in the gut. She looks straight past everyone else, locking gazes with Sam and smiling. It’d look kittenish if her eyes weren’t promising to eviscerate him in new and exciting ways.

“No more crap, okay?” she says.

Sam wants to tell her to go fuck herself, but he can’t move. Bobby isn’t moving either, both of them stupid and frozen, but Dean is. Dean is striding toward her with a flask in his hand. He’s unscrewing the top as he goes, and Sam has a moment to hope it’s the right one (Bobby and his brother have been playing pass the whiskey while they waited) before Meg backhands Dean and sends him flying into a stack of books.

Sam’s done enough research over the past few months to know that demons are stronger than humans, but it still looks odd—a girl half Dean’s size tossing him like that—and the strangeness of it delays Sam’s instinctive pulse of protective anger by about half a second. Then it hits him—Dean lying sprawled and unconscious and vulnerable on one side of the room—and his hands clench into fists.

Bobby grabs his arm before he can take so much as a step forward, murmuring, “Sam,” under his breath. Belatedly, Sam remembers the trap in the other room—remembers the plan Dean clearly forgot—and wrestles down the impulse to tear Meg apart with his bare hands. It’s probably the hardest thing he’s ever done, backing away and leaving his brother unprotected on the floor.
“I want the Colt, Sam,” Meg announces, leaving Dean alone and coming after them, thank God. “The real Colt. Right now.”

Funny how she can’t sense that the gun isn’t on Sam at all, that it’s trapped between Dean’s back and those books at the side of the room. Sam very carefully doesn’t look at his brother. Doesn’t look up either as he retreats one step at a time, arms spread slightly with Bobby shielded behind him.

Over by the wall, Dean stirs a little as he starts to come around. Meg hesitates, head turning, and in an attempt to refocus her attention Sam blurts, “We don’t have it on us. We buried it.”

It works.

“Didn’t I say ‘no more crap’?” Meg asks, baring her teeth. “I swear, after everything I heard about you Winchesters, I’ve got to tell you I’m a little underwhelmed. First Johnny tries to pawn off a fake gun, and then he leaves the real gun with you two chuckleheads.”

Sam and Bobby are past the trap now, he can see it out of the corner of his eye, and Meg is still following. Sam licks his lips and backs up further, drawing her in.

“Lackluster,” she scoffs. “I mean, did you really think I wouldn’t find you?”

As she takes another step forward, Dean appears in the doorway behind her. Sam can tell his brother is still a little unsteady on his feet, but Dean’s covering well enough that he doesn’t think it’d be apparent to anyone else.

“Actually,” Dean says, “We were counting on it.”

There’s a dark, triumphant curl to his brother’s voice that Sam hasn’t ever heard before—something in his eyes that goes past revenge and violence and even murder to form a darker, blood red word in Sam’s head.

Slaughter.

Meg turns around at the sound of Dean’s voice, and then follows his gaze up to the devil’s trap above her head. The swagger doesn’t completely leave her body, but it does dim. Sam wishes that seeing her trapped made him feel better, but all he can focus on is how joyous his brother’s face is right now. How eager.

How cold.

“Gotcha,” Dean purrs.

But there’s nothing human in his eyes, and Sam shivers.

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Sam doesn’t completely trust the trap until Dean has stepped beneath it and is tying Meg to one of Bobby’s chairs without any sign of resistance. Meg’s still as cocky as ever, of course—smirks at Dean as he works, no matter how bruisingly tight he pulls the ropes. Dean may or may not notice. It’s hard for Sam to tell—to see through the darkness covering his brother’s features.

He knew Dean was on edge, of course, but he didn’t realize it was this bad until Meg showed and gave his brother a target. A part of Sam wishes that he could feel as violently about their father’s death (although of course Dean is clinging to the hope that the man’s not dead, that he can be saved), but right now he’s more concerned about Dean. The yellow-eyed demon, Meg, Dad ...
everything has faded to a dim, background static in the face of how utterly not okay Dean is right now.

He isn’t scared for once—isn’t depressed or self-loathing. That should be a good thing. And it would be if the fault line running through Dean hadn’t heated with a molten, red glow and turned his iron, determined core into magma and ash. Sam thought he had finally grasped what Dad forged Dean into in Vegas, but he realizes now that he was only catching a glimpse of it—just the tame wolf that Dean lets other people see. Sam never even dreamt that this was lying beneath—this cold, vicious man who doesn’t look like he’d so much as hesitate before plunging a knife into Meg’s stomach and yanking her guts out onto the floor.

Sam is reminded of the old adage about rats and corners, and of course Dean was never anything as harmless as a rat, and he’s been fighting desperately with his back to the wall for years. He hasn’t actually done anything yet—nothing Sam can call him on—but he’s already so far past the blue that he’s left black behind and is sailing through uncharted, cold waters. It’s terrifying—worse, Sam knows that it’s hurting Dean, existing in whatever headspace he’s tapped into.

Because this stranger, who bleeds violence into the air with every flick of his eyes, isn’t Sam’s brother. And sooner or later, this lunatic high is going to desert Dean and he’s going to come crashing back down.

If he does anything before that happens, when he’s lost in this fractured state, he’s never going to forgive himself for it.

“Dean,” Sam says as his brother finishes with Meg and steps away.

It’s the first he’s tried to communicate with his brother, and Dean glancing at him is more than Sam expected. But there’s nothing but blood and hard edges in his eyes, which have gone so dark they’re almost black. There’s nothing there that Sam can use to drag his brother back to the surface and lock this ... whoever he is ... back in the dark where he came from.

Sam shuts his mouth, lips trembling, and swallows. He wishes Bobby were here with him instead of busy demon-proofing the house to keep any more of Meg’s companions out. Wishes Bobby had taken more than a cursory look at Dean before hurrying off to do so. Bobby would know what to do. He’d know how to get Sam’s brother back.

With slow, casual movements, Dean sits down on the cleared corner of a desk to wait. His eyes are locked on Meg, his mouth twisted in an unpleasant smile. Sam is struck by the unsettling thought that if he went over there and tried to kiss his brother, if he so much as tried to touch him, Dean wouldn’t even hesitate before lurching into an attack. He wouldn’t kill Sam, Sam knows that, but he thinks that Dean might actually hurt him when he’s like this.

Dean might hurt him without even thinking about it.

“You know,” Meg says, cocking her head coquettishly in Dean’s direction. “If you wanted to tie me up, all you had to do was ask.”

Something flickers deep in Dean’s eyes, but he doesn’t move.

Meg chuckles and then, running her eyes up and down Dean’s body, says, “Oh, he was right about you. You’re going to be perfect.”

Dean keeps right on looking at her with that faint little smile that promises razor blades and barbed wire, unresponsive, but Meg’s words have caught Sam’s attention even through his fear for his
brother. If Dean isn’t going to ask what she means by that—who she means by that—then he sure as hell is. Before he can do more than open his mouth, though, Bobby hurries back into the room. The man is carrying a large container of salt and panting a bit—must have been really hustling around the house’s perimeter.

“I salted the doors and windows,” he announces, putting the salt down. “If there are any demons out there, they ain’t getting in.”

Dean nods at that, pushing up off the desk and stalking forward to stand in front of Meg. She tilts her head back to look up at him with a satisfied, mocking expression.

“Where’s our father, Meg?” Dean’s voice is empty. Detached. But there’s a threat swimming beneath the emptiness, a threat with rusted bottle caps for teeth and needles for claws. Sam can sense it around the periphery of his mind.

When he looks toward Bobby for help, beseechingly, the man is frowning with dawning, reluctant concern—like he only just caught scent of the fact that there’s more than one predator in the room.

“You didn’t ask very nice,” Meg replies, blinking coquettishly up at Dean. “And I’m sure you know how to be very, very nice.” The leer on her face as she trails her eyes across his body for a second time doesn’t really leave much room for interpretation.

It should make Dean tense, at least, but instead he’s as relaxed as ever as he smiles and repeats, “Where’s our father. Bitch.”

Meg snorts. “Jeez, you kiss your mother with that mouth? Oh wait, I forgot. You don’t.”

Dean’s moving before Sam senses the intent, lunging forward and clamping his hands down over her bound arms on the chair. The darkness riding him hasn’t quite slipped its leash but it’s straining at the end of it, and Sam can see his brother’s fingers digging into Meg’s forearms as he snarls, “You think this is a fucking game? Where is he? What did you do to him?”

Meg tilts her head back with a soft, sensual moan, as though moving beneath a lover’s touch. Sam’s stomach trembles uneasily at the sight—he isn’t sure it’s an act, isn’t sure Meg isn’t getting off on this. She licks her lips, taking her time with it, and then breathes, “He died screaming. I killed him myself.”

There’s a second of silence where Sam wishes he felt surprised, or hurt, or anything but numb, and then Dean backhands Meg across the face.

Sam jerks—startled despite himself that Dean just did that, so casually, like it didn’t cost him at all. When he shares a glance with Bobby, Bobby’s wide-eyed and tense, standing straighter with every passing second. Sam prays that the man isn’t catching on too late, that he knows how to reach Dean when Sam couldn’t.

“Mmm, that’s quite a turn on—you hitting a girl.” Meg twists sinuously against the ropes, arching her throat and panting through slightly parted lips.

“You’re no girl,” Dean spits. He’s reaching for his boot—for what has to be a knife—and Sam (God help him) isn’t going to do anything to stop him. He isn’t going to do anything to stop his brother because he still can’t believe this is happening, can’t believe that’s actually his brother over there. None of it seems real: more like a nightmare he can’t thrash his way awake from.

“Dean.”
It’s Bobby’s voice, stern and commanding—Bobby’s voice mimicking their father’s—and, miracle of miracles, Dean straightens.

If Sam had called to him like that in the first place, instead of being so tentative about it, would he have responded the same way?

Sam thinks back to his earlier revelations about his brother—about Dean’s devotion to Sam before everything else, before even Dad—and knows that the answer is yes. If Sam had called to Dean the way Dean’s used to being called when he’s gone into soldier mode, Sam could have stopped this before it started. Before Dean hit her.

“What’s wrong, baby,” Meg taunts. “Can’t get it up?”

Dean ignores her, turning away to look at Bobby with dead, obedient eyes. Sam can tell that Bobby’s as put off by that expression as he is, but the man doesn’t flinch. When he jerks his head toward the other room, Dean moves in that direction without a word of protest.

Sam follows his brother, sweating lightly. His chest is a jumble of emotions, all of his previous numbness ripped away by what just happened, but as much as he just wants to curl up in a corner and scream for a while, he knows that Dean needs him. Bobby’s going to need him, to continue handling Dean. Dean’s instinctive obedience isn’t going to last long once he works through in his head that Bobby isn’t Dad, no matter how much he sounds like him.

Sam thinks he can see it wearing off now, actually—the dull sheen of his brother’s eyes sharpening as he looks at Bobby, the restraint falling away before a slow burn of rage. Before Sam can think himself into inaction, he shoots a hand out and grabs his brother by the elbow. Dean’s head snaps around, eyes locking with Sam’s, and for a heartbeat Sam imagines that he can see all the way through the darkness into his damaged brother beneath. Then the swirling pain and panic are gone, covered up by another waft of fury.

“Get your hand off me.”

Every instinct is telling Sam to obey, but instead he tightens up and says, in a crisp, firm voice, “Stand down.”

Dean stares at him.


There’s a twitch at that—a minute spasm of Dean’s facial muscles—and Sam seizes the opening, moving his body forward and to the side so that Bobby can’t see what he’s about to do. Then he takes his other hand—the one not maintaining a death grip on Dean’s arm (fuck, it’s like holding a tiger by the tail)—and presses his fingers against the fresh tattoo on his brother’s hip. This time, Dean’s eyes flicker as well—a minute lightening that Sam would have missed if he hadn’t been watching for it.

“Stand down,” he says for a third time, and when his brother blinks again the darkness flees, leaving just Dean standing there, looking at Sam like a little boy on the verge of tears. Sam can see it in his brother’s eyes for all of a second—the welling panic, the terror at what just happened, what he almost did—and then the blankness descends again. But it’s different this time—safe—and Sam finally lets his grip on Dean’s elbow loosen.

“You okay?” he murmurs, sliding the tips of his fingers up beneath his brother’s shirt to brush the feverish skin beneath.
Dean licks his lips—a quick dart of his tongue—and then, evasively, responds, “She’s lying. He’s not dead.”

It isn’t any kind of answer, but Sam can sense Bobby at his shoulder and so he quickly pulls his hand out from beneath Dean’s shirt and uses it to gesture to Bobby—a slight, negative shake of his fingers. He glances back as well, catching the man’s eyes, and does his best to signal that the situation was handled, that Bobby needs to not bring it up again right now.

Bobby doesn’t look convinced, but then he shifts his gaze to Dean. Whatever he sees there softens his expression, and in the end all he says is, “Dean, you got to be careful with her. Don’t hurt her.”

Dean goes pale at the instruction, and Sam knows that hurting Meg more is the last thing on his brother’s agenda right now. But Dean clearly gets that Bobby has a deeper point to make here, so instead of nodding he asks, “Why?” in a soft, subdued voice.

“Because she really is a girl, that’s why,” Bobby answers. He’s looking back and forth between them incredulously now—as though they’re both idiots, as far as he’s concerned—and Sam’s too worn out to feel offended on either of their behalves.

“You mean she’s possessed and not a demon,” he says, checking to make sure he understands.

Bobby nods, and Sam feels Dean twitch through the loose hold he has on his brother’s arm. Great. As if Dean didn’t already feel shitty enough about what he was just doing.

Sam casts his mind around for a way to distract his brother from the knowledge, but before he can Dean says, “That’s, uh, actually good news.”

Sam looks over, surprised Dean’s pulled himself together enough to make a contribution to the conversation, and his brother meets Sam’s gaze steadily as he says, “We’ll do an exorcism. Slow. It won’t hurt the girl, but it should get the demon bitch to talk.”

Bobby tugs at his cap and purses his lips thoughtfully. “It’s worth a shot. Key of Solomon’s got a long one I’ve been itching to try.”

“I’ll get the book,” Dean volunteers, pulling away from Sam and hurrying into the other room. Probably taking the opportunity to get a couple minutes of alone time so he can finish shoring himself up again.

Bobby waits until Dean disappears around the corner and then steps close to Sam and hisses, “What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know,” Sam answers honestly, keeping his own voice low as he watches for signs of Dean’s return.

“It wasn’t just me,” Bobby prods. He looks more frightened than Sam has ever seen him, pinning Sam with wide eyes as he checks, “He was ready to take that girl apart.”

Sam clenches his jaw.

“I don’t know,” Bobby insists, grabbing Sam’s shoulder and giving him a shake.

“You know.” The admission is drawn from Sam unwillingly, and he feels a little more desperate for having said it aloud.

“Christ on a fucking stick,” Bobby mutters sickly.
Releasing Sam, he wipes his hand over his mouth. He glances at Meg, who has started calling Dean’s name in a taunting, cajoling voice, and when he looks back up there’s a new expression on his face—a penetrating, searching look that makes Sam shift uncomfortably. He does his best to present an opaque front before the scrutiny, and finally Bobby mutters to himself under his breath and looks away again.

This time Bobby twists to stare in the direction Dean disappeared. He chews on his lower lip for a moment, as though considering whether or not to say something, and then gives a reluctant shake of his head and turns back to fix Sam with a look.

“You watch him, Sam.”

Well, that’s easy enough.

“I always do,” Sam says.

“No,” Bobby insists, his gaze heavy and meaningful. “You watch him.”

Dean’s not the one you have to worry about. It’s on the edge of Sam’s lips, but then he remembers how terrified he was of his brother only minutes before and reconsiders his words. The way things have been going lately, it looks like Bobby would be safest if he washed his hands of them altogether.

But of course, Sam isn’t stupid or selfless enough to cut loose their best hope at coming out of this in one piece, so he only says, with as much finality as he can muster, “I’ve got him, Bobby.”

Bobby’s mouth works as he chews on some unspoken comment—something to do with that look he gave Sam? with Dean’s little performance? with whatever was up between the two of them when he and Dean first arrived?—and then he gives his cap a frustrated tug and grunts, “Yeah, I saw that. Just mind you keep him.”
Chapter 37

Dad’s alive.

Dad’s alive and in Jefferson City.

Dad’s alive and in Jefferson City and Sam killed a girl.

Dad’s alive and in Jefferson City and Sam killed a girl and he doesn’t feel anything.

It’s shock again, he supposes, same as he’s succumbed to time and time again with Dean. It’s the same numb shadow he lived with after Jess’ death.

Sam hoped for a reprieve then—even with the balm of Dean’s return he had prayed every night that he would wake in the morning to find Jess lying beside him. To find that the fire and the smoke and the ash, which lingered in his nose and throat for weeks, were nothing more than a bad dream. It never happened, of course, and after a month or so he stopped expecting it to happen. Then, finally, the shock wore off and allowed him to grieve.

As they stand beside a slow-moving river across the street from Sunrise Apartments (‘by the river’ Meg said after Sam finished reading out the exorcism, and ‘sunrise’, and if this isn’t the place she meant then Sam doesn’t know what is), Sam wonders how long it will take him to accept the fact that he was wrong—that he gave up on Dad too soon. He wonders if he’ll feel guilty at all when it finally sinks in, or if he’ll just be relieved.

“All right,” Dean says. “So we pull the fire alarm, get out all the civilians.”

It takes Sam a moment to slot back into the conversation, which is worrying. He needs to have his head on straighter than this or he’ll be nothing but a liability. And he needs to keep an eye on his brother. Dean hasn’t shown any further signs of the darkness that took him at Bobby’s, but that doesn’t mean that he’s stable, or that it won’t happen again.

Get it the fuck together, Sam tells himself, and gives his head a tiny shake to clear away some of the fog.

“Okay,” he says. “But then the city responds in, what, seven minutes?”

Still staring at the apartment building like it’s Mecca, Dean nods and says, “Seven minutes exactly.”

Something about the way he says it catches Sam’s attention, and even as distracted as he is, it doesn’t take Sam long to place the familiar tone. Not after having heard it so often before, on hunts that were far less important than this.

“You have a plan,” he says.

“I always have a plan.”

Sam considers pointing out that, while that may be true, Dean’s plans don’t always work, and then says instead, “You’re leaving the Colt in the car.”

That gets him his brother’s eyes, flat and resistant.

This isn’t negotiable, though, not after what almost happened at Bobby’s, and Sam firms his jaw. There’s an implicit understanding between them that they won’t talk about it until after they have
Dad back, but Sam can’t stop himself from alluding to the incident as he says, “I don’t want you going into that kind of situation with the gun, Dean.”

Dean’s mouth quirks into something that doesn’t qualify as a smile: something sour and self-deprecating. “You mean you don’t want me armed when I flip out again.”

So much for not talking about it.

“I don’t think you’re going to ‘flip out’ again, dude, but we have to be—”

“Fine,” Dean grunts, turning back toward the apartment building.

Sam regards his brother for a moment, taking in the hostile lines of Dean’s body, and then says, “We have to be careful, man.”

“I said ‘fine’, Sammy,” Dean snaps. He moves suddenly, stalking away from the apartment and back toward the place they parked the car. Sam trots a few steps to catch up with his brother.

“I trust you,” he offers.

Dean utters a disbelieving laugh. “Yeah. Sure.”

“It’s not just—Dean, it’s what they want, for us to bring the gun,” Sam argues. When his brother purses his lips and speeds his steps, Sam adds, “It’s not like I’m asking you to go in there completely unarmed, I just don’t want you bringing the Colt.”

“Oh right, cause all our other weapons are going to do so much against a bunch of demons,” Dean snaps sarcastically.

Sam colors a little at that—it isn’t like he’s going to be any better equipped than his brother, after all—but fighting with Dean isn’t going to get them anywhere. As Dean turns sharply to the side and cuts through a narrow gap in the brush bordering the road, Sam hurries after him and, changing the subject, calls, “So, you gonna fill me in or what?”

Dean tosses a look over his shoulder that makes Sam think the answer is going to be ‘what’ (at least initially, until Sam apologizes and grovels a bit), but after a few more steps his brother grudgingly starts talking.

Like most of Dean’s plans, this one is just smart enough to work. Or, conversely, just risky enough to get them both fucked six ways from Sunday when something goes wrong.

But Sam doesn’t have anything better to offer, so in the end there’s nothing left to do but cross their fingers and pray.

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Getting in turns out to be ridiculously easy.

Sam pulls the alarm and then, when the firemen show, Dean distracts them while Sam snags a couple of extra suits from the truck. Visibility drops to practically nil with the masks on, and the water packs are heavy bitches, but since the Colt is sitting safe and snug in the Impala’s trunk, the (freshly blessed) water inside the packs is their only real weapon. Even the holy water won’t do anything but delay the demons—this is going to have to be a snatch and grab job at its quickest.

Sam only hopes Dad’s in good enough condition to run.
They hurry through the ground floor first, keeping behind the main line of firefighters exploring the building ahead of them. Dean takes point, just like always, with his homemade EMF reader out and cupped in one hand. He waves the reader over each door as they pass, and every time it doesn’t go off, Sam feels himself wake up a little more.

Adrenaline will eat through shock anytime.

As they move down the third floor hallway and Sam watches his brother swing the EMF reader from side to side, he even feels a faint stab of pride, despite the severity of the circumstances. The beat up hunk of metal and plastic in his brother’s hand started its life as a Walkman. Worn down by years of rough handling, it was chewing up tapes more often than not when Sam left for Stanford, and he was surprised to see it again in the airplane hangar. Surprised and a little amused by what he saw as Dean’s sentimentality in keeping the machine instead of tossing it out once it broke beyond repair.

Now, for the first time, Sam realizes that he’s been thinking about his brother’s tinkering the wrong way. Dean never saw the Walkman as broken—if he had, he would have tossed it into the nearest trashcan without a backward glance. Instead, Dean accepted the fact that the machine was never going to play another cassette again and then looked past that flaw to craft the Walkman into another, arguably more useful tool.

Sam can’t help seeing echoes of his brother in the transformation.

Dean isn’t ever going to be who he was before Vegas. He isn’t ever going to be that carefree, carnal man. He isn’t ever going to regain his almost naïve trust in strangers—or maybe it was just himself he trusted, and his own ability to punch or talk his way out of any rough spot he landed in.

And Sam loved that Dean, and he misses him, but this version of his brother is stronger—or he will be, once he finishes healing. This Dean has been tempered by what happened to him in Vegas, and if he doesn’t smile quite as widely or laugh quite so carelessly, the rare expressions always feel more genuine. As though Dean actually appreciates each light-hearted moment he’s granted.

And he’s more open with Sam now—has learned to rely on him. Sam doesn’t think that he ever would have been permitted to occupy any place in Dean’s life besides from “kid brother” if Dean hadn’t been forced to it by necessity.

Sam won’t ever stop hating the event or the man who changed his brother into this new version of himself, but he can’t help but be grateful for the survivor Dean has become. Can’t help but be awed by his brother’s unflinching tenacity.

As they round a corner—stepping into yet another empty hallway—Dean unexpectedly comments, “I always wanted to be a fireman when I grew up.”

The words come through a little distorted by the mask over his face, and it’s impossible to read his tone. Sam doesn’t know what to make of the comment—was that sarcasm? An off-handed comment? A genuine confession?

Things are a little tense right now for Dean to be starting a meaningful conversation, but that doesn’t mean he won’t. Makes it a little more likely, actually, because here Dean can expect to be interrupted before things get too intense or painful. Hell, maybe this is Dean’s response to Sam’s question all those months ago: Dean finally opening up and telling Sam what he wants out of life aside from hunting.

Or maybe Sam is overthinking things like always.
“You never told me that,” he says after a beat, and thank God his own voice is just as muffled by the mask as his brother’s, because he’s pretty sure his anxious confusion wasn’t at all hidden.

Dean’s shoulders move in something that Sam initially thinks might be a shrug. A moment later, he realizes that the movement isn’t anything more than Dean bringing the EMF reader to bear on another door. This time, the reader jumps, letting out that shrill, fifties sci-fi noise (which Sam is sure his brother programmed into the thing on purpose, film geek that he is), and Sam’s pulse leaps in response. Dean glances back, his eyes wide and worried behind the Plexiglas visor.

Sam’s sure that his brother isn’t concerned about what they’re about to do, but rather what they’re about to find. As nervous as Sam might be about finding Dad bloody and dying on the other side of the door (and he is nervous, he realizes with a jolt, he’s nervous as hell), it has to be a hundred times worse for Dean. Sam wishes he could say something to reassure his brother, but there’s no guarantee that it wouldn’t be a lie, and anyway there’s no time. Dean is shoving the EMF reader into the bag on his right shoulder and knocking on the door.

There’s no immediate response, so he knocks again, shouting, “This is the fire department! We need you to evacuate.”

This time, there’s the sound of a chain being undone and of bolts snapping, and as soon as the door starts to swing open Sam shoves forward past his brother. If anyone is going to walk into an ambush in there, it’s going to be him and not Dean.

Sam doesn’t plan on going down without a fight, of course, even if it is an ambush, and he has the hose in his hands as he moves. As soon as he catches sight of a target in front of him—a woman, it’s a woman with short black hair—he pulls back the catch on the nozzle and lets her have it. The woman falls back on the table, smoking and yowling like a cat, and clearly too distracted by the pain that the holy water is inflicting to do more than bat ineffectually at the stream with her hands.

Sam can hear his brother moving in behind him, followed by another voice—this one male—raised in pain. He doesn’t think it’s Dean’s voice, but he doesn’t have time to glance back and check either because the flow of water from his hose is slowing. Which means that he’s already running out of juice and it’s time for phase two of his brother’s insane plan.

Although Sam agreed to it when they were still safely outside, now that he’s here he can’t help but wonder whether he’ll be able to get the screaming banshee before him from the table and into the closet while keeping all of his limbs. Still, it isn’t as though he has any other option, so Sam drops the hose and dives forward anyway, trying to get a good grip on the woman’s body.

Behind him, he can hear sounds of a struggle and hopes, fervently, that Dean is doing okay with his own demon. The sound of a door opening and then closing again—the closet, Dean got his in the closet—is a relief, and as his brother shouts, “Come on!” Sam finally manages to get a grip on the woman. Hauling her off the table, he turns toward the sound of his brother’s voice and sees the closet is right where they figured it would be: less than three steps away.

Thank God.

Tightening his grip on the demon, Sam moves forward. Dean yanks the closet door open again—there’s a man inside, fighting to his feet—and Sam tosses the demon in his arms on top of him with a quick, mental apology for the bruises their human hosts are going to get from the impact. The demons are both snarling and furious as they collide in a tangle of limbs, and then Dean slams the door shut, muffling the sound. Leaning against it, he plants his feet and uses his body weight to keep the door closed.
“Hurry up!” he barks, but Sam is already moving, dropping his bag from his shoulder and pulling out
an oversized canister of salt. He pops off the top and turns back toward the closet, where the demons
are banging on the door furiously enough to jounce Dean forward with each blow. Dean is snarling
as he pushes back, straining to keep the door shut and the demons inside, and Sam’s palms are
sweaty as he spills a thick ring of salt around the door.

The instant the ring is completed the demons go eerily, uncomfortably quiet. Sam wishes he could
believe it meant the demons were trapped, but he knows it’s more likely they’ve abandoned their
current hosts to find others—and there’re a shitload of curious bystanders and apartment tenants
gathered just outside, which means it’ll only be a few minutes before they have company.

And this time, they won’t have the element of surprise on their side.

The demons might be gone, but Dean still jumps away from the door like he can’t move fast enough.
Sam would think it’s because he wants to be out of range in case the demons are playing possum, but
from the way his brother is already shedding the bulky, heavy fireman’s gear, Dean’s speed has
nothing to do with the demons behind him. Following his brother’s lead, Sam pulls off his own
helmet and mask as he jogs over to the front door and relocks it. The more time they can give
themselves when the demons show up in their new bodies, the better.

Dean’s out of his fireman’s coat when Sam turns back, and already moving for the mostly-shut door
at the far end of the room. Ripping his own coat off, Sam sprints to join his brother, scooping up the
bag as he goes by. He’s at Dean’s shoulder when his brother carefully pushes open the door and they
see their father at the same moment.

It’s a shock, and not just because Dad looks dead, lying there unmoving and tied spread-eagle to the
bed. As he stands there staring, Sam realizes that there was a part of him that didn’t actually expect
Dad to be here. A part of him that expected the demons to move him when Meg didn’t come back or
call to check in.

Only they hadn’t.

God, is Dad dead? Is that why they didn’t bother moving him?

“Dad?” Dean calls, jerking forward with a sudden lurch. Reaching their father’s side, he grips the
front of Dad’s shirt and jacket and bends over to put his ear next to the man’s mouth. He pauses
there, hardly breathing himself as he listens with his face creased in concern and his eyes flicking
restlessly over Dad’s chest. Dean’s as still as Sam has ever seen him, but Sam can tell that his brother
is panicked from the glassy sheen to his eyes.

He realizes that he isn’t going to know what to do with Dean if Dad is dead. Because under no
circumstances is Dean going to agree to leave the man’s body here, and they aren’t going to get far
trying to lug their father’s dead weight. If it comes down to it, Sam supposes he can probably get the
drop on his brother, knock him out cold. He can carry Dean out, anyway, and if Dean won’t ever
forgive him for it, at least he’ll be alive.

Then Dean lifts his head, glancing back at Sam for the first time since they entered the apartment.
“He’s breathing,” he announces.

Sam sags a little beneath the weight of his relief and watches as his brother starts to shake Dad and
call his name. Telling him to wake up. Dad still isn’t responding, which makes Sam’s chest twist
anxiously again—Dad’ll be just as difficult to move unconscious as he would have dead—and Dean
is looking more panicked than ever.
It’s the time slipping through their fingers, maybe, or the worries over why Dad won’t wake up—if there are fates worse than death, leave it to demons to find them—but whatever the reason, Dean’s movements are frantically sharp as he reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a switchblade. He flips it open with an easy, practiced motion and reaches for the rope binding Dad’s right wrist.


“What?” Dean says, a little breathless as he looks up. The expression on his face says that Sam had better have a good reason for stopping him. He already looks a few degrees past angry at being halted now of all times, but the important thing is that he stopped.

Sam doesn’t want to say it out loud—is worried that it’ll jinx them—but now that he’s considered the possibility, he can’t unthink it. And he can’t just ask Dean to trust him on this one, because Dean looks a few seconds away from slipping into the dark again. The words stick between Sam’s teeth for a moment and then tumble out.

“He could be possessed for all we know.”

Dean’s brow furrows. “What, are you nuts?” he demands, turning back to his work.

Like Dad is above that. Like a demon couldn’t possibly do that to the great John Winchester.

“Dean, we gotta be sure,” Sam argues, desperate.

It’s the sound of his voice that makes Dean hesitate again, but Sam’s pretty sure that it’s the pleading in his eyes that convinces his brother to release Dad and straighten. Although he’s clearly ceding control of the situation to Sam, Dean keeps looking between the two of them with an agonized, fraught expression. His fingers are twitching like they want to move, like they want to be cutting Dad free and hauling him off that filthy bed.

Despite his caution, Sam knows how his brother feels. Once they get out of this—once they know Dad’s safe, that he’ll be fine—Sam’s going to be spending some quality time with a toilet until the tension in his stomach unknots.

Turning away from the wretched tableau in front of him, he digs through his bag for one of the flasks Bobby lent them. Pulling it out, he unscrews the lid and moves forward a step to stand next to the bed across from his brother. It’d be all of a second’s work to tip the flask over, but now that he’s here Sam can’t make himself take that final step. He’s too frightened of the consequences, if he wants to be honest with himself.

He doesn’t think he’ll be able to handle it if Dad steams and starts to writhe at the first flick of holy water.

He realizes after a few moments that he’s looking across to Dean for guidance—that he’s waiting for his brother’s approval, as though that will validate the test. As though it will split the guilt of discovery between them if Dad turns out to be beyond saving. It makes Sam feel all of ten years old, looking to his big brother for reassurance like this, but he can’t help himself.

Dean is responding in kind the way he always does, thankfully—shoring himself up in the face of Sam’s naked need. Most of the wildness fades from his eyes, the darkness edges back again, and his grip on the switchblade eases. Licking his lips, he gives Sam a silent nod. At the implicit command, Sam upturns the flask and empties the water out onto their father’s chest.

There’s no steam. There’s no steam, and the water actually seems to have helped because Dad lets out a groan and moves his head as he starts to come around. He’s clearly been beaten, Sam realizes
now that his deeper fears have been laid to rest—there’s blood all over the man’s chin—but it doesn’t look too bad. Of course, that doesn’t mean that Dad doesn’t have sprung ribs or internal bleeding or any of those invisible party favors.

“Sam?” Dad groans, lifting his head and clearly trying to focus his eyes. “Why are you splashing water on me?”

Sam huffs out a breath that isn’t quite a laugh—Dad’s conscious, and he’s talking, and he’s clearly in pain but he’s all right, he’s safe. The knowledge makes Sam feel just as light and buoyant as it always did when he was a kid, when he’d spent a night or longer waiting for Dad and Dean to come back and wondering whether they would. He knows they aren’t out of the woods yet, but God, does it feel good to have Dad back.

“Hey, Dad,” Dean says, leaning in and putting a hand on Dad’s shoulder. “You okay?”

Dad turns his head, but it takes him a couple of seconds to locate Dean and lock his eyes on him. “They’ve been drugging me,” he answers with labored clarity.

Dean doesn’t look thrilled at that news, and Sam isn’t all that happy about it himself. They have no way of knowing whether the drugs Dad has been given are addictive, whether he’s going to be stuck going through withdrawal when they get him away from here. Which means that they’re going to have to batten down the hatches and prepare for the worst. Hole up somewhere near a hospital in case Dad ends up needing one to flush out the toxins.

Dad stirs a little more as Dean bends to the ropes again, and asks, “Where’s the Colt?”

Sam can’t resist a slight, relieved smile at that. If Dad’s worrying about the gun, then he can’t be that out of it. Maybe the demons weren’t giving him anything worse than a mild sedative.

“Don’t worry, Dad,” he says, putting a reassuring hand on his father’s calf. “It’s safe.”

Dean’s knife slices through the ropes on Dad’s right hand and the man moves his wrist laboriously as Dean moves down to get his legs.

“Good boys,” Dad murmurs, wincing a little as the circulation starts to come back. “Good boys.”

Dean finishes cutting Dad free and then spends a couple of moments rubbing frantically at the abraded skin of their father’s wrists, trying to work some feeling back into the man’s fingers. Sam can tell that Dad’s doing what he can to speed things up, but he clearly isn’t in any kind of shape to help with his own rescue. All they can hope for right now is that Dad can soldier through enough not to be a hindrance.

Finally—after a far longer delay than Sam is comfortable with—Dean crouches by the bed and hauls one of their father’s arms around his neck. “Okay,” he says, “Up we go.”

He gets Dad halfway up and then starts to lose him as Dad’s legs give out. Sam sprints around the edge of the bed in time to catch him and then maneuvers beneath Dad’s other shoulder. This time, when both he and Dean pull together, Dad comes up. As the man’s weight comes down on the back of Sam’s neck and upper shoulders, Sam grunts.

“Fuck, you’re heavy.”

“It’s all muscle,” Dad answers.

It’s a joke, but Sam can’t be too cheered by the sign that Dad’s brain is waking up again when the
man’s chin is resting on his chest and his limbs are heavy blocks of wood. At this rate, Dad won’t be able to do much more than cling to them as they drag him out of the apartment and down the stairs. If they can navigate the stairs.

As they haul Dad a couple of awkward, heavy steps into the main room of the apartment, there’s a pounding noise on the front door—reinforcements arriving. Looks like Sam doesn’t have to worry about the stairs after all.

“Go, go!” he shouts, pushing against their father’s chest with his free hand to indicate which way he means.

Dean raises the call instantly, backpedaling with Dad and shouting, “Come on! Back, back!”

Between the warnings and the pushing, Dad gets the picture and starts—finally—trying to help them move backwards as an axe crashes through the front door, sending splinters flying into the room. Then they’re back in the bedroom, out of sight, and Sam kicks the door shut behind them. Stretching out with one hand, he twists the lock while calculating the amount of time they have left in his head.

It isn’t much. Not even with two doors between them.

“What now?” he demands, shuffling into the center of the room with Dad’s arm still slung around his neck and Dean supporting the man on the other side.

“The window,” Dean answers almost immediately. “There’s a fire escape. I’ll take Dad. You salt the door—it should give us enough time to get out.”

Sam doesn’t waste time asking his brother if he’s sure—if Dean says he can manage Dad on his own, then he can. Instead, he ducks out from underneath their father’s arm, grabs the salt canister again and, with shaking hands, gets the top off. It doesn’t take him more than a couple of seconds to line the door, but Dean is already outside on the fire escape with Dad before he finishes straightening. The drugs must be wearing off quicker now that the man’s up and moving around.

“Sam, let’s go!” Dean calls, gesturing for him.

Before Sam can move, the tip of the axe comes through the door next to his head and he jerks back against the wall. He watches with wide eyes and a pounding heart as the gleaming metal is worked back and forth, widening the hole as the demon tugs it loose.

“Sam!” Dean shouts again, more frantically, and the sound of his brother’s voice jolts Sam into moving.

Sprinting for the window, he catches up their bag along the way and tosses through before him. Dean catches the bag and then gets out of the way as Sam follows. He spares a moment to grab Sam’s shoulder and haul him back to his feet and then is gone, hurrying to catch up with Dad, who has started to make his slow, painful way down the fire escape. Sam hesitates long enough to empty the rest of the salt out on the windowsill and then goes after them, tossing the canister aside.

The ladder at the bottom of the escape proves tricky for Dad, but they all know it’s their only chance and neither Sam nor Dean is going to be able to carry the man. After some hasty negotiation, Dean goes down first, with Dad following and Sam bringing up the rear.

If they get jumped while they’re strung out and vulnerable, at least Dad won’t get hit. And if he slips, Dean’s confident in his own ability to break Dad’s fall without getting too banged up himself. Sam’s less thrilled with the scenario, of course, but Dad and Dean don’t seem to care what he thinks right now. Sam has to admit to himself that he probably isn’t being as impartial as he should be when
faced with the thought of their father’s considerable bulk dropping down on top of Dean and possibly breaking something.

Thankfully, nothing of the sort happens. Dad makes it down without incident, barely staggering when he hits the ground after making the drop. Then Dean is there again, scooping their father up and taking most of his weight. When Sam drops down himself, he can see that Dad’s worn out from the fire escape: trembling and pale beneath the bruises and the blood.

Dean clearly has his hands full with both Dad and the weapons bag slung over his other shoulder, so Sam moves ahead to take point without discussion. He scans the surrounding area as he goes, hurrying down the alley away from the crowd in front of the building. Everything’s clear, thank God, and he’s just turning around to make sure his brother and father are still behind him when something hard and heavy slams into him from the side.

Sam grunts as he collides with the ground, and then the world spins as he’s rolled over onto his back. There’s a weight on him, heavy and making it difficult to breathe, and as the sky tilts into view he gets his first look at his attacker.

It’s a young man, good looking and with short, spiked hair, almost like Dean’s. Leather jacket, almost like Dean’s. Too pretty face, like Dean’s. His attacker’s eyes are nothing like his brother’s, though: beetle black and sparkling with malicious hate.

Sam tries to throw a punch and finds his fist caught almost carelessly as the demon grins at him.

“Winchester,” it sneers. “I’ve been waiting for a long time for this, you sick, brother-fucking fuck.”

Pain explodes on the left side of Sam’s face, taking away Sam’s vision and replacing it with a white blur. His breath catches in his throat—partly in surprise, because he didn’t even see the punch coming.

“Sam!” That’s Dean’s voice, coming from somewhere far away, but the demon hits Sam again, and again, and Dean must be lost because he isn’t coming, isn’t stopping the demon from hitting him again, and again, and again.

Then a jolt goes through the demon’s body where it’s straddling him and the beating stops. Sam blinks, trying to scrape together enough coherency to move—or, barring that, at least to see what’s going on—but he’s just figured out how to get his eyes open when it starts up again. The sides of his face are blazing, and his neck aches as well from the way each punch snaps his head to the other side, and Dean. Where’s Dean? Dean wouldn’t let this happen if he was here, he’d stop it, he must be hurt, Sam has to find him help him save him—

“He’s going to have what he wants back soon enough, brother-fucker,” the demon snarls as it rocks his face back and forth with the force of its blows. “And then I’m gonna have a taste myself. See what’s so addictive I had to play pretty and bend over anytime he snapped his fucking fingers.”

Sam doesn’t know what the hell the demon’s going on about—he can’t think through the blinding, numbing pain. Can’t think past the certainty that he’s going to die like this.

Even in the midst of his confusion and his panic and his pain, Sam hears the gunshot. It’s too loud to miss, more like a crack of lightning than anything manmade, and then there’s a sharp, ozone scent. The demon’s body stiffens on top of Sam for a moment before slumping off to one side, leaving him blurry-eyed and panting at the sky. His face feels hot and too large. He takes a sharp, shuddering
breath and the air stings against his lips. Overhead, the sky is an indistinguishable mess of blue and white.

Sam stares at it in confusion, trying to figure out what just happened, and then Dean is there. Dean is there, calling Sam’s name and pulling at his shirt.

“Sam! Sammy, come on!”

He’s still tugging at Sam’s clothes, and thinking is sort of like trying to wade through molasses but Sam is beginning to suspect that his brother wants him to get up. Surprisingly, the order his brain sends to his legs to comply gets through, and he staggers upright. Dean gets an arm around him, and Sam takes the offered assistance gratefully, relying on his brother for balance and support as his head starts to clear.

His face hurts more than ever now, but Sam will take the pain over confusion any day, and he’s relieved that he can get his eyes to focus when he looks down at the demon’s body. There’s a distant, unimportant burn where Dean’s hand is pressing over the fresh tattoo on his chest, and another one on his hip where his jeans have been rubbing the healing skin in all the wrong ways, but Sam barely notices. He’s too busy staring at the body on the pavement.

There’s a bullet hole in the man’s skull. There’s a bullet hole in his skull and a fine, black dusting of powder on his pretty, startled face, and Sam knows instinctively that Dean used the Colt. He wants to feel angry that his brother lied to him—that Dean brought the gun with him even after Sam explained why that would be a terrible idea. He wants to be frightened by the darkness he can sense moving inside of his brother even now, restless and shifting.

He wants to, but he can’t.

In his numb, shocked state, the only emotion he feels is relief. Relief that he isn’t the one lying dead in a pool of his own blood.

Two bullets left, he thinks disjointedly.

“Come on,” Dean says, voice harsh and urgent. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

Sam lets himself be pulled away, helps Dean get Dad back onto his feet. He and Dad are both leaning on Dean as they go, both relying on Dean to get them where they need to be.

And, just like always, Dean does his job.
The cabin belongs to Bobby, and like everything else the man owns that isn’t a gun, it’s worn down and falling apart. Right now, though, after twelve hours in the car with Dad sleeping off the drugs in the back seat and Dean silently gunning the gas beside him, it’s probably the most beautiful thing Sam’s ever seen. The way Dean just sits behind the wheel after he’s put the car in park and turned the engine off, blinking owlishly into the darkness around them, he’s just as ready to crash. Sam isn’t sure how his brother managed to get them this far—adrenaline and sheer willpower, probably.

“You okay, man?” Sam asks, resting a hand on his brother’s arm.

Dean rallies a little at the contact, but instead of answering he opens his door and gets out of the car. Sam hurries to follow.

“Get inside,” Dean says as he goes around to the backseat to get Dad out. “Salt all the doors and windows. I’ll take care of Dad.”

Sam wants to argue—wants to ask who’s going to take care of Dean. Dean, who hasn’t said a single word the entire drive. Dean, who looks hollow and haunted as he leans into the car to wake their father. Dean, who—and this is the part that Sam’s really stuck on—just killed a man in order to save Sam’s life.

There was a demon riding the guy, and the demon is what Dean was aiming at, but it isn’t possible to kill one without killing the other, and that has to be messing with Dean’s head in ways Sam can’t even imagine. Especially coming so quick on the heels of their confrontation with Meg.

Dean has to be as terrified of that part of himself as Sam is, because Dean—this Dean, the Dean who is Sam’s brother—isn’t a killer. He’s too kind, too compassionate. Hell, even in Hibbing, back when the Benders had grabbed him and tortured him, he was more concerned with the girl’s well-being than his own.

It was Sam’s fault that Dean got grabbed then, and it’s his fault Dean finally pulled the trigger today. Some of the darkness Sam first saw at Bobby’s is loose now—it’s been let out of the box and isn’t
going back in. Not now that Dean has taken that irrevocable step.

Sam looks at his brother, and he can see that darkness coiling through his soul. He can see the guilt, too, and the self-hatred and doubt, and he doesn’t know how to help. He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to say to ease Dean’s pain.

In the end, he takes the coward’s way out and obeys the order, going around to the trunk and getting out a fresh canister of salt and two of the bags. One bag—bulkier and heavier—has the weapons in it, the other is one of their overnights—Sam’s or Dean’s, it doesn’t make much of a difference which. Either way, there’ll be some medical supplies and fresh clothing inside—and once they’re safely within the cabin’s walls, Sam doesn’t want to have to come back outside until the sun is high and bright in the sky and they can see what they’re up against.

The low murmur of Dean and Dad’s voices comes to him as he heads up the steps and into the cabin, sending the front porch’s normal denizens—beetles and other low, crawling things—scampering in fear at his footfalls. Dean has Dad out of the car by the time Sam has the front door open—just give it a couple of kicks, Bobby told him over the phone.

As he steps inside and flicks the light on, Sam can hear their hollow footsteps on the wooden boards behind him. He holds the door open for them while scanning the room for signs of danger, but there’s nothing alarming. A table, couple of chairs. Dusty, moth-eaten curtains on the windows.

Dad’s still leaning on Dean when they move past Sam and deeper into the cabin, but he looks steadier on his feet than he did back in Jefferson City, so hopefully the drugs are wearing off. Dean moves them forward with familiar confidence, not bothering to glance for the switch before flicking the light on in the next room.

He must have been here before, when Sam was away at Stanford. Or maybe the visit happened before that, on one of the jobs Sam ducked out on during those last, tumultuous years.

As he shuts the front door behind him and pours a line of salt across it, Sam tries to imagine that younger Dean sitting in one of the wooden chairs with his legs kicked up on the table, taking a swig from his beer and grinning as Bobby and Dad trade ribald jokes. He manages the image for a moment and then it fades into another: nameless stranger on the street, face expressionless, burnt hole in his temple and blood spreading out around his head in a sticky, red halo.

Who was he? Did he have a wife? Kids? A brother?

The demon said something while it was beating Sam’s face into a pulp, but Sam couldn’t concentrate on the words then, and he can’t recall them now. There probably wasn’t a clue to its host’s identity there anyway. Meg didn’t ever mention her host, after all—and why would she, why would any demon? Humans aren’t anything more than suits to them, to be pulled on or shucked off at a moment’s notice.

But that nameless man was more than a suit to Sam, and he knows that he was more than a suit to his brother as well. Or he will be, once Dean disengages enough from soldier mode to really feel the impact of what he’s done.

A hand brushes Sam’s shoulder and he jerks around, thudding into the wall. The canister of salt comes up in his hands, like a shield, although Sam knows that it isn’t any more than a flimsy defense. Then he sees who it is, and relief washes through him, cold and tingling.

“Jesus, Dean!” he breathes, lowering the canister again.
Dean’s expression doesn’t warm as he drops his hand, but the slight flicker of his eyes tells Sam that a part of his brother is amused by his response. “Sorry. I need the bags.”

Dean nods toward Sam’s left side, where the bags are hanging, and Sam obediently lets the straps slide down off his shoulder. Catching the straps in his hand before the bags can actually hit the floor, he offers them to his brother. Dean nods his thanks, taking the bags and carrying them over to the table.

Sam watches as his brother opens the first bag, peers inside, and then pushes it away. Weapons bag, then. The second bag turns out by luck to be Dean’s—Sam can tell from the speed with which his brother finds what he wants inside, pulling out the first aid kit. The faded black t-shirt and pair of jeans that join the kit on the table a moment later confirm the bag’s ownership—black isn’t really Sam’s color.

“You changing?” he checks. It doesn’t feel exactly right—much as he would love to get out of his clothes himself (there’s blood on his shirt from his nose, or maybe his split lip) it isn’t a priority right now. And Dean’s usually even less concerned about that sort of thing than he is.

Sure enough, Dean shakes his head. “For Dad,” he says simply, gathering up the clothes and the first aid kit and hurrying out of the room.

Sam guesses that it makes sense. After all, Dad’s still wearing the same clothes he disappeared in two days ago—now stained with blood and sweat and God knows what else. A shower’s in order, most likely, and Dad’s going to want something clean to put on afterwards.

Returning to his assigned task, Sam moves around the cabin in a circle, outlining the entrance to each room with a thick line of salt to keep the demons out. Salting the bathroom is tricky—it’s already cramped enough in there with Dad sitting on the edge of the tub and Dean crouched in close between his knees. Dad has his shirt off as Dean checks out his chest, and the sunset of bruises makes Sam’s face feel a hell of a lot better in comparison. But Dad isn’t wincing too badly as Dean carefully presses against his ribs, which hopefully means that nothing’s broken.

Sam isn’t surprised that Dean ignores him—Dean’s focus when one of them is hurt is always so intense it’s almost frightening—but even Dad takes a couple of moments to look up from Dean and ask, “Need something, Sammy?”

If Sam didn’t know better, he’d think Dad was angry with him for interrupting.

But they’re all tired and on edge, and after a momentary pause, Sam pushes the uncomfortable feeling away and holds the canister out over Dean’s head. “Can you get the window behind you?” he asks.

“Sure.”

Dad puts a hand on Dean’s shoulder as he takes the canister, making Dean pause in his assessment and sit back on his heels, and then twists around to lay a line along the shallow sill. He grimaces a little as he passes it back, and Dean shoots a hand up, closing it around their father’s waist to steady him. Dad shifts his grip from Dean’s shoulder to his wrist, and once again Sam gets that odd, uneasy flutter in his stomach.

There isn’t anything wrong with the touch—it’s a warning to take it easy, to ease up on his grip—but... something about the curl of Dad’s fingers around Dean’s wrist just looks wrong.

*I checked,* Sam reminds himself. *I doused him in holy water and he hasn’t been out of my sight*
He realizes he’s still standing there, reluctant to leave, only when Dean twists around to look up at him.

“I’ve got this, Sam,” he says pointedly.

“I’ll be fine,” Dad adds, releasing Dean’s wrist and putting his hands down on the tub. He nods to the door behind Sam. “Finish up. We’ll be out in a couple of minutes.”

Dad’s voice is easy enough, but the expression on his face is wary, as though Sam’s the one they need to be worried about. After a moment, Sam realizes that Dad probably is worried about him. After all, he’s the ticking time bomb of a psychic here. He’s the weak link: the one they need to worry about hurting Dean.

Flushing at the reminder, Sam ducks his head and backs out of the room. As an afterthought, and to prove to himself that he isn’t as paranoid and jealous as he was feeling for a second there, he shuts the door behind him, giving Dean a little more room to work.

Less than two minutes later, Sam’s back in the main room finishing up the last window. He hears the door open and then shut again, and then his brother’s familiar tread on the floorboards. Glancing over his shoulder, he sees Dean strolling into the room while wiping his hands on a small towel. He probably got blood on them while he was cleaning Dad up.

“How is he?” Sam asks, turning back to the window.

“He just needs a little rest is all,” Dean answers.

Which is Winchester for ‘he’s beat all to hell, but it isn’t so bad it’ll slow him down’, and could mean anything from superficial damage to bruised ribs. But Sam is certain now that nothing’s broken, at least: Dean wouldn’t be so nonchalant if that were the case.

After a beat of silence, Dean adds, “How’re you?” and Sam floods with relief. He realizes he’s been waiting for that question, which is usually his brother’s first, and knows before turns around again that Dean is finally coming out of the driving, duty-bound fog he’s been lost in since Jefferson City.

Pausing for a moment, he takes stock of his own condition. His face aches all over, bone deep, and he can tell from his narrowed field of vision that the skin around his right eye is a little swollen, but he’s pretty sure Dean stopped the demon before it could do any real damage.

“I’ll survive,” he answers simply as he turns around to look at his brother.

Dean is sitting on the edge of the table with his head bowed and that white cloth in his hands. The soldier in him isn’t gone, exactly, but Sam thinks his brother has given himself the ‘at ease’ command. For the most part, Sam is relieved to see Dean sitting there instead of the methodical, detached hunter. But if Dean is letting himself be Dean again, then it’s only a matter of time before all of those emotions Sam caught a glimpse of out by the car swell to disabling intensity.

In an attempt to distract his brother before that can happen, he says, “Hey, you don’t think we were followed here, do you?”

Dean stirs a little, and actually looks over at Sam when he answers, “I don’t know. I don’t think so. I mean, we couldn’t have found a more out-of-the-way place to hole up.”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. He wonders how Bobby found this place, what he used it for. There were
perfumes in the bedroom, covered in dust and cobwebs. A jeweled comb. Woman’s things.

When Sam pulls his mind off of Bobby’s mysterious past, Dean’s eyes have gone distant on him. Sam’s sure that his brother is replaying the event in his mind, watching himself pull the trigger over and over. He considers trying to distract Dean again and then discards the idea. Nothing short of a full on assault on the cabin is going to stop Dean from thinking about Jefferson City.

But if Sam can’t stop his brother from thinking about it, then maybe he can at least change the way that he’s thinking about it.

“Hey, uh, Dean, you—you saved my life back there.”

Dean blinks, eyes focusing on Sam. After a moment, he smiles wanly. “So, I guess you’re glad I brought the gun, huh?”

Sam had forgotten about their argument over the weapon, but as he replays it in his head now he’s surprised that he ever believed Dean’s grudging, sullen agreement. He must have been more preoccupied with Dad than he thought at the time.

Smiling a little to show his brother that he doesn’t have any lingering resentment or anger over the broken promise, he says, “Man, I’m trying to thank you here.”

Dean ducks his head, clearly embarrassed by the sentimentality of the gesture, and mumbles, “You’re welcome.”

It ends the conversation pretty soundly, and while Sam wracks his brain for something else to say, he heads over to the table and sets the salt canister down. This close to Dean, his hands itch to touch—to reassure. It’s probably the worst thing he could do right now, for a lot of reasons—not the least of which is the fact that Dad could rejoin them at any moment—and so he keeps going instead, crossing to the window on the other side of the room and peering out into the darkness.

“Hey, Sam?” Dean says softly from behind him.

“Yeah?”

“You know that guy I shot? There was a person in there.”

Sam’s chest clenches as he turns around. His brother isn’t looking at him. He’s staring down at his hands, like the gun’s there instead of tucked safely down the back of Dean’s jeans.

“You didn’t have a choice, Dean,” he says.

To his surprise, Dean nods. “Yeah, I know. That’s not what bothers me.”

Sam isn’t quite sure how to respond to that, or even if he’s reading Dean’s answer correctly. Because if he understands his brother, then Dean just said that he doesn’t care he killed a man. And that ... that possibility is more disturbing than Sam wants to admit.

He isn’t sure he wants to know—no, scratch that, he knows he’d rather remain in the dark on this one—but he clears his throat and manages to ask, “Then what does?”

“Killing that guy, killing Meg,” Dean answers slowly. “I didn’t hesitate. I didn’t even flinch.” He shakes his head a little, staring down with lost, damned eyes as he confesses, “For you or Dad, the things I’m willing to do or kill, it’s just, uh. It scares me sometimes.”
It scares Sam too. God, it leaves him fucking petrified, how easily Dean slipped into the darkness at Bobby’s. How quickly he must have found his way back there in Jefferson City when Sam needed him. He doesn’t know how far away that place is for Dean anymore, now that he’s found his way there once.

Sam wishes he could be sure that he was just looking at Dean now, that the darkness has been buried again, but he isn’t sure. He isn’t sure Dean’s ever going to be able to lock that part of himself away again.

That’s Sam’s fault, he knows. It’s his fault, and Dad’s, because Dean let the darkness in for them. It’s terrifying how easily Dean finds it to destroy himself when it comes to his family. It’s getting to be more than just a habit for him—more than an addiction. Like Dean doesn’t know how to breathe without twisting himself into what he thinks they need, no matter how much it hurts him, or how deeply he bleeds.

Worse, Sam and Dad keep on taking, like it’s their right, like Dean is theirs to own. Like it’s okay for Dean to be doing this for them. Sam knows it’s wrong, he does, but he just ... he doesn’t know how to tell his brother ‘no’.

He’s still searching for something to say—something aside from the ‘I’m sorry’ that’s only going to confuse Dean—when their father steps into the room.

Dad hasn’t changed, despite the fresh clothes Dean brought back for him, and Sam finds the sight of the soiled clothing disturbing. Dean’s clothes must not have fit, despite the fact that the two men are more or less the same size. No way Dad would have chosen to put those back on otherwise.

“It shouldn’t,” Dad says, his eyes fastened on Dean. “You did good.”

Dean lifts his head, and Sam can see his brother taking stock of their father’s appearance as well. But Dean has more important things to worry about than finding Dad a new outfit, and the cringing hope that fills his eyes as he looks up is painfully pitiful.

“You’re not mad?” he asks, voice trembling slightly.

“For what?”

“Using a bullet.”

“Mad?” Dad repeats the word as though he isn’t quite sure what it means—or maybe can’t connect it to Dean—and then, giving his head a little shake, answers, “I’m proud of you. You know, Sam and I, we can get pretty obsessed.”

He shifts his eyes to Sam, giving him a fond look and inviting him in. Sam doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to this kind of approval and acceptance from Dad, and it makes him stand a little straighter now: eases the tightness in his chest and the lump in his throat.

Dad’s smile widens as he returns his gaze to Dean. “But you, you watch out for this family. You always have.”

Sam isn’t sure what’s going through his brother’s head right now, but Dean’s eyes are wet as he looks up at their father. The expression on his face is practically rapturous, and Sam realizes that, as gentle as Dad has been with Dean over the past four months, this is the first time that the man has said what they’ve always known. It’s the first time that he’s admitted out loud how very important and cherished Dean is to him.
This is the first time he’s told Dean that he’s proud of him.

In this moment, if Dad asked Dean to eat a bullet, he would. He’d do it in a heartbeat, without even asking why, and smile the whole time.

That understanding sours the taste of unity in Sam’s mouth, and he feels a distant sting of his old anger. Dad should have done this a long time ago. It shouldn’t have taken his eldest son turning into a murderer to get the man to unbend and offer the reassurance Dean has always craved.

“Thanks,” Dean says, looking up at their father with that adoring expression he still hasn’t offered Sam, even after all this time. Sam isn’t sure he actually wants Dean to look at him like that, as though he’s more myth than man, but seeing the expression leveled at Dad is making his stomach twist around itself with jealousy.

He’s about to move forward and break the moment when the lights flicker. Outside, the wind picks up, becoming a howl. The skin at the back of Sam’s neck prickles as he whirls to look out the window. The sound of footsteps on the floorboards and the stir of air at his back tell him that Dean has joined him.

Behind them, Dad says, “It found us. It’s here.”

“The demon?” Sam asks. There’s nothing outside—nothing he can make out, anyway—and he turns around to look at their father for some direction.

“Sam,” Dad says, meeting his gaze head-on with an air of calm command. “Lines of salt in front of every window, every door.”

“I already did it,” Sam answers, a little confused despite his rising fear. Not only did he just do it, Dad just helped him do it.

But Dad’s expression darkens into an uncompromising stare and he snaps, “Well, check it, okay?”

Part of Sam wants to protest the order, which assumes incompetence and unblinking obedience—both of which he thought they left behind over the past four months. But mostly he’s just scared shitless, remembering the way he felt in Alexandria—remembering the way the air smelled there, the way the demon’s eyes seemed to peer right down into his soul.

“Oh, okay,” he agrees, and hurries out of the room.

He checks each room diligently, rechecking several sills when he panics and can’t recall looking at them. Finally, when he’s sure that everything is sealed up as tight as they can manage, he heads back to the main room. As he hurries back inside, the ‘all clear’ shrivels on his tongue.

Sam freezes in the doorway, the air in his lungs gone solid and uncompromising. His stomach lurches and keeps dropping, leaving him stuck in a sensation that feels like freefall. As his heartbeat echoes in his head, he reaches out a hand and grasps hold of the doorframe to his right, trying to ground himself. Trying to tear free of the nightmare he just walked into.

Nothing changes.

Dean is still backed up against the wall, both wrists pinned above his head by one of their father’s heavy hands. Dad’s body is blanketing Dean’s, his broad back turned toward Sam and blocking what he’s doing, but Sam can see their father’s right shoulder moving as the man works his hand, low and hidden, between their bodies, and he sure as hell can’t miss the fact that Dad is mauling Dean’s mouth with his own—no use calling something like that kissing, not when it looks more like
an attack than anything else.

Dean has his eyes screwed tightly shut, and Dad might be pinning him in place, but it doesn’t look to Sam like he needs to because his brother isn’t struggling at all. Dean’s hands are opening and closing where they’re held against the wall, but it’s a reflexive, helpless motion. There’s no intent behind it. No resistance.

Sam tightens his grip on the doorframe as Dad makes a low, hungry sound, and then washes cold and calm.

That’s not Dad. No fucking way.

“Get off him,” Sam spits. He doesn’t move forward—can’t remember how to work his body yet—but he’s working on it.

Dad—no, not Dad, the demon—releases Dean’s mouth and glances over its shoulder. There’s a smirk on its lips—Dad’s lips—but Sam looks past the demon and all he can see is Dean’s swollen, wet mouth. His brother’s lips are pressed together so tightly they’re white and trembling—Dean doing his best to present a barrier.

“You mind, Sammy?” the demon asks in their father’s voice. “We’re a little busy here. Be a sport and come back in a couple of hours.” His shoulder flexes again, hand moving somewhere low on Dean’s body, and Dean lets out a tiny, hurt noise.

“You son of a bitch!” Sam snarls, and this time when he tries to rip himself free from the door, his body obeys.

He starts forward, not thinking of anything but pulling the demon off of his brother—of stopping it. The demon watches him approach, and actually lets him get within grabbing distance before dropping the mask and flashing those sickly, yellow eyes at him. Before Sam knows what’s happening, he’s flying backwards through the air and slamming into the wall to the right of the door. He’s been thrown by things before, but he’s never been pinned the way he is right now: never been held in place by an invisible blanket of air and power. It’s almost as frightening as the scene before him.

“If you wanted to watch, you only had to ask,” the demon says, tilting Dad’s body enough for Sam to see that it has Dad’s hand shoved inside Dean’s jeans. “Got a good enough view?”

“Stop!” Sam yells, struggling futilely against the demon’s hold. “Goddamn it, stop touching him!”

“Mmm,” the demon purrs as it turns its attention back to Dean. “Open up for Daddy, boy.”

Still keeping his eyes shut, Dean starts to tilt his face away, but the demon moves their father’s body with the speed of a snake. It catches Dean’s mouth again easily, and from his vantage point against the wall Sam can see the demon working Dad’s hand inside of Dean’s pants. His vision is blurring, he’s choking on a hot mess of hate and rage and despair and disgust, and the words he wants to shout are getting caught in his throat and coming out as weak, pleading sobs.

“Dean—Dean, please—don’t—”

Either Dean hears him or the demon makes a particularly rough tug because he stirs against the wall. His hips jerk, and he lets out a sharp, protesting noise. When he whips his head to the side, turning his face blindly toward Sam, the demon lets him. Chuckling, low and amused, it nuzzles at the corner of Dean’s jaw instead.
“Mmm,” it purrs, keeping its gaze on Sam. “Knew you’d be sweet. Fuck, Dean, been wanting this so long. Lost count of how many times I jerked off thinking about you.”

Dean’s face twitches, and a tear slides out from underneath his scrunched eyelid to snake down his cheek. And yeah, it’s bad, the demon using Dad’s body to—to molest him like that, worse considering Dean’s history, but even with his eyes closed Dean’s expression is the most broken, hopeless thing Sam has ever seen. He can’t reconcile it, can’t understand why Dean isn’t fighting and kicking, why he’s just standing there taking it.

Or maybe a part of him does understand, but is too horrified by the prospect to admit it.

“Such a good boy for Daddy,” the demon purrs, and licks a slow, wet path up the side of Dean’s neck to his ear. It’s still watching Sam, as though daring him to do something—anything—to stop it. “I’m gonna let you loose, son,” it continues. “And I want you to be the good whore we both know you are and get down on your knees for me. Can you do that for Daddy?”

Dean’s crying harder now, but he nods. He nods, and the demon releases him, steps back and Dean sinks down onto the floor, onto his knees, so obedient, and Sam can’t block out the truth anymore, he can’t remain blind to the fact that Dean believes that it’s Dad over there, that he thinks Dad is doing this to him.

Sam gives himself a moment to wonder whether Dad ever did anything to warrant that kind of belief and then hates himself for it. Of course Dad didn’t do anything. Dad has a lot of faults, sure, but molesting kids isn’t one of them—Dad would cut his own hands off before he touched either of them like that. And Sam understands, with a sudden, sick twist, that what’s happening over there isn’t just a show for Sam’s benefit. It isn’t just a way to fuck with Dean.

There are three Winchesters in the room right now, and this scene is intended for each of them, in his own way.

The understanding rips through Sam’s horror and his disgust and fans his rage, and this time when he tries to shout it comes out cleanly. “Dean! Dean, that’s not Dad! It’s the demon! Open your eyes and look at him, damn it!”

Dean tilts his head slightly, as though hearing Sam’s voice for the first time, and Sam guesses that it must be a little easier for things to get through to Dean, now that he isn’t being pinned against an unyielding surface and felt up. He watches his brother blink his eyes open—looking to Sam, looking back to their father’s feet, looking up toward his face.

The demon grasps Dean’s chin with one hand, tightly enough that Sam is sure it’s leaving bruises, and growls, “That’s right, you look at me.” The yellow is hidden again, submerged behind John’s brown irises, and Sam thunks his head back against the wall in desperate frustration as Dean’s expression wavers. He can tell that his brother is trying to listen, is trying to sort things through in his head, but the demon isn’t giving him any room to breathe.

Sam opens his breath to yell again—Christo, this time, to make the bastard reveal itself (as long as the name of God works where the holy water obviously didn’t)—and finds himself gagged with a wad of power. The demon doesn’t so much as glance at him, but Sam can feel its amusement as he struggles to yell past the restraint.

“I want to see those pretty eyes looking up when you suck me,” the demon announces, rubbing Dad’s thumb over Dean’s lips in a possessive, hungry manner.

“Dad,” Dean chokes out. There are still tears running down his cheeks, and he looks so lost and young and confused. “Why—why are you doing this to me?”
The demon feigns surprise, and although the expression looks clownish and exaggerated on their father’s face, Sam is sure Dean isn’t thinking clearly enough to recognize that it isn’t genuine.

“Because you’re a whore, Dean,” the demon answers. “That’s what you’re good for, isn’t it?”

Dean’s face is crumpling, but the demon isn’t done.

“I mean, the movie ... Hanson ... your own brother ... you didn’t really think I wouldn’t want some of what you’ve been giving away.” It shakes Dad’s head with a studious expression of disappointment. “You can’t act like a little cocktease and then not put out, son, you should know that.”

“I—” Dean tries, and then chokes on the rest, eyes falling shut.

“Shhh,” the demon says, brushing the tears from his cheeks in a parody of gentleness. “You’re not too bright, boy, but you’re very pretty. Now stop stalling and do as you’re told.”

Still fighting back tears, Dean reaches up for Dad’s jeans with trembling hands. Sam watches as his brother fumbles at the zipper while the demon strokes his hair, and something deep inside of him snaps.

Inside Sam’s head, there’s a pulse of heat and an agonizing, snapping sensation, and in the next moment an electric, burning flare lashes out from him. Over by the other wall, the demon is ripped away from Dean and tossed back against the table, where it puts a hand to its temple and shakes its head laboriously.

Sam’s still pinned in place on the wall, but the gag is gone and he uses his new freedom to yell, “Dean! Snap out of it! That’s not Dad! Shoot it! Use the Colt and shoot it!”

Dean blinks over at him, and this time Sam actually feels seen. He watches his brother regather some of the broken shards of himself and piece them into something approximating clarity. His hands are still shaking as he reaches back behind himself for the Colt, but he doesn’t look nearly so lost. He’s here with Sam, and Sam doesn’t think that the demon is going to be able to trap him back in that lost, little boy headspace again. Not after Dean raises his head to see the thing levering their father’s body back into a standing position. Not when he meets its hateful, yellow gaze.

“Sonuvabitch,” Dean mumbles, bringing the gun around.

Sam isn’t sure his brother is going to be able to pull the trigger, even now, but it turns out not to matter because the demon’s eyes flash and Dean is hauled up onto his feet and thrown backwards. As he crashes into the wall with a grunt, the gun falls from his hand and skids across the floor to come to rest by the demon’s feet.

Sighing, the demon bends down and picks the weapon up. It turns the gun over in its hands with a grimace, inspecting it, and then mutters, “What a pain in the ass this thing’s been.”

They’re officially screwed now, but Sam ignores the demon to focus on his brother, who’s grimacing and blinking his eyes in a way that makes Sam think he hit his head when the demon threw him back in that lost, little boy headspace again. Not after Dean raises his head to see the thing levering their father’s body back into a standing position. Not when he meets its hateful, yellow gaze.

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They’re officially screwed now, but Sam ignores the demon to focus on his brother, who’s grimacing and blinking his eyes in a way that makes Sam think he hit his head when the demon threw him into the wall. “Dean!” he calls. “Dean! Come on, man, wake up and look at me.”

When Dean can’t manage more than a groggy groan, Sam cuts his eyes over to the demon and snarls, “If you hurt him, I swear to fucking God, I’ll—”

“You’ll what? Kill me?” the demon interrupts, smirking. “That’d be a neat trick.” Lifting the Colt up for a moment so that he can see it, the demon steps back and places it on the table. “Here. Make the
gun float to you there, psychic boy.”

Sam tries. He stares at the gun and wills his brain to do that freaky, telekinetic thing it’s done twice now. Nothing happens.

The demon laughs softly. “What’s wrong, Sam? Can’t get it up when it doesn’t involve your brother? Here, let me help you out.”

Then, still grinning, it moves back toward Dean, who is finally starting to come around.

“No!” Sam shouts. “Goddamn it, no! Don’t you touch him!”

It doesn’t. It plants its hands on the wall to either side of Dean’s head and leans into his space with a lascivious grin. “Pretty, pretty,” it purrs.

Dean’s eyes are so pale they’re practically transparent, and his breathing is coming fast and light, but despite his fear he meets the demon’s gaze and spits in its face. The demon’s smile widens a little as it wipes its cheek against one arm.

“You know,” it says, still staring at Dean, “I could’ve had you a hundred times today, but this ... this is worth the wait.”

It darts in suddenly, nose skimming along the line of Dean’s neck. Scenting him.

“My Dad,” it rumbles. “He’s in here with me. Trapped inside his own meat suit.” Lifting its head again, it glances toward Sam. “He says ‘hi’, by the way.” Sam tries to catch its eyes, keep its attention focused on him where it belongs, but instead the demon looks back at Dean and finishes, “He’s gonna tear you apart. He’s gonna taste the iron in your blood.”

There isn’t really any room to question exactly how it’s going to do that. Not with how close the demon is standing to Dean. Not with the way it’s looking at him.

Sam feels a twinge of pride at the way his brother rallies, now that he knows it isn’t their father standing in front of him. There isn’t anything but anger in Dean’s face as he growls, “Let him go or I swear to God—”

“What?” the demon sneers. “What are you and God gonna do?” For the first time, it looks angry instead of superior. “You see, as far as I’m concerned, this is justice. You know that little exorcism of yours? That was my daughter.”

Dean blinks, surprised. “Who, Meg?”

The demon keeps smiling that hostile, little smile that Dad always wears at his most dangerous. “The one in the alley? That was my boy. You understand.”

Dean does, Sam can tell, but there’s still more than a little bit of incredulous disbelief in his voice when he whispers, “You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“What? You’re the only one that can have a family?” It inclines its head. “You destroyed my children. How would you feel if I killed your family?” It pauses and the smile on its face widens. “Oh, that’s right. I forgot. I did.”

For a second, Sam honestly doesn’t know what the demon is talking about. Then he remembers Mary, the mother he never knew, and his gut goes cold. Against the other wall, Dean seems to have lost every last shred of fear in the face of his anger. There’s a snarl in his eyes as he stares at the
demon: a hate-filled sneer on his lips.

“Still,” the demon says lightly. “Two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“You son of bitch,” Dean chokes out.

The demon leans in even closer, and Sam can tell that this time it means to hurt. Sweating, he calls out, “I wanna know why. Why’d you do it?”

Right now, of course, he couldn’t give a shit about the demon’s motives, but he’s pretty sure that it’s one of the only ways to shift the son of a bitch’s attention away from his brother. In his limited experience with demons, they love to grandstand and blow their own horns.

Sure enough, the demon swings toward Sam. It hasn’t moved away from Dean, not yet, but it isn’t looking at him anymore and that’s a step in the right direction.

“You mean why did I kill Mommy and pretty little Jess?” it asks.

Sam’s chest twists with instinctive rage at the sound of Jess’ name in this thing’s mouth, and he spits out his “Yeah,” through clenched teeth. And then his heart sinks as the demon turns toward Dean again.

“You know, he never told you this, but Sam was going to ask her to marry him. Been shopping for rings and everything.”

Something flickers in Dean’s eyes—deep down, too deep for Sam to have any clue what his brother’s thinking. He’d deny the demon’s words anyway if he could, if they weren’t true. He’d try and explain that he was only settling, that he thought Dean was out of reach and better off that way, if he thought his brother would understand.

The demon’s smile is self-satisfied as it drifts toward Sam, but Sam could care less if it’s happy about hurting Dean with its words because it’s moving away from his brother. Sam’s ploy worked, at least for the time being.

He’s careful to keep his eyes off of Dean and on the demon as it spins to face him directly and says, “You want to know why? Because they got in the way.”

It’s close enough to him now that Sam can feel the heat coming off of their father’s body, can smell the sulfur on his breath. He wants to turn his face away, but he’s too worried that the demon will lose interest if he does. He needs to keep its attention locked on him instead of his brother for as long as possible. Dean will be able to figure out how to get them out of this, given the chance. Sam knows he will.

“In the way of what?” he demands.

“My plans for you, Sammy,” the demon answers, looking Sam up and down. Unlike the way it looks at Dean, there’s no heat in its gaze. Just a kind of proprietary pride. “You and all the children like you.”

“The other psychic children, you mean.”

For a moment, the demon looks surprised. Then it makes a tsking noise and says, “Johnny’s been telling tales out of school.”

“You’re building an army, aren’t you?” Sam guesses.
It’s the only theory he’s been able to come up with that makes any sense, and the demon doesn’t deny it. It just pats his chest and says, “Don’t worry, Sammy—you’re my favorite.”

“Listen, do you mind just getting this over with, huh?”

Dean’s voice. Dean using that bored, cocky tone that always drives authority figures crazy. Dean doing what he always does when he’s scared and drawing way, way too much attention to himself.

For a moment, Sam’s rage shifts targets—goddamn it, can’t Dean keep his mouth shut for a minute—and then, as the demon turns away from Sam and moves back toward his brother like a shark scenting blood, the anger slips through his fingers and Sam is left empty, and cold, and terrified for his brother.

“Funny,” the demon says. “But that’s all part of your M.O., isn’t it? Masks all that nasty pain, masks the truth.”

Dean either doesn’t see the danger he’s in or, more likely, he’s ignoring it as he curls his lips and shoots back, “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

“You play the alpha dog, but the truth is you’re just a bitch in heat, ready to roll over and spread your legs at the first opportunity. You aren’t really happy unless someone’s pulling on your chain and making you beg, are you, Dean-o.”

It isn’t anything worse than what the demon was saying before, and Sam expects Dean to shrug it off, or maybe twist it around somehow and toss it back into the demon’s face, but instead his brother goes ashen. His eyes widen, all whites and a wide ring of lime green around a pinprick pupil. His mouth trembles.

Chuckling, the demon runs a hand up Dean’s stomach and over his chest, which is beginning to rise and fall in shallow, swift breaths. It grips his chin and draws his face to the side so that he’s facing Sam with his left cheek pressed into the wall. Then, holding him there, it drags Dad’s thumb slowly over the scar on his right temple.

“Marked you up, did I?” it purrs. “Guess I’ll have to be a little more careful this time.”

Somewhere, deep inside, Sam is screaming, but none of it is getting out his mouth.

No.

No no no no nonononono ...

But everything is snapping together in his head now—everything he ignored or didn’t want to look too closely at before. The rotten egg scent, Hanson knowing Dean’s name, Hanson dying so conveniently afterwards so he couldn’t carry tales. Suddenly, Sam is certain that he knows what his nightmares were about as well, and Jesus fucking Christ he woke up hard every time—and he was—and Dean—

Sam’s brain shuts down on him.
When he swims back into reality a moment later, the demon has its mouth next to Dean’s ear. It’s whispering the same word over and over—Dean’s childhood nickname purred in Dad’s husky voice. Dean shudders with each fresh repetition, like the demon is skinning him instead of calling his name, and his eyes are squeezed tightly shut. His lips move in soundless, repetitive patterns. Sam thinks that his brother might be praying.

“I’m going to kill you,” Sam says. His voice sounds calmer than he feels, buried as he is beneath white-hot licks of rage.

The demon straightens, releasing Dean’s head. Dean doesn’t move—Sam isn’t sure his brother even realizes the demon has stopped whispering, thinks that maybe Dean is still hearing its voice on an endless, insinuating loop in his head.

“What’s wrong, Sammy?” the demon asks, coming back to stand in front of him. “Don’t you like your present? Happy birthday, by the way.”

Out of everything screaming for his attention right now, that tiny error is what Sam fixates on. It’s all he can handle without losing it.

“It’s not my birthday.”

“November second, kiddo,” the demon says. “It’s the only birthday you have that matters. But if it helps, you can think of it as your baptism.” It cocks its head, grinning. “Doesn’t change the fact that I got you a gift and you haven’t said thank you.”

“What gift?” Sam asks through numb lips. He wishes he could feel surprised when the demon prances back over to Dean’s side and strokes a hand through his hair.

Dean jerks his head this time, coming back to himself a little and growling, “Don’t fucking touch me!” The demon ignores the complaint, gripping Dean’s hair tightly to hold him still and making him look at Sam. Sam catches his brother’s eyes with his own and holds them, silently pleading with Dean to stay with him, to stay strong.

“Pretty, isn’t he, Sam?” the demon says. “How old were you when you first started to—oh, let’s call a spade a spade—covet him?”

Sam doesn’t have a hard answer for that question, but he has a sinking, uneasy feeling that the demon does.

“Twenty-two?” the demon asks. “When he first let you have a little taste? Or was it the first time you saw him take it like the little whore he is—you were what, twenty? How about eighteen? He looked awful sweet passed out on the kitchen table after that fight you had with Daddy, didn’t he?”

Sam remembers that night, coming back home after hours spent roaming the town pissed off and raging to find the house dark and Dad gone and Dean passed out drunk on the table. There was a line of drool running down the side of Dean’s mouth, but it didn’t look like drool in the moonlight and the sight had stirred things deep inside of him that he hadn’t wanted to examine. He hadn’t been able to keep himself from sitting down across from his brother and drinking in the sweep of his lashes and the line of his jaw and the curve of his ear—storing up memories for Stanford, he told himself then, but God, underneath his rational mind he had wanted ...
“Tell me when this starts freaking you out, Dean-o,” the demon murmurs from the side of its mouth before continuing, “How about seventeen? Your big brother and Kathy Wingate in the backseat of Daddy’s precious car, remember that one Sammy? No? Younger, then. Sixteen. Dean took you out for your first night on the town and got you drunk, didn’t he? Only you weren’t quite as drunk as you pretended to be, clinging so close to him on the ride home—did you think he’d give you a goodnight kiss? Did you pray for one?”

It’s talking faster now, skewing all of Sam’s memories around and twisting his unconscious attraction into something that sounds sick and devious. He wants to protest and can’t—can only watch the growing, horrified betrayal in his brother’s eyes as the demon winds back the clock.

“Fifteen—and this is my personal favorite, actually—Monday night pool lessons down at Joe’s. How you begged and pleaded Dean-o to show you the ropes. You played him like a pro, got that hot body of his pressed up nice and close behind you. Sammy was a bit of a slow learner for once, wasn’t he, Dean-o? Would’ve been even slower if he thought you’d buy it.”

An aching lump lodges in Sam’s throat. He knows how much his brother cherished those nights, how proud Dean was that he had a skill Sam actually wanted to learn. And so Sam had dragged his feet, wanting Dean to have that feeling longer, wanting to draw out those nights where Dean smiled wide and bright and ruffled his hair with an easy laugh.

But he can’t be sure the demon’s wrong, because he liked the closeness as well, and now that he’s remembering, he ended up jerking off more nights than not, and ever since Stanford—ever since he figured out what he wants—he’s gotten hard whenever Dean’s anywhere near a pool cue.

Sam can’t keep the guilt from his eyes and Dean sees it, of course he does. Dean’s own eyes dull. Accepting. He sags visibly in the demon’s grip.

“Fourteen,” the demon continues mercilessly. “Dean looked mighty fine all covered in grease and sweat that summer, didn’t he? Sammy here spent his afternoons watching you work, Dean-o—that’s why he popped up so nice and prompt whenever it was quitting time. No? Still not there? How about lucky number thirteen? That was the first time Sammy walked in on you, wasn’t it? Wouldn’t be the last, though. Hmm, let’s see ... twelve—you know when you took Sammy to that carnival he honestly thought it was a date? Not then, either, huh? How about eleven? Would you believe that you were Sammy’s first wet dream?”

Sam can’t take it anymore. He can’t keep looking into his brother’s wet, betrayed eyes. “Stop it,” he rasps. “You made your point, just—just stop.”

He doesn’t actually expect the demon to listen, but a slow smile spreads across their father’s lips and instead of continuing the count the demon says, “You didn’t actually think he’d ever have let you touch him if I hadn’t taken him first, did you, Sammy?”

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It hits Sam with the force of a physical blow and he jerks a little against the demon’s power. Oh God, he did this to his brother. Not with his own body, maybe, and not intentionally, but he wanted Dean. He wanted Dean and this—this yellow-eyed son of a bitch raped his brother over and over in that shitty bathroom. It broke Dean with deliberate, calculating malice—fashioned him into someone who would be open to a relationship with his brother because he didn’t trust anyone else enough to give it a go.

It raped Dean as some kind of sick, twisted gift for Sam.

The demon releases Dean suddenly, and Dean takes the opportunity to hang his head and close his eyes. Sam knows that his brother is fighting back tears, doing his best not to cry in front of the son of
a bitch that violated him.

“Dean,” Sam calls. “Dean, I’m sorry, I didn’t—God, I didn’t want any of this.”

“Funny, Sammy. That’s what Daddy’s trying to say.” The demon shoots him a disingenuous smile. “All those years of watching you lust after big brother and he’s still trying to deny it.” Reaching out, it grips the collar of Dean’s t-shirt in two hands. “He’s gonna have to see it with his own two eyes, I think.”

The demon tears Dean’s shirt down the middle, forcefully enough that Dean’s body jerks from the violence of the motion. Sam’s heart rate speeds as his brother’s pale chest is revealed, wondering if the protective tattoo on his chest is going to do anything. The demon does pause, and pulls the cloth back to get a better look, but the look it casts toward Sam is mocking.

“Nice try, Sammy, but you’re gonna need a little more firepower than that if you really want to mark him off limits. From something like me, anyway. Now, let’s see ... ah yes, here it is.”

There’s a scab partially covering the tattoo, but the demon peels it off. Dean grimaces as his skin beads blood, head coming up slightly, but doesn’t otherwise move.

“I have to admit, I’m a little surprised,” the demon comments. “I had you pegged for a traditionalist. Still, I guess not every blushing bride wants a wedding ring.”

“Dad,” Sam tries, speaking past the demon. “Dad, I’m sorry, but it isn’t what he’s trying to make it sound like. It isn’t about the sex, I swear—”

The demon’s head swings around to him and the rest of Sam’s words dry up in his mouth because it isn’t the demon looking out at him anymore. It’s Dad. The man is crying weakly, his mouth twisted in disgust. “How could you,” he breathes. “Your own brother, Sammy, how the fuck could you?”

Then Dad’s gone, buried again, and the demon is beaming over at Sam. “Like I said, Sammy—you’re my favorite. I couldn’t have raised you better if I tried. And really, all you needed were a couple of nudges in the right direction. All that selfish desire of yours did the rest. Of course, I’m pretty sure you haven’t actually had the balls to consummate the relationship yet, or am I wrong?”

Before Sam has had a chance to respond, the demon is opening Dean’s jeans and pushing them down. The threat has been there, obviously, but somehow Sam still hadn’t believed that things would go this far, and he’s shocked into silence by the sudden revelation of Dean’s thighs and limp cock. Dean’s body is trembling—fear, Sam thinks until his brother tosses his head with a growl.

Dean may be afraid, but that isn’t why he’s trembling. No, he’s struggling against the demon’s power, trying to stop this. Trying to attack, or get away, or do anything but stand there and take it.

“Spread ‘em,” the demon says, tapping Dean’s inner thigh, and Dean’s eyes narrow in rage as his legs open as far as they can with his jeans around his ankles.

“No!” Sam yells, straining forward mindlessly as Dad’s hand disappears between his brother’s thighs. A moment later, Dean’s body jerks and he throws his head back into the wall. The demon’s other hand is there immediately, cushioning Dean’s skull.

“Shh,” it soothes. “Don’t want to damage Sammy’s property, do we?”

When it pushes its hand back further, Dean squeezes his eyes shut and lets out a harsh groan.

“Nope,” the demon announces cheerfully. “He’s a little too tight to have been taken for a ride lately.”
“Okay,” Sam tries, panting as he fights against the demon’s restraining power. “Okay, you’ve made your point. Just—stop, okay? I’ll do anything you want if you—please, stop hurting him.”

“Sammy, Sammy, Sammy,” the demon scolds. It twists its arm and Dean makes a second, louder noise. His eyes fly open, focused somewhere over the demon’s left shoulder. “You gotta learn to share.”

Sam screams as the demon plays with his brother’s body—yelling at it to stop at first, and then telling Dean to focus, to look at him, please Dean please.

Dean doesn’t seem to be hearing him, biting down on his lower lip hard enough to break the skin and dribbling blood on his chin. His skin is covered in a thin layer of sweat, muscles shaking and twitching violently.

The demon leans in, rubbing Dad’s body against Dean’s, and purrs, “That’s right, boy, go ahead and fight. Not that it’s going to do anything. After all, you fought like a little wildcat last time, didn’t you?”

That doesn’t dovetail with what Dean told Sam, doesn’t mesh with what Sam can see now either—Dean standing still as a statue against the wall. Then Sam realizes that Dean is fighting—the way his muscles are shaking is proof of that—and he understands that Dean must have fought in that bathroom in Vegas as well. He just wasn’t able to move, and his disoriented brain translated that into passivity.

But that doesn’t make the demon any less right: Dean can fight all he wants and he isn’t going to be able to budge from where the demon wants him.

Oh God, the son of a bitch is going to rape Dean again, wearing Dad’s body, and it’s going to make Sam watch.

Throwing back his head, Sam lets out a wordless scream of enraged despair. The demon glances over at him, smirking, and then lays a hungry kiss on the side of Dean’s neck. Dean tries to headbutt it and the demon ducks out of the way with a laugh.

“You weren’t such a frigid bitch last time, Dean-o,” the demon purrs. “Is our audience making you shy, or do you need something else from me—something a little less ... gentle.”

Dean looks confused through his fury and his fear, but Sam knows what the demon is getting at and he knocks his own head against the wall in helpless frustration. He thought it couldn’t get any worse, but it can. Oh God, it can get a lot worse.

“You like a little pain with your pleasure, don’t you?” the demon says, and before Dean can finish processing that, he’s tossing his head back and letting out a hoarse yell. With a glance in Sam’s direction, the demon eases back far enough for Sam to see blood seeping out through his brother’s skin to run down his chest in hot streams.
“Dean!” he yells. “Dean! Jesus, stop, you’re killing him!”

“Promise I won’t break your toy, Sammy,” the demon murmurs, rubbing Dad’s borrowed hand through the blood. “He’s too perfect for that. A whore and a guard dog, all rolled up into one pretty package. Keep you safe. Keep you satisfied. I couldn’t have found a better gift for you if I made one from scratch.”

Dean’s still screaming, blood streaming down his chest, and now Dad’s hand is covered in a slick, red glove. The demon pats Dean’s cheek, leaving a red smear and earning a flash of green, hurt eyes, and drawls, “Saddle up, partner.”

This time, when the demon reaches down, it bypasses Dean’s cock and pushes its hand back up between his thighs. Whatever it’s doing—however many fingers it’s using—it forces a hurt, compressed noise from Dean’s throat. It’s the same sound Dean made when he was hypnotized, the same sound he must have made when the demon used Hanson’s body to fuck Dean in the bathroom, and Sam can’t handle hearing it again. He fucking can’t.

His struggles redouble, his shouts of protest reduced to nothing more than Dean’s name over and over again. Sweat breaks out over his skin, and his head pounds alarmingly.

Over by the wall, the demon has stopped cushioning Dean’s head and is opening Dad’s pants instead, moving quickly but methodically. Apparently, it’s done playing around.

Dean isn’t crying, but Sam’s sure that’s only because his brother isn’t coherent enough to manage it. His eyes are pain-hazed and panicked. Pleading as he twists against the demon’s power.

“Dad,” he pants. “Dad, please. Please, Dad, don’t.”

“Love it when you beg, baby,” the demon announces, but a tear slides down its cheek unnoticed.

Unnoticed by the demon, anyway, because Dean’s pleas redouble. “Dad—Daddy, please. Please don’t do this to me. Don’t let it hurt me.”

The demon reaches inside Dad’s pants for his cock and then freezes. Their father’s face twists, eyes scrunching shut and head dipping. When he looks up again, they’re brown and soft and doomed. Dad’s eyes.

He pulls the hand hidden between Dean’s thighs away, making Dean flinch again and cry out, and jerks his other hand out of his pants. “Dean,” he whispers, horror filling his voice.

Against the wall, Sam feels the demon’s power loosen its hold and strains forward in a desperate surge. That dark, painful place in his mind flexes again, and he drops to his feet as the demon’s power snaps.

Sam doesn’t let himself think about it. Doesn’t let himself hesitate. He dives for the table, grabbing the gun and tucking in his shoulder as he rolls onto his back and then comes up into a crouch, Colt leveled at their father. The demon is already back in control, and it takes a single step in Sam’s direction before catching sight of the gun and pulling up short.

Gun or not, the demon’s grin is triumphant. “You kill me, you kill Daddy,” it points out, and Sam can tell that it doesn’t expect him to do it. Despite what it just did to Dean—what it’s still going to do if Sam doesn’t stop this—it doesn’t expect him to pull the trigger.

“I know,” Sam agrees.
Dropping his aim, he pulls the trigger and puts a bullet in Dad’s thigh. He isn’t sure whether it’s going to be a fatal shot anyway, considering the weapon’s purpose, but it’s the best chance he can offer their father.

The demon looks shocked as hell for a moment. It stands there, looking from the gun to Dad’s leg, and then up at Sam’s face. Then, with a flicker of lightning across bloodstained denim, it topples to the floor. Behind it, Dean comes unglued from the wall and slides limply to one side.

Sam is moving before his brother’s body hits the floor.

He isn’t quite fast enough to catch Dean, but he’s there in the next second, hands fluttering over his brother’s blood-soaked chest. He wants to cover Dean up but doesn’t quite dare to try it—he doesn’t know what touching Dean below the waist will do to his brother right now.

“Dean,” he says instead, reining himself in and planting both hands on the floor where his brother can see them. “Dean, hey. Oh God, you—you’ve lost a lot of blood.”

The look Dean gives Sam is confused, like he isn’t sure exactly where he is or what’s going on. “Where’s Dad?” he rasps.

Sam glances over his shoulder—Dad’s still down, maybe breathing, maybe not—and then turns back to his brother. “He’s right here,” he says. “He’s right here, Dean.”

Dean gives a weary nod and lets his head thunk down on the floor. “Go check on him.”

“Dean,” Sam protests.

Dean doesn’t open his eyes, but his voice is uncompromising as he repeats, “Go check on him.”

Grudgingly, Sam goes. Less because Dean’s asking him and more because he wants to make sure the danger is over. He wants to be sure the demon’s gone, even if it took their father with it.

“Dad?” he calls, moving carefully toward their father with the gun out and pointed toward the floor. “Dad?”

Dad stirs suddenly, hauling in a breath and jerking his body. The Colt comes up in Sam’s hands automatically, and he takes a shaky step back.

“Sammy!” Their father’s voice is hoarse, but it’s unmistakably Dad speaking. Unmistakably Dad looking up at Sam with tears running down his cheeks. “It’s still alive,” Dad says. “It’s inside me, I can feel it. You shoot me.” His head comes up off the floor, as though he’d press his own skull against the end of the barrel if he were able to reach. “You shoot me! You shoot me in the heart, son!”

Sam knows he should obey, but for some reason he’s hesitating even before he catches Dean’s desperate, pleading whisper from behind him.

“Sam, don’t you do it. Don’t you fucking do it.”

Sam doesn’t know how Dean can beg for their father, how he’s in any condition to do anything but curl up into a ball and wait for the nightmare to go away. But when he looks back at his brother, Dean is actually struggling to sit up. He’s struggling to move toward the two people in the world whom he cares about more than he cares about himself.

“You’ve gotta hurry!” Dad shouts from Sam’s other side, jerking his attention back. “I can’t hold
onto it much longer! You shoot me, son! Shoot me! Son, I’m begging you! You do it before it can hurt him again!”

The threat to Dean gets through, just as Dad must have known it would, and Sam brings the gun up, sights down the barrel at their father’s heaving chest. He’s about to pull the trigger when a trembling hand curls around his ankle.

“Sam, no.”

It’s Dean. Dean, who hauled himself over here, chest leaving a bloody streak on the floor, because he couldn’t figure out how to stand up with his pants stuck around his ankles. There’s a bloody smear on Dean’s cheek from the demon’s hand—more blood between his thighs, hopefully just transfer from his chest, but fuck, Sam doesn’t know—but it’s Dean’s eyes that leave Sam cold and empty and hollow. Dean’s devastated, broken eyes.

If Sam shoots Dad now, he might as well shoot his brother as well, because Dean isn’t going to be able to come back from something like that.

Dad is still yelling at Sam to shoot, to end it here and now, but Sam is already lowering the gun. If the demon seizes control again, he’ll shoot to kill and damn Dean’s pleas, but he can’t put a bullet in their father like he’s a horse with a broken leg.

Besides, the Colt is too quick for the demon. Too quick by far.

When Dad throws his head back and opens his mouth to let the demon out, Sam watches it happen with dull, apathetic eyes. There’s a tiny spark of anger inside of him, a trickle of fear. Mostly, though, he’s numb. This ... the whole goddamn thing was just too much. He can’t process it right now.

“Goddamn it, Sammy,” Dad sobs when the last tendrils of the demon have seeped through the floor. “Goddamn it.” Pressing his hand over his eyes, he lies unmoving on the floor. He’s breathing, though, and it looks like Sam managed to avoid nicking the artery, so he feels safe enough turning his back on Dad and crouching down to check out Dean.

His brother is on his side now, trying to grab his jeans without bending his torso at all. It hurts to look at him, to see the tremor in his hands and hear his harsh breathing. Sam’s numbness doesn’t break, but it has an edge to it now: something bitter and desolate.

“How bad is it?” he asks, and he isn’t sure whether he means Dean’s chest or his ass or his mental state. When Dean just keeps making that pathetic, useless attempt to get his pants, Sam puts a hand on his brother’s shoulder to get his attention.

It’s a mistake.

Dean makes a choked, panicked noise and flails out at him before making an undignified scramble across the floor to huddle with his back to the wall. Sam can tell it’s hurting Dean to move like that, but Dean’s fear is riding him harder than the pain and he sits up when he gets there, pulling his knees up to his chest and staring at Sam with wide eyes. Dean’s staring at him like his eyes are yellow and not hazel, like Sam’s going to hurt him.

It only takes a couple of seconds for Dean to blink and come back to himself a little, but a couple of seconds is long enough. It’s too fucking long.

“Sammy?” Dean rasps, blinking in confusion. He looks down at himself as though he can’t remember how he got here, or what’s happening to him, and there’s a part of Sam that’s yelling at his
brother to snap out of it, not to forget again, but there’s a larger part that knows now isn’t the time to jeopardize anything Dean’s mind is doing to keep him functional.

“Yeah, man. Can you—can—” He swallows, tucking the gun down the back of his pants and doing his best to look harmless. “Do you need help getting your pants up?”

Dean looks down again at that, sharply, and Sam can see the memories flickering around the edges of his brother’s eyes. Then Dean licks his lips and says, “Might. Chest hurts.”

“I know,” Sam says, even though he doesn’t know at all, doesn’t have the faintest clue what the demon might have done to his brother’s insides in order to make him bleed like that. No doubts about it this time—they’re going to a hospital.

Clearing his throat, Sam offers, “Try on your own, okay? If you need help, I’m right here.”

While Dean struggles obediently with the worn denim, Sam chances a glance back at Dad. The man’s hand has slipped from his eyes down onto the floor, and his face is slack in a way that tells Sam their father’s unconscious, which is probably a blessing. One unstable family member is all Sam can handle at a time right now.

When he looks back to his brother, Dean has managed to get his pants most of the way up his thighs, but he’s white with pain and dripping sweat. “Sammy,” he says tightly.

Sam’s careful to move forward slowly. Instead of pulling Dean’s pants up on his own, he tells Dean to get a grip on them and hauls his brother up by his armpits. In the new, standing position, Dean is able to get his underwear and his jeans up over his hips. When he starts zipping his pants again, though, and the denim constricts, he lets out a startled, hurt noise.

“Dean?” Sam says, trying to keep his voice even.

“It—Sammy, did I—” Dean shakes his head, lifting a shaky hand to press against his scar.

Sam bites his lip hard enough to taste the zing of copper, but doesn’t say anything and he gingerly takes his hands away, now that his brother’s standing on his own.

“Dad’s hurt,” Dean says when he lowers his hand again.

“Yeah.”

“You shot him.”

“Dean, we need to get you to a hospital.”

“I can’t believe you shot him.”

The really sad thing is, Sam thinks Dean would still be saying that if he clearly remembered what just happened.

“We need to get Dad to a hospital,” Sam tries. It’s what he should have said in the first place, and it gets through Dean’s confusion and makes his brother stand a little taller.

“Can you lift him?” he asks. “I don’t think I can help. I fucked up my chest.”

Sam’s eyes are stinging as he turns away. “Yeah, man,” he says, wiping at his tears. “I’ll bring him.”
It’s a measure of how messed up Dean feels that Sam comes out of the cabin with Dad slung over his shoulder to find the Impala’s engine on and Dean curled up in the back seat. One of Dean’s hands is lying limply on the seat next to him, the other is rubbing agitatedly at his temple.

“Didn’t want to get blood on the driver’s seat,” he says when Sam shoots him look while strapping Dad in. Sam’s vision blurs at his brother’s flimsy cover, and he accidentally elbows Dad’s chest while straightening. By the time he’s sliding into the driver’s seat, their father is coming around again.

“Dean.” It’s Dad’s first word, moaned as Sam shuts the driver’s side door after himself and fastens his seatbelt. “’S okay?”

“He’s fine,” Sam agrees, glancing in the rearview mirror to find his brother watching them both with pain-glazed, anxious eyes. “He’s in the backseat, Dad.”

“Hospital,” Dad says, and he’s clutching at his leg but Sam can tell it isn’t himself he’s requesting it for. When he glances over at their father as he drives away from the cabin, Sam can tell that the man remembers. He remembers everything.

Dad turns away from Sam’s glance, tilting his body toward the side window and scrunching his eyes. Sam’s pretty sure that his father is crying.

Sam can feel control slipping away from his hands, feels the panic descending, and clings harder to the numbness. The numbness lets him operate. It’s going to let him get Dad and Dean to safety.

Okay, think, he tells himself as he flicks on the high beams and speeds up. You need a hospital. Where can you find a hospital?

Bobby.

Steering with his left hand, Sam uses his right to fish his cell phone out of his front pocket and then holds it out toward Dad—he doesn’t want to have to take his eyes off the road long enough to find the man’s number. The last thing they need right now is a crash.

“Call Bobby,” he says. “We need directions to the nearest hospital.”

Dad takes the phone without really looking at him—red hands, red with Dean's blood—but Sam can feel the weight of his brother’s eyes from the backseat. He isn’t sure which response is more upsetting.

Dad has a subdued, mumbled conversation with Bobby over the phone and then hangs up and says, “Couple of miles up, take a right onto Dearbourne Lane. Hospital’s a forty mile straight shoot from there.”

Forty miles is further than Sam would like it to be, and once he locates the right turn off, he guns the engine until the car starts to shake around them, and then eases off a little. They drive in near-silence for almost twenty minutes; the only sounds breaking the quiet are Dad’s gasps of pain and one or two rasping breaths from Dean.

God, Sam prays his brother isn’t bleeding out internally.

Finally, after Sam nails a particularly rough bump, he can’t take it anymore. “Look, just hold on, alright?” he says. “The hospital’s only ten minutes away.”

“You should have killed it.” Dad’s voice, sullen and empty. “Christ, Sammy, you saw—” He chokes
a little and has to clear his throat before finishing, “Why didn’t you just *shoot* the bastard?”

Sam glances into the rearview mirror and finds Dean looking back at him. Dean still looks out of it, but there’s more awareness in his brother’s gaze than before. More shadows.

Sam thinks that what happened in the cabin is starting to come back.

“Dean needs us,” he says, not caring if his brother hears. He’s pretty sure Dean isn’t in any kind of condition to protest, anyway. “He needs both of us, and I wasn’t taking that away from him.” Clearing his throat, he continues in a more casual tone, “Look, we still have the Colt. We still have one bullet left. We just need to regroup, all right? I mean, we already found the dem—”

Something picks Sam up by the spine and yanks him sideways. The Impala screams around him. Glass peppers his face—no, not glass. Mirror shards.

*Close your eyes, Dean, Sam* thinks.

Silence.
Chapter 40

Even later, Sam can never get the pieces to line up correctly.

There’s blood in his eyes, and fresh air on his face, and a half-glimpsed figure standing where the driver’s side door used to be. The figure’s eyes are black, or maybe yellow, or maybe that’s just in Sam’s head, where Dean keeps making that hurt, broken sound over and over again.

“Back or I’ll kill you, I swear to God.”

There are bees in his head. Electricity in his hand. He can taste blood on his lips.

Dean is whimpering in the back seat. Dean’s naked and struggling and Dad’s on top of him, Dad’s grinning and his teeth are stained with blood.

Sam thinks it’s funny, that Dad’s mouth is the one with blood in it and Sam gets to taste it. Gets to feel it sliding down the back of his throat.

“You won’t,” Dad says, using someone else’s voice as he pushes Dean’s legs wide. “You’re saving that bullet for someone else.”

Blood drips down the side of Sam’s face and he blinks, shakes his head a little.

Dean and Dad are gone. The figure is still there, leaning closer. Black eyes. Black like beetles, like spiders, like Other.

He has a gun in his hand. No memory of how it got there, but it’s there now and Sam cocks the safety back. “You wanna bet?” he rasps.

The bees become wasps, stinging. They fly out of the figure’s mouth, black and laughing, and swirl away into the sky. Sam’s tired. His head hurts. He shuts his eyes and leans back against the seat.

“Oh my god!” A man’s voice. Shocked and appalled.

Sam thinks it might be his own voice. Is he in the cabin again? Is he pinned helpless to the wall? He can’t move, he must be. And Dean ... Dean is ...

“Dean,” he manages through slick lips.

“Did I do this?” that other voice, the voice Sam’s starting to think isn’t his, replies.


“I’mma call an ambulance,” the voice says, breathy, and then Sam is alone. There’s a dripping sound somewhere, wet and moist.

He thinks he might not be in the cabin anymore after all.

Time goes vague and unimportant, until there’s light, and it’s dawn.

“Doesn’t matter,” Sam says to no one in particular. “Demons don’t care about the sun.”

He has a gun in his lap—The Gun. There’s a man pacing around the car, and swearing, and praying, and Sam doesn’t want to let go of his only defense, but he thinks ... he thinks that there are civilians
on the way. Civilians will Take The Gun.

Another choppy, disorienting sideways slip of time and Sam is being hauled out of the car. The gun isn’t in his hands anymore, and for a moment Sam panics, but he thinks that he might have hidden it. He just can’t remember where.

“Sir! Sir, can you hear me? Can you open your eyes?”

Sam can. He does.

It’s blinding. Noisy. His head hurts, and his shoulder, and he was in an accident.

Dad and Dean were in the car with him.

“Dean,” he says, looking through a veil of blood for the paramedic who was talking to him. “Dad. They’re hurt. They—help them first.”

“We’re assisting your companions, sir, but I need you to focus for me right now, okay? Can you tell me your name?”

The paramedic’s face is bouncing up and down, and Sam realizes that he’s being jostled and jounced as the stretcher he’s on is hurried away from the car. Fear spikes inside of him and jerks his thoughts into focus for a bright, pained moment, and he struggles to sit up.

“Tell me if they’re okay!”

“You have to stay still,” the paramedic insists, pressing down on Sam’s shoulder.

She hasn’t answered him. Oh God, she hasn’t answered him.

Sam struggles harder. “Are they even alive?” he roars, and the yelling around him increases. There are more hands, weighing him down. A sting in his arm.

_The bees are back_, Sam thinks, and goes under with Dean’s name on his lips.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When Sam wakes up again, he groans almost immediately. He hasn’t moved at all, but the room’s still swimming, and his head fucking_ hurt s_. It’s sort of like having the worst hangover ever, except that the lingering aftertaste in his mouth is all wrong—plasticy and medicinal rather than bitter and stale. Even if the taste fit, though, Sam would know that it isn’t anything as harmless as a hangover because he remembers.

He remembers everything.

He opens his eyes and finds himself looking at a ceiling—white, clean corkboard. He made it to the hospital, then.

Dad’s sitting next to his bed wearing the world’s rattiest blue bathrobe and a detached, apathetic expression as he stares down at his hands. Sam pushes up a little despite his pounding head, looking around the room for his brother, and then has to drop back down onto the bed as his right shoulder gives out on him with a spasm of pain. He gasps a little, reaching for it, and feels a tug on the IV in his left arm.

“You dislocated it,” Dad says. His voice is thick. Drugged. “Tore the ligament up pretty good, too.”
“Where’s Dean?” Sam asks. If he strains his left arm, he can reach his shoulder. Cupping the scapula doesn’t actually do anything for the injury, but it makes Sam feel a little better all the same.

“You also have a nasty concussion.”

Sam might not be at his best right now, but he’s not so out of it that he doesn’t notice Dad’s not answering his question, and his heart beats a little faster. The softly beeping machine to his left picks up its pace as well.

“Dean,” Sam says. “Where is he, what’s—he’s okay, right?”

The corner of Dad’s mouth twitches in something that might be an abortive smile or a frown or anything in between. Still not looking at Sam, he says, “Our last name’s McGillicuddy. We were hunting at a friend’s cabin—you can use Bobby’s name, it’s clean.”

“Dad, please—you’re scaring me.”

“Guy broke in when we were sleeping,” Dad continues, and his voice is just as toneless but his eyes are swimming with emotion. A single tear falls free and runs down his cheek to tangle in the stubble of his beard. “He attacked you in bed, punched you until you lost consciousness.”

The damage to his face, Sam realizes through his rising panic. Dad isn’t just rambling at him, he’s coaching Sam—and yeah, it makes sense. The bullet was lodged in Dad’s leg, couldn’t be explained away by the crash, and Dean ... God, Dean, where is he?

“When you came around again, you could hear—you heard noises from the other room. You came in, found the guy h-holding us at gunpoint. I’d already been shot, and he was m-making me—”

Dad stops, grimacing and shutting his eyes. Sam wants to reach out and put a hand on their father’s shoulder, but his right arm isn’t working and his left can’t reach that far. And he doesn’t think that Dad’s in any frame of mind to welcome the comfort.

“You charged the guy, got the gun away from him. Shot him in the gut. He ran off—you didn’t follow because you were too busy taking care of your brother and me.”

“When they find the cabin, they aren’t going to find evidence of a fourth man,” Sam can’t help but point out.

With a heavy inhalation, Dad lifts his head again. “Won’t matter by then. We’ll be out of here.”

“All of us?” Sam presses.

Dad puts a hand over his eyes, but he nods. Oh thank God he nods.

“Where is he? Can I—I need to see him.” Sam tries sitting up again, and gets farther along in the attempt now that he knows he has to watch his right shoulder. Before he can get all the way up, though, Dad pushes him back down. It’s an awkward maneuver from his seated position, but Dad makes no move to rise, and Sam’s concern momentarily shifts targets. Rolling to his side—carefully, so as not to jar his shoulder—he looks over the edge of the bed.

Dad isn’t sitting in a chair: he’s in a wheelchair, one leg out in front of him and swathed from toe to mid-thigh in a heavy, immobilizing wrap.

“The Colt didn’t do all that,” Sam says.
“Crash,” Dad grunts, trying to arrange his robe so that it covers the leg better.

“How bad is it?”

Dad shrugs. “Got more steel in the damned thing than Singer’s junkyard, but I’ll be able to walk. Maybe run, if my luck holds out.”

Luck. From where Sam is sitting, Dad’s looking at months of painful rehab and he’s considering himself lucky. He wonders how many painkillers the man is on right now—a lot, if Dad’s letting it show in his voice the way he has been. If he’s letting the conversation make his hands so nervous with the fabric of his robe. Or maybe it’s something else making Dad fidget like that.

After all, he hasn’t actually answered any of Sam’s questions about Dean.

“What’s wrong with him?”

Dad’s mouth tightens. He hasn’t actually looked at Sam yet, but now he actively turns his face away to stare out the open door and into the hallway. It’s quiet, Sam realizes, and for the first time it occurs to him to wonder what time it is—the inactivity indicates sometime either really late or very, very early.

Dad still isn’t answering him.

Sam pushes the covers off and starts to rise again.

“They found some scarring,” Dad says, freezing him in place. The man’s voice is reluctant and dragging, even beneath the drugs. “When they were—when they checked.”

Sam’s stomach turns over, and not because the room is spinning around on him from his most recent attempt to stand. He did his own, accidental check, back in Cape Girardeau—had more than one finger pushed up inside of his brother then—and he doesn’t remember feeling any scarring. Then again, he was drunk enough at the time that he wasn’t really feeling much of anything.

God, he wishes he couldn’t feel anything right now.

“Is he hurt?” he manages after a moment. “Did it—”

“Not—not so bad he needed any stitches. But yeah, he’s hurt. They’re taking care of it.”

Sam’s brain shies away from thinking about how they might be taking care of it, but he can’t ignore the fact that Dean’s going to be terrified whenever they need to treat him—especially if he’s alone with strangers. Sam needs to be there with him, he needs to make sure his brother is okay. He needs to help keep Dean in the present instead of flashing back into the nightmare.

Sam starts to push up again. This time, when Dad grabs his arm to keep him from going anywhere, he also says, “No.”

Nothing more, and uttered in the same dull, heavy voice he used for everything else, but Sam makes himself stop.

“Why not?” he demands, making sure to keep his own voice down. “What else aren’t you telling me? Damn it, Dad, I thought we were past all of this keeping secrets bullshit!”

“Oh yeah?” Dad answers, and finally there’s a hint of fire in his voice. “Then when were you gonna tell me you and Dean were fucking?”
Oh. Well, crap. In the midst of everything else, Sam had forgotten that the demon outed them.

As Sam sits there, stunned into silence, Dad releases his wrist with a little grimace of disgust. Sam watches as his father rubs his fingers against his robe—as though he just touched something unclean—and does his best not to be hurt by the motion.

“We’re not fucking,” he says belatedly.

Dad lets out a hoarse, disbelieving laugh and buries his face in his hands.

“We—I mean, yeah,” Sam fumbles, trying to find a way forward through this train wreck of a conversation and out the other side. “We’re ... together. But we aren’t—we haven’t. I wouldn’t push him into something like that. I—I love him.”

“It’s sick,” Dad says. The words come out muffled against his palms, but still audible enough to lodge in Sam’s stomach and chest like razor-edged hooks. “He’s your goddamned brother. You’re—you were supposed to be looking after him. I trusted you to be looking after him. Not—fuck, not manipulating him into—”

“I didn’t manipulate him into anything!” Sam protests, stung by his father’s attack and forced on the defensive. “Dean agreed to this—he loves me back, and I don’t give a shit whether you—”

“Of course he agreed to it!” Dad snarls, bringing his head up and finally looking at Sam. Now that he has his father’s full regard, Sam wishes Dad would go back to staring out the door. The man’s face is a snarl of pain and disgust and hate—dulled slightly by whatever painkillers he’s on, but still strong enough to leave Sam feeling bruised and winded.

The broken, aching sensation in Sam’s chest keeps his mouth shut as Dad continues, “He was fucking raped, Sam. He was raped, and he was vulnerable, and you goddamned well know he’d do anything for you, and you—fuck, you broke him. You broke him so bad he actually thought—he thought I’d—”

He breaks off, choking on a sob. This time, when he turns away, he brings his hands down to the wheelchair rims and puts some distance between them. He rolls to a stop in the middle of the room and sits there with his head down and his hands caressing the wheels.

“It kills me to look at you,” he continues after a couple of moments. “But I’m gonna learn to deal with it, because taking you away from him right now would do more harm than good.” His head comes up and he wheels around—a laborious motion, his strength is obviously fading fast—so that he can meet Sam’s gaze. “But this—this thing between you two. It ends now. You don’t touch him. I ever even see you think about laying anything but a brotherly hand on him and I swear to God, I’ll put you in a wheelchair, do I make myself clear?”

No way is Sam giving Dean up. Not when Dean is going to need him more than ever. Not when he’s sure Dean loves him back, when he has all of those memories of their stolen moments—Dean’s smiles, Dean’s contentment when he’s wrapped around Sam in bed at night, Dean’s obvious enjoyment during all those marking and make-out sessions.

But after what happened in the cabin, Dean isn’t going to want any of that for a good, long while, and Sam is willing to pretend in the meantime if it means less friction between him and their father.

So he swallows his refusal and says only, “Yes, sir.”

Dad hesitates for a moment, rightly suspicious of Sam’s easy agreement, and then says, “Give me
about five minutes to get back to my room and then ring for a nurse. Don’t want the police knowing I coached you on what to say.”

Sam nods wordlessly.

“I expect they’ll let you see your brother once you’ve given a statement. But you remember what we talked about, Sam.”

“Yes, sir,” Sam agrees, more readily this time.

Dean. He’s going to be able to see Dean.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It’s four in the morning, but the police were waiting around to question Sam and once the doctor gives them the okay, he finds himself subjected to a barrage of questions. He replies with the story Dad gave him, letting some of his real horror and shock and pain and anger seep through as he speaks.

When they ask if he got a good look at the man, he hesitates only briefly before saying that he can’t remember. He’s interviewed enough witnesses to know it isn’t an uncommon response, and Dad didn’t give him a physical description. Be a hell of a thing to do so well with the meat of the story and then fuck it up by saying the guy had brown hair when Dad described him as a blond.

Sam also plays dumb when the police ask for directions to the cabin. Bobby’s is isolated enough that it’ll take them a while to find it on their own, and again, he can tell from their frustrated but unsuspicious expressions that he isn’t any more confused than other people they’ve interviewed after traumatic events.

“My Dad might remember,” he offers disingenuously. “Or you could call Bobby for directions. He’s on this survivalist kick, though—went backpacking somewhere in Canada. He isn’t supposed to get back until December.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll find the place, Mr. McGillicuddy,” the younger cop assures him. “And we’re keeping an officer on duty outside your brother’s room 24/7 until this guy’s found.”


It doesn’t, not really. He doesn’t like the thought of someone with a gun that close to Dean. It’d take the demon less than a minute to possess Dean’s guard, unholster the man’s weapon, and walk in there and shoot him in the head.

Although Sam doesn’t think that murder is what they need to worry about when it comes to Dean.

He’s been awake long enough now for the guilt to have settled in his chest like a pile of jagged, black stones—this is his fault: the fire, Mom, Jess, Dean. After what happened in the cabin, he can’t deny that anymore. Can’t help but think it would have been better for everyone if he’d never been born.

In those five minutes between the time when Dad left him and he rang for the nurse, the weight of his guilt—of how quickly he tarnishes everything around him—even drove him to consider leaving. He knows enough to make himself disappear, after all, and Dad would keep Dean from following him. Dean might be torn up about it for a while, but he’d get over it.

If Sam thought leaving would solve anything, he would do it in a heartbeat.
It would hurt, living without Dean—would make his chest ache with every breath, would leave the world dull and dead—but as long as it kept Dean safe, he’d do it and be thankful. But Sam doesn’t think that separating himself from his brother would be enough to keep him safe. Not now that the demon has Dean’s scent.

Something about Dean’s suffering fascinates the yellow-eyed son of a bitch. It isn’t just his connection to Sam, isn’t just the fact that Dean sent one of its children back to Hell and killed the other. This runs deeper: an obsession born from the demon’s very nature, which loves pain and worships damage.

Dean’s clearly a work of art, as far as the demon is concerned. A masterpiece. Or maybe that isn’t quite the right analogy.

Sam remembers the way that the demon looked at his brother when Dean was in the bathroom with it—when the demon was still pretending to be Dad—and thinks that it might be more accurate to compare Dean to a junkie’s first, perfect hit of heroin. The demon might have initially gone after him as some sick favor to Sam, but something about that first encounter hooked the son of a bitch. It’s addicted to Dean now—to hurting him—and even if Sam completely removes himself from the picture (*knife to the wrists, bullet to the brain*), it isn’t going to leave him alone.

This isn’t about revenge anymore, not for Sam. It’s about making sure that Dean is safe.

A wave of fear washes over him suddenly, twined around the irrational certainty that the demon is here now, that it’s with Dean, that it’s hurting him.

“Can I see my brother now?” he asks, shifting up anxiously and swinging his legs over the side of the hospital bed. His head still hates him for the movement, but he’s gotten used to that and he isn’t going to let a little pain keep him from Dean’s side.

The older cop stands, moving toward him, and Sam thinks for a moment that the man’s going to help him up. When the cop puts a hand on his uninjured shoulder instead, keeping him in place, it takes all of Sam’s willpower to resist the urge to punch him.

“Just a few more questions, Mr. McGillicuddy,” the cop says, blithely unaware of his own danger.

“Make it quick.”

“Did you know that your brother has been sexually assaulted before?”

Sam’s stomach jerks around in a wide, swooping motion and he presses his lips together against the unexpected urge to hurl. He doesn’t know what Dad would want him to answer in this situation, but he knows what Dean would want him to say. And he knows that it isn’t the answer he’s going to give.

“Yes. He was—he was raped.” He makes himself say it as baldly as he can, putting the truth out there in such an ugly, stark way that he can’t take it back again. “He told me about it.”

The older cop’s grip has changed on his shoulder—more reassuring and less restraining—while his partner has perked up and is flipping his notebook open again. It occurs to Sam, in a surreal moment of clarity, to wonder if this is how he and Dean always looked on their interviews. He wonders if Dean’s eagerness was as transparent as the younger cop’s. If his own efforts at sympathy felt as false as the older cop’s attempt feels to Sam now.

The saliva in his mouth sours.
“Did he describe the man who assaulted him?” Officer Eager Beaver wants to know.

“He didn’t see him,” Sam replies shortly. “Look, I’ll—I’ll answer all your questions, okay? I swear to God I’ll sit down with you for however long you want. Later. Right now, I just want to see my brother.”

The sound of a feminine voice clearing brings Sam’s head up. He was aware in an absent way that one of the nurses stayed behind when the doctor let the police in, but this is the first time he’s really looked at her. She’s plain-faced and brown-haired, a bit on the plump side and wearing ridiculous blue scrubs patterned with smiling pieces of fruit, but in that moment she’s probably the most beautiful person Sam’s ever seen, after Dean. The sympathy in her eyes doesn’t look at all false or manufactured.

“How about you boys go grab some food and a couple of cups of coffee while I take Mr. McGillicuddy to see his brother?” she offers. “I’m sure he’ll be able to think more clearly once he’s seen him and talked to his doctor.”

The officers exchange glances, and Sam’s pretty sure they’re going to insist on finishing this now (he knows he and Dean have done so on more than one occasion) but the nurse is already padding across to the open door and shouting down the hall.

“Patty! You want to grab me a chair? I’m gonna take Mr. McGillicuddy up to see his brother.”

Officer Eager Beaver and Officer There-There are both anxious to do their jobs, but they’re also smart enough to notice when they’re being railroaded. Officer There-There takes his hand off of Sam’s shoulder while his partner grudgingly puts the notepad away.

“How long do you think this’ll take?” Officer Eager Beaver asks as they make their way toward the door.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about it, hon,” the nurse answers, patting him on the arm with a consoling little smile. “We’ll let you know when we bring him back.”

Officer There-There sighs, glancing back at Sam, and then permits himself a resigned smile. “Just try not to ‘forget’ like you did last week, Jill,” he says. “We’re just doing our jobs, you know?”

“You do your job, I’ll do mine,” the nurse—Jill—answers.

With one more look over his shoulder in Sam’s direction, Officer There-There shakes his head and disappears into the hall after his partner.

“He means well,” Jill announces as she turns back toward Sam. “He just gets a little caught up in catching the bad guys sometimes.”

“Yeah, I know the type,” Sam admits, getting slowly to his feet. He thought he was ready for the shift in altitude, but the room spins alarmingly and he promptly sits back down.

Jill gives him a sympathetic look—this one not quite as believable, there’s too much of a smile in it—and then says, “How about we wait for the wheelchair, okay, Mr. McGillicuddy? You aren’t going to get upstairs any quicker if you fall over and give your head another knock.”

“Yeah, might be a good idea,” Sam agrees, holding his head with his left hand. It feels odd not using his right, but he’s tried lifting it and he can’t get it above his chest—even that much hurts like hell. It must have been out of place for a while before they popped it back in, because Sam’s dislocated things before and it’s never been this painful.
Jill walks over to the low dresser opposite Sam’s bed and opens one of the drawers. “Unless you want to give everyone a cheap thrill, you’re going to want to shut the backdoor,” she announces, pulling out a flimsy-looking pair of pants.

Sam glances down at himself and realizes, for the first time, that he isn’t wearing anything but a hospital johnnie. His cheeks redden a little, and he takes the pants gratefully.

“Thanks,” he says, and then accepts the steadying arm she wraps around his waist while he struggles into the pants with one hand. “I’m surprised you found something that’d fit,” he continues, pulling them up. “Usually these places—” He was going to say ‘don’t have my size’, but he stops, staring down at pants that come down to his mid-calf and then cut off.

Jill, who is rapidly becoming his favorite person, doesn’t laugh at him. She doesn’t even comment on it. Just helps him toward the door while another nurse—bad bleach job and perm, but otherwise fairly pretty—wheels a chair through the door.

“Someone called for a taxi?” she asks, and then winks at Sam. “Hey there, gorgeous. Nice to see you up and around.”

“Thanks,” Sam responds awkwardly. He isn’t sure what to do with the new nurse’s bubbly, flirtatious attitude. Normally, he’d at least be able to give her a smile, but he’s feeling strangely fragile right now, and he ends up watching the floor as Jill helps him over to the chair and balances him while he sits down.

“You two mind if I tag along for the ride?” the new nurse asks.

Sam tries to cover his immediate, unhappy reaction to the suggestion, but he must not do very well because before he can say anything, Jill answers, “You can moon over the poor boy on your own time, Patty. Let Mr. McGillicuddy have his first visit on his own.”

“Oh,” Patty says, sounding subdued and more than a little embarrassed. “Oh, yes, I—sorry.”

Sam glances up, drawn by the honest mortification in the nurse’s tone, and finds her face covered in splotchy blushes. The knot in his chest eases a little.

“That’s okay,” he offers. “Maybe you can take me up next time?”

Patty perks up at the prospect, beaming at him, and gives him a pat on his arm before moving away. “It’s a date, gorgeous.”

“He has a name, Patty,” Jill says dryly as she starts to push the wheelchair forward, but Patty just winks at Sam.

“He don’t mind, do you, gorgeous?”

To Sam’s surprise, he doesn’t. “No, it’s fine,” he says. Patty’s exuberance is a little painful, and it’s making him feel uncharacteristically shy, but maybe this is what he needs right now. This taste of normalcy to take the sulfur and blood out of his mouth.

Jill wheels him into the elevator—they’re on the third floor, Sam notices—and pushes seven. The numbers go all the way up to twelve, though, and Sam’s surprised by the apparent size of the hospital. He didn’t think that it would be so big, out in the middle of nowhere like it is.

“How big is this place, anyway?” he asks. “I didn’t think they made rural hospitals this size.”
“Oh, this isn’t St. Claire’s, Mr. McGillicuddy,” Jill answers. “Didn’t anyone tell you?”

“No.” Sam restrains himself from pointing out that she’s been with him ever since he woke up, heard everything he did.

“The responding paramedics assessed the situation and decided that your brother’s injuries required more care than they could provide at the local hospital, so they sent for the airwolf. Luckily, there was enough room on board for all three of you, or you’d be missing out on the best nursing staff in the continental forty-eight.”

Sam’s a little stuck on the fact that Dean is apparently hurt worse than Dad let on, but he tells himself that Dad wouldn’t have told him they’d all be leaving the hospital soon if it wasn’t true and just asks, “Airwolf?”

“Helicopter,” Jill clarifies.

“So this is ...”

“Avera McKennan.”

“Oh.”

Jill is silent for a beat and then she says, “That was nice, what you said to Patty. Between you, your brother and your father, I think the entire nursing staff is in love.”

Sam laughs softly despite his rising anxiety over Dean’s health. “You, too?”

“Maybe. I’m not telling you which McGillicuddy caught my eye, though.”

“Don’t trust me?”

“About as far as I’d be able to throw you, Mr. McGillicuddy.”

“It’s Sam,” he offers.

“That’s very sweet of you, but as my patient, I’m obliged to provide the best professional care possible.”

“Hospital won’t let you use patients’ first names, huh?” Sam guesses.

“They advise against it when the patient is an attractive young man,” Jill answers, and then the doors cling open again.

There’s a sign across from the elevator proclaiming this is the ICU, and Sam’s heart gives a nervous clench. Jill doesn’t give him time to process the new information, instead pushing him out of the elevator and starting down the hall. She nods to the two women and one man manning the nurses station as they pass it—Sam gets some more sympathetic smiles from the crowd—and then starts angling the chair toward a door midway down the hall. There’s a uniformed cop sitting just to the door’s right and watching them approach with easy diligence, and Sam flails out with his left hand and grabs Jill’s wrist.

“Wait,” he pants. He doesn’t know when it happened, but somewhere between the elevator and here, he’s managed to work himself up into something that’s bordering on a panic attack. He’s sweating, and his heart is pounding, and his head aches so fiercely he can’t see straight.

Jill immediately comes around to crouch in front of the wheelchair. “Are you okay?” she asks,
catching his wrist and feeling his pulse. “Mr. McGillicuddy? I need you to tell me what’s going on.”

“Just. Dean,” Sam manages, trying to blink his eyes into focus. “How bad. I need to know how bad it is. Before I see him.”

Jill stops checking his pulse and rubs the inside of his wrist soothingly instead. “Okay, we can do that. Rachel?”

Sam hears footsteps coming down the hall toward him, and he knows it’s one of the other nurses, but most of his mind is focused on the way that soft sound makes the silence on this floor seem even louder. It may be obscenely early in the morning, but there was still life downstairs on Sam’s floor—a patient at the end of the hall with the TV on, the nurses animated and chatty at their station. Here everything is morgue-still, and hushed, and God, the people in these rooms are clinging to life with not just a foot but a whole goddamned leg in the grave.

And Sam’s brother is one of them.

“He wants to know what to expect,” Jill’s voice says, and then there’s a waft of sweet air—not perfume, but some strongly scented soap—and another hand grasps his. Sam grips back gratefully and closes his eyes so that he can focus on controlling his breath.

“Mr. McGillicuddy? My name is Rachel Wahl, and I’ve been taking care of your brother under the direction of Dr. Davidson. Do you want me to call the doctor to talk to you?”

“Can’t you—can’t you tell me?” Sam asks. He’s terrified of what he’s going to find on the other side of the door, but he doesn’t think he can wait for a doctor. God only knows how long it would take the man to get here.

“Go ahead and tell him, Rachel. No one’s going to ride your ass for talking to his brother.”

“Maybe they don’t reprimand nurses for ignoring hospital policy in neuro, Jill,” Rachel says, a little sharply, “But up here we’re required to dot every i and cross every t.” There’s a brief pause after that, and then Rachel gives Sam’s hand a comforting squeeze and says, in a softer voice, “I can tell you what to expect visually, Mr. McGillicuddy, but if you want to discuss your brother’s condition, I’d feel more comfortable if you talked to the doctor.”

Sam might have pushed if he were a little more in control of himself—he can usually get the information he wants from people—but he isn’t coherent enough to manage that right now. “Okay,” he agrees. “Tell me—tell me what you can and I’ll. Then you can call the doctor while I go in.”

“All right,” Rachel agrees in a calm, controlled voice, and clasps her other hand on top of their joined ones. “Dean’s going to be in bed, and for the most part he’s going to look like he’s sleeping. He has a gash on his forehead, and it isn’t covered because we’re letting it air out a little right now. There’s a mask over his face, and there are going to be a lot of tubes running into his nose and mouth, which is going to be a little scary-looking, but they’re helping him breathe. They’re good tubes. The rest of his body is covered with a blanket.”

Oh God. Oh God, the way she’s talking it sounds like Dean is ... like he’s ... “Is he—God, is he in a coma?”

“You’ll have to talk to the doctor about that, Mr. McGillicuddy. I’m going to call him right away, though, okay?”

“Okay,” Sam repeats, biting his lip and fighting back the tears that want to fall.
“Do you have any other questions you want to ask before I call the doctor?”

“Is he—” Sam wants to ask if Dean’s in pain, but he can’t quite manage it. He knows he won’t be able to handle the answer. Instead, he ends up whispering, “Is he cold?”

“The blanket’s keeping him warm,” Rachel assures him, rubbing one hand up and down his forearm. It’s a small consolation, but Sam hauls in a deep breath, focusing on it, and then nods. “Okay. Okay, I’m ready.”

In truth, he isn’t anywhere near ready. But he’s going to do this anyway because he needs to see it with his own eyes—he needs to see what he did to his brother.

“All right,” Rachel says, gently pulling her hands away. “The doctor will be right in to talk to you.”

As her footsteps clop away down the hall, Sam senses Jill move in again. He wipes his eyes with the back of his left hand—he isn’t crying, but it’s a close thing—and then opens them. Jill regards him with a serious, steady expression and says, “I’m going to be right here, okay? You just let me know if you need anything.”

Sam can’t actually bring himself to speak, but he nods. Jill pushes back to her feet with a tiny grimace of effort and then goes around behind Sam to push him forward again. Sam watches his brother’s doorway come closer, sees the cop watching him back, and either the guy’s been shown a picture or he’s really crappy at his job because he doesn’t say anything as Jill pushes Sam inside the room.

The mask is scary. It’s all Sam can see at first, covering his brother’s face like a one of those face-hugger things from Aliens that gave him nightmares for a week after he saw the movie. If he were moving under his own power, he probably would have frozen in the doorway, but Jill’s in charge right now and the bed keeps getting closer. There’s a sound in here, the slow whirr and kt-hush of the machine doing Dean’s breathing. There’s a smell as well: stale and sterile.

Sam looks at the tube running past his brother’s parted lips and into his mouth, at the smaller tubes snaking in through Dean’s nose, and wonders if there are more beneath the blanket where he can’t see. Probably. If Dean is in a coma, which is feeling likelier and likelier by the moment, then definitely. He can see the gash Rachel mentioned, raw and red and running across the center of his brother’s forehead, and it’s probably deep enough to scar, but it’s the old wound that Sam fixates on: the scar Dean always plays with, the one the demon gave him.

And just like that he’s crying, sobbing as though he can release his guilt, as though he can expel it with each, torturous breath. The tears are only making him feel worse, though, and he fumbles blindly beneath the blanket for his brother’s hand.

“I’m sorry,” he chokes out, finding Dean’s fingers warm and motionless. “Dean, I’m so fucking sorry, I never—I never wanted this for you. I wouldn’t—God, you should’ve—you should’ve dropped me when Dad gave me to you, you should’ve—should’ve tossed me in the fucking fire, I can’t—God, Dean, come back to me. Please.”

It breaks down after that, becomes even more disjointed and distorted by his tears. Sam doesn’t know if Jill is still in the room listening and he doesn’t care if she is. He pulls himself forward as far as he can and rests his forehead against the cool metal bars keeping his brother in the bed. This close, he should be able to smell Dean, but he can’t. He can only smell hospital—that sterile, dry smell that makes him think of Nebraska.
There aren’t any faith healers around this time, but Sam’s more than willing to get a pet reaper of his own if that’s what it’s going to take. Dean can’t leave him like this, he can’t let the demon win. Dean has to fight, he has to get better so Sam can fix him, so that he can be strong again, and remember what it feels like to be happy. He has to get better so that they can have their happy ever after.

“Here.” It’s Rachel’s voice, but there are too many hands on him for the nurse to be alone, and the hands are urging him back with gentle insistence.

“No!” Sam protests thickly as he grips his brother’s hand more tightly. “No, Dean!”

“Shh.” And that’s Jill’s voice, Sam’s almost sure of it. “We just want to put the bars down, Mr. McGillicuddy. You need to move your hand so it doesn’t get caught when we do.”

Somehow, that gets through and Sam lets himself be drawn back. There’s a torturously long moment when he’s isolated and alone, sobbing in the wheelchair, and then a clanking noise from in front of him, and then hands on him again, leading him forward.

“Be gentle with his chest,” Rachel says.

Sam can’t acknowledge the warning with words, but he can with actions, and despite the violence of his sobs, he’s careful as he folds his head forward again and rests it against his brother’s stomach. He can feel the steady rise and fall of Dean’s breath as he lies there, and it makes him feel a little better until he remembers that there’s a machine doing his brother’s breathing for him.

The renewed realization makes Sam cry harder for a few minutes, but eventually—far sooner than he expects—he’s too worn out to do much more than sniffle. His shoulder and head are killing him, and the room is spinning, and Sam doesn’t care. He scootches even further forward, knees bunched up and pressing against the supports on Dean’s bed, and carefully rests his left arm over his brother’s waist, holding him as close as he can.

There are voices from behind him—two female, one male—and after a few moments Sam understands that the doctor must be here. He makes an effort and gathers himself enough to sit up, grimacing as the shift in position makes the room twist violently around him. Jill’s at his side in a second, gripping his arm and holding him upright.

“Do you need to throw up?” she asks in a low undertone.

Yes, Sam thinks, but he swallows and grunts, “No. Gimme a second.”

Forcing his physical discomfort to one side is difficult, especially as emotionally wrecked as he is right now, but he manages it. When he opens his eyes, his stomach does lurch, but not quite high enough to turn him into a liar.

“Here,” Jill says, passing him a handful of Kleenex.

Sam accepts them wordlessly and uses them to mop his face. He doesn’t blow his nose, although he knows he needs it: doesn’t know what that would do to his head, which feels tender enough already. Finally, when he feels a little more human, he tries to wheel himself around to face the doctor. Jill immediately moves to help turn him, but is smart enough not to push him away from Dean’s side in the process.

“Mr. McGillicuddy?” a tall man in doctor’s whites says, stepping toward him. “I’m Dr. Davidson, your brother’s doctor.”

“I figured.” Fuck, is that Sam’s voice? That weak rasp? “Is he in a coma?”
“No,” Davidson responds immediately and authoritatively. “I know it looks that way, but we’re just keeping him under heavy sedation as a pain management measure.”

Sam blinks. “What—I’m sorry, but what does that mean?”

“Dean sustained serious internal trauma in the crash, Mr. McGillicuddy. It’s very painful for him to breathe right now, so we’re helping him out.”

“But I don’t—what does that have to do with putting him in a coma?”

“It isn’t a coma,” Davidson says. His voice is as calm and level as before, like he didn’t just explain this. “He’s heavily sedated. Think of it as falling into a deep sleep. While he’s sleeping, his muscles are relaxed and not fighting the respirator.”

Sam still doesn’t think he understands, and it must show on his face, because Davidson adds, “I know it’s difficult to grasp, but if it helps you can think about it as a way to keep Dean from feeling any pain in the initial stages of his recovery.”

That does help a little—with Sam’s comprehension if not for his peace of mind—and he nods. “Is it dangerous, making him sleep?”

“There’s always a degree of risk in medicine, but I can assure you this is the best possible treatment for Dean at the present time. I’ve already spoken with your father at great length and he approved my recommendation.”

As if Dad has the right to make that decision on his own. Sam feels a dull, distant pulse of anger at the man’s presumption and then forces himself to swallow it. Dad’s just trying to do his best for Dean, and Sam knows that. He wasn’t available to consult with, and he knows that as well.

Besides, arguing with Davidson isn’t going to fix his newly shattered relationship with their father.

“So what exactly is wrong with him?” Sam asks instead, twisting in the chair to look back at his brother. Jill takes her cue from that and maneuvers him into a position where he can hold Dean’s hand and see the doctor at the same time.

“He has multiple contusions to his liver and kidneys,” Davidson answers, stepping closer and crossing his hands behind his back. “There was some internal bleeding when he was first brought in, but we located the sources and staunched the flow.”

Sources, Sam notes dully. That means more than one.

Rubbing his thumb against the side of his brother’s hand, he nods and asks, “What else?”

Because of course there’s more. With Dean, there always is.

“His left lung was collapsed. We managed to reinflate it, but there was some damage done to the surrounding muscle. He also has multiple fractures to his ribs, which is why he’s on the respirator. And he’s suffering from head trauma. There was some swelling when he first came in, but it’s gone down quite a bit in the last twenty-four hours, so I don’t think there’ll be any permanent neurological damage.”

Davidson stops, but the way he’s looking at Sam makes it feel more like a pause, and Sam already knows what the man’s going to say. Dad told him about it downstairs.

“Did he—” Sam clears his throat and tries again. “Did he need stitches?”
“No,” Davidson answers, looking a little relieved that he doesn’t have to list this last injury out loud. “There were some minor tears, but the preexisting scar tissue seems to have taken the brunt of the damage.”

For the first time, his tone is less than professional. Sam wants to be angry at the man’s presumption—he doesn’t need anyone’s pity, and neither does Dean—but he’s too worn out to manage more than a dull, resentful throb.

Closing his eyes, he asks, “How, ah, how long are you going to keep him out for?”

“If he continues to improve steadily, we can try waking him up sometime next week.” Davidson’s hand falls on Sam’s shoulder, making Sam open his eyes and look up. “I can’t make any promises,” Davidson says. “But I’d say his chances of making a full recovery are good.”

As Jill tells him to say goodnight to his brother and wheels him back to his own room, Sam wishes bitterly that he felt even remotely reassured by the doctor’s words.
Chapter 41

When Sam wakes up again, Bobby’s sitting next to his bed.

He comes awake all at once, sucking in a breath and sitting up and wiping at his face with his left hand. “Bobby?” he says, confused. “What’re you doing here?”

Bobby snorts. “I was babysitting,” he says, shifting his jacket to one side enough for Sam to see the pistol attached to his hip. “But seeing’s how you’re getting released as soon as the doc gets another look at that thick skull of yours, I’m gonna be playing chauffeur in an hour or so.”

Sam has to admit that he feels better—his head and shoulder still hurt, but not as fiercely, and the nausea is all but gone—but he stiffens in alarm at that. “What? No, I can’t leave. Dean’s—”

“No going anywhere. Your daddy’s with him now.” Heaving himself up from the chair he was sitting in, Bobby goes over to the dresser, where Sam belatedly notices there’s a bulging, brown paper bag. “Gave him a couple of things he can use in a pinch.”

Not any guns, though, Sam’s guessing. Not even John Winchester would be able to keep that kind of thing a secret when he’s under the watchful eyes of the nursing staff.

“Doesn’t matter,” he argues, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “I’m not leaving Dean.”

He tosses the covers off and then immediately tugs them back over his lap. From the looks of things, Jill and whoever helped her get him back into bed—Sam was a little out of it at the time—weren’t too squeamish to strip him down again, because the ill-fitting pants are gone. Good thing Bobby was turned around fussing with the bag because otherwise he’d have gotten quite a show. Grimacing, Sam hitches his hips up and readjusts the Johnnie so that he’s more adequately covered beneath the blanket.

“You want to do your brother a useful favor, Sam, then you come on back to the salvage yard with me and help me find that gun.” Bobby turns around again, arms full of a familiar-looking wad of clothing. Boxers, jeans, t-shirt, hoodie, the works. Sam feels a little better just looking at them. As he hands the clothes over, Bobby adds, “John told me you had it in the car, but there’s no record of it in the police reports. Not that they had a whole lot of time to search, since some hooligan stole the car right off the impound lot.”

“Some hooligan, huh?” Sam says dryly as he sorts out the pile of clothes on his lap.

Bobby gives him a patented, innocent look that Sam doesn’t buy for a second—especially since he just admitted he had the Impala back at his house—and then says, “Your daddy figures you stashed the Colt in the car somewhere. He right?”

“I—” Sam tries to remember, but all he can come up with is a blur of confused images and nightmarish thoughts. And a sound like bees buzzing, for some reason. “I don’t remember.”

“Yeah, well, I ain’t going through that wreck on my own, so get dressed and I’ll fetch the doctor. And in front of anyone else, my name’s Bill Deveren, since I’m supposedly traipsing around in Canada right now.”

He doesn’t sound thrilled by the cover, and Sam flushes a little under the man’s gaze. Thankfully, after a few seconds, Bobby snorts and turns for the door.
Mostly, Sam wants to let the man go so he can get dressed, but if he’s going to be spending an extended amount of time with Bobby, then he wants to get the question of Dean’s defilement out of the way first. He doesn’t want it coming up out of nowhere and biting him in the ass later, when he needs to be focused.

“What’s going on?” he asks.

Halting in the doorway, Bobby turns back. “Yeah.”

“Did Dad—did he tell you about …” Sam can’t say it. Much as he knows it needs to be addressed before they can move past it, he just can’t get the words out. Not when it’s Bobby. Not when it’s someone who knows them.

Knows Dean.

Clutching the clothes more tightly against his abdomen, he presses his lips together on the sob that wants to come.

“If you’re talking about what happened your brother,” Bobby says softly after a moment, “Then he didn’t have to.”

And before Sam can ask what the hell that’s supposed to mean, he’s out the door and down the hall.

Sam’s doctor isn’t thrilled to find him already dressed, but eventually pronounces Sam fit for release. Things move as molasses slow as Sam expects them to after that, as his release is processed in the same plodding, reluctant fashion that dogs every administrative system Sam has ever had the displeasure of tangling with. Not that it matters all that much to Sam, since he’s stuck in his hospital room answering Officer There-There and Officer Eager Beaver’s questions.

It’s probably best that he didn’t have to do this eight hours ago, when both officers were bright-eyed and eager for answers. Now, past the end of their shift and pulling overtime, they’re both exhausted and therefore less forceful than they would otherwise have been. Sam, on the other hand, has had some much needed sleep and feels more grounded than he did when he first woke up. Not that any of that makes it easier to get the words out.

Bobby reappears at the end of Sam’s interview and leans against the dresser with his arms crossed and his cap pulled down low over his face. Not so low that Sam can’t tell the man is completely unsurprised by the topic of conversation, though. In light of Bobby’s recent words, and Dean’s odd behavior when they showed up on Bobby’s doorstep, and the thank you that meant more than it should have, Sam thinks he knows what happened. He’s just missing the details.

He doesn’t comment on it after the officers leave with a promise to be in touch if there’s any news. Doesn’t comment on it when they take an elevator ride up to ICU so that Sam can say a stilted, awkward goodbye to his brother under Dad’s watchful gaze—Dad gives him a grunted farewell himself, but Sam’s pretty sure that he wouldn’t have merited even that much if Bobby hadn’t been standing in the doorway. Sam doesn’t comment on it during the long drive back to the salvage yard, either, even though the trip takes two hours and they’re both clearly thinking about it.

Instead, Sam waits until they’re back at Bobby’s, standing in the yard and looking at the broken wreck of the Impala in front of them, before asking, “What happened?”

To his credit, Bobby doesn’t try to dissemble or evade the question. He doesn’t bother asking for clarification.
Still studying the Impala with distant, shadowed eyes, he answers, “Came home from a hunt and
found him waiting for me. Damn fool was passed out on the front steps—God only knows how long
he’d been there. He’s lucky as hell it wasn’t raining.”

He pauses for a moment, and Sam can tell from Bobby’s expression that the man isn’t exactly seeing
the salvage yard any longer. When Bobby speaks again, his voice is uncharacteristically subdued.

“I didn’t know what was wrong at first. Thought maybe just the conk on the head, but when I was
dragging him into the house he woke up and panicked. Damn near broke my knee trying to get
away.”

He falls silent again, frowning, but Sam feels no urge to prod him. There’s no reason to rush this
particular unveiling, which is making his skin feel clammy and his chest sting.

After a few minutes, Bobby gives himself a shake and continues, “He said a few things while he was
at it and then passed out again. I got him up on the couch and I—” He looks over unexpectedly,
catching Sam’s eyes. Bobby’s own eyes are alarmingly wet, and pained, and meeting them makes
Sam’s stomach twist unnervingly even before the man says, “Sam, I swear to God, I wouldn’t’ve
looked but he was bleeding.”

At the sudden upsurge of nausea that takes him, Sam turns his face away and staggers forward to
crouch beside the Impala’s crumpled side. Despite the chill of the day, the metal is warm against his
skin as he rests his hand against it. His back is to the man, but that doesn’t feel like enough and so he
bows his head as well, desperate to distance himself from Bobby’s story.

His cheeks feel wet in the sunlight, but he doesn’t think he’s crying. Or maybe he is. It’s hard to tell
when he’s so focused on the vise around his heart, on getting another breath.

“Got a doc here,” Bobby relates. “Friend of mine, works on hunters. She’s good and she’s discreet.
She took real good care of him.” Then, letting out an audible sigh, he adds, “I don’t know how in
God’s name he made it here like that. He’s lucky he didn’t drive himself into a tree, the goddamned
idjit.”

“How long?” Sam chokes out, and it looks like he is crying, because he can hear the tears in his
voice.

“How long was he here, you mean?” Bobby checks, and then without waiting for Sam to nod he
answers, “Couple of weeks. I was gonna call John in the morning, but Dean woke up first, made me
promise not to. So I, uh, I sent a couple of texts from his cell, let your daddy think he’d run into a
hunt. Sent Caleb out John’s way to keep him from doing anything stupid in the meantime.”

Sam wonders if Dad has figured that part out yet, if he knows that he was deceived and lied to by
someone he trusted, no matter how rocky their relationship might have been. He wonders if this is
the first time Bobby has confessed the part he played in the whole sorry mess.

He wants to hate the man for keeping this from him—and to resent Bobby for being there for Dean
when Sam wasn’t—and can’t manage either emotion. He’s sure they’ll come at some point, but right
now all he feels is deep, throbbing regret for what Dean went through and numbing gratitude that he
at least didn’t have to go through it alone. Thank God someone was watching after Dean those first
few days.

“Dean wouldn’t talk about it with either of us,” Bobby continues into the silence. “But he let Sharon
do what she needed to quietly enough.” His breath huffs out in a sigh. “He spent most of his time
sleeping, actually. I think—he came close once, I think. To talking. But before he really got
anywhere with it, he went stiff as a corpse and clammed himself right back up again.”

Bobby’s voice cracks, dropping to a whisper that carries audibly enough in the quiet yard. “It was like living with a goddamned ghost. Even when he was awake, he wasn’t all that responsive. Had to call his name half a dozen times before he’d hear me, and most times he’d just. You’d walk into the room, and Dean’d walk out. No hesitation, no thought, he just—he just drifted away. I don’t think he even knew he was doing it.”

Sam’s throat pulls hot and tight, and he struggles to swallow the keening sound he wants to make. Behind him, there’s the sound of gravel scraping against dirt as Bobby shifts his stance.

“I didn’t know what to do with him,” the man says, and his voice carries all of the helpless bewilderment Sam guesses he felt at the time. “I was about to give you a call and to hell with Dean’s pride when he just. He got up one day, and he was smiling again, and joking around. He came into breakfast, went out and worked on a couple of the cars.” He lets out a hoarse laugh. “Could’ve knocked me over with a feather.”

“He blocked it out,” Sam translates. His voice comes out dull, empty of the pain and grief clogging his chest.

“Every damned thing,” Bobby agrees. “I felt around it over dinner, and after a while it came out that he thought he’d been on a hunt and got himself banged up a bit. He was itching to get back to your daddy, said he was leaving in the morning, and I. I let him go.”

Sam doesn’t say anything to that, but he feels the first, faint echoes of anger.

“I guess that makes me the idjit in your eyes,” Bobby continues, “But you didn’t see him, Sam. He was like night and day. And he’s got one heck of a stubborn nature. I thought he’d locked it up for good, and it wasn’t gonna do him any harm not to remember what happened. Sharon ran his bloodwork when she was taking care of him, and he gets himself checked every six months anyway, you know that.”

Sam does know that—or he knows that Dean used to get himself checked, back before Stanford when he was screwing around every chance he got. He isn’t all that sure that his brother has kept up with that particular routine over the past year, though, and he doesn’t see how Dean getting his bloodwork done justifies what Bobby did.

He realizes that this must be the thing Bobby was trying to decide whether or not to fill him in on when he and Dean were here last. This is what Bobby was deciding whether or not to warn Sam about.

Well, fuck him for thinking he could keep something like this from Sam.

“What the hell else was I supposed to do?” Bobby demands as the silence drags out. He sounds a little defensive now, like he knows Sam’s judging him. Hell, he probably does. Sam certainly doesn’t have the energy to conceal his own feelings on the matter.

“I don’t know,” Sam answers caustically as he tilts his head back to look at the sky. “Call me?”

“And what would you have done?” Bobby demands. “You left, Sam. Way I heard it, you didn’t want anything to do with your daddy or your brother anymore.”

That’s not true, and it isn’t fair, but Sam has to admit that he can see where the man might have gotten that impression. Because Sam wasn’t so sure that he wanted anything to do with them himself at the time, too buried beneath the weight of his own unconscious desires and resentments to think
clearly.

And as much as Sam knows that he would have dropped everything and come running if Bobby had called, he can’t be sure that he wouldn’t have hated Dean for it—just a little. Can’t be sure he wouldn’t have resented his brother for pulling him away from his chance at normal.

Resentment aside, though, Sam knows that he wasn’t mature enough to handle Dean’s rape as well as he’s handling it now—and even now, he’s still making a mess of things. If Bobby had called him in back then, it would have been a complete disaster.

“I know,” he says in a more subdued voice as he finally glances back at Bobby.

The man’s eyes are sharp and challenging, but his cheeks are wet with evidence of his own grief, and Sam finds the rest of his anger slipping away.

“But he’s so fucked up, Bobby,” he continues in a quiet, choked voice. “I mean, he was fucked up even before, and now—after what the demon did to him this time, I don’t know—”

Sam looks back at the Impala—at the twisted, ruined metal before him—and is reminded of his brother. Dean’s body isn’t this badly broken, it’ll heal—Davidson told them as much before Sam left with Bobby—but inside? In Dean’s mind and in his heart? Sam thinks Dean might look something like this.

“I don’t know if I can fix him now,” he confesses. Saying it out loud hurts just as much as he thought it would. “But I—I can’t help thinking that I could’ve fixed him then, maybe. If I’d been there.”

The gravel crunches again beneath Bobby’s boots and a moment later the man’s hand lands on Sam’s shoulder, heavy and reassuring. “You can’t get caught up in maybes and might’ve beens, son,” Bobby tells him. “Just keep your head on straight and be here for him now.”

Sam lowers his head and nods. He will. He’ll be there for Dean until the skies run red and the oceans overboil their bounds and the mountains sink into canyons. He’ll be there beyond that.

He just doesn’t know if he’s going to be enough.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

They find the Colt wedged underneath Sam’s seat.

Most of the rest of the weapons in the trunk are as wrecked as the car, but Bobby manages to salvage a couple of those as well, although when everything is laid out on the ground it’s a pitiful accounting. Sam’s laptop has been demolished. Dean’s tapes are nothing more than ribbons and twinkling shards. Sam’s favorite knife, which he brought with him to Stanford, has been snapped right in half.

But it’s the car Sam can’t stop looking at. Dean’s black beauty, that he’s babied ever since he was thirteen and Dad first let him drive it on his own.

“Man,” he says finally, breaking the silence. “Dean is gonna be pissed.”

Sam hopes his brother will be pissed, anyway, because the only option aside from anger is devastation, and there’s already been more than enough of that.

As he comes to stand beside Sam, Bobby sighs. “Maybe we should junk it before he sees it,” he suggests. “Ain’t like it’s gonna improve any between now and when the sawbones decides to spring him.”
For a moment, Sam’s surprised—pleasantly, he thinks—by the unspoken assumption in Bobby’s words that they’ll be staying here while they finish recuperating, and then his mind catches up to what the man is actually saying and he clenches his hands into fists. His right shoulder, already strained from all the activity, throbs.

“No,” he bites out. “Dean would kill me if we did that. When he gets better, he’s gonna want to fix this.” Because Dean is getting better. He’s getting better if Sam has to drag him there every step of the way.

“There’s nothing to fix,” Bobby argues, looking at Sam as though he’s lost his mind. “The frame’s a pretzel, and the engine’s ruined. There’s barely any parts worth salvaging.”

Recalling his earlier thoughts about the car—about Dean—Sam bristles and growls, “Listen to me, Bobby. If there’s only one working part, that’s enough. We’re not just gonna give up on—” He doesn’t say ‘him’, but that’s only because he clamps his mouth shut on the word before it can get out.

Bobby’s sharp enough to hear it anyway, though, and his eyes go soft with realization. “Okay,” he agrees. “You got it, kid.”

Slightly placated by the concession, Sam runs a hand through his hair and lets out a slow, controlled breath. “Right. That’s settled then.” He pauses for a moment longer, giving himself a breath to take in the wreckage laid out before him, and then turns away. “I have to get back to the hospital.”

“Sam, we just got here a couple of hours ago,” Bobby protests. “And you haven’t been doing anything but rooting around out here. You just got out of the hospital, son, and you still have a concussion. You’re in no condition to drive.”

“Then call me a cab.” Sam replies. When Bobby continues to give him a stubborn, concerned look, he softens his expression and pleads, “I can’t stay here, Bobby. Not when he’s—I need to be closer.”

“What you need is to sit down for a spell before you fall flat on your face. Christ, Sam, you’re no good to anyone unconscious.”

Bobby has a point, but Sam’s edgy enough as it is already. He can feel the distance between himself and Dean like the tension of a stretched-out rubber band on the verge of snapping, and he doesn’t trust the demon not to try something when he’s so far away. When he can’t help.

“He’s—”

“He’s gonna be asleep for another day at least,” Bobby interrupts firmly. “You’ve got time to sit down and have some dinner with me. I’ll drive you back after myself.”

Sam’s stomach growls at the prospect of food, but he continues to hesitate, glancing in the direction he knows his brother is.

“Four more hours tops, Sam,” Bobby pushes. “Hell, I’ll even drop you off curbside so you can go visit while I check us into a hotel. I think the ICU’s got open visiting hours.”

Sam perks up at the thought—open visiting hours means he can stay by Dean’s side as long as he wants, leaving only to grab a bite to eat here and there. He’ll be able to be there more consistently than Dad, anyway—Dad’s going to have to go get checked over and submit to whatever treatments his doctor is prescribing. Still, it’s gonna take Bobby time to cook, and then there’s clean up ...

“Can’t we grab some fast-food on the way?”
Bobby rolls his eyes as he complains, “Christ, you’d think you two were joined at the hip.”

Sam colors a little, thinking of how the man isn’t actually all that far off, but Bobby is already turning away and doesn’t notice the absent hand Sam uses to press against the tattoo. There’s no real pulse of pain anymore, so the skin doesn’t feel any different from anywhere else.

But then again, it does.

“Give me twenty minutes to toss a kit together,” Bobby mutters as he heads toward the house. “And we’ll hit the road.”

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Dad isn’t thrilled to see Sam back so soon, and he looks even less happy when Sam mentions that there’s a hotel within walking distance. The flash of the Colt that Sam casually shows him seems to cheer him slightly, though, and he offers a grim nod in Sam’s direction before going back to staring at Dean’s face. They’ve been sitting there in complete silence for half an hour when a woman comes in, rapping her knuckles against the doorframe on her way through.

She’s gorgeous—dark haired and curvy and everything Dean normally likes in a woman—and it takes Sam a moment to look past that and see the scrubs as she greets their father. Then she gives Sam a smile and holds out her hand.

“Mr. McGillicuddy? I’m Rachel. We met last night, but under the circumstances I didn’t have a chance to introduce myself.”

Sam gropes back and remembers a kind voice, steady and calm, and a hand squeezing his own. “I remember,” he says, standing up and reaching out to accept the offered greeting.

Rachel shakes hands the same way she comforts, with careful competence, and Sam finds himself returning her smile even when she shifts her gaze to Dean and says, “Time to get you cleaned up, Mr. McGillicuddy.” Glancing back to Sam and Dad, she adds, “You’re both welcome to stay if you like, or you can wait outside. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Thanks, but Sam’s going to take me for a cup of coffee.”

Sam’s halfway to glowering—he knows exactly why Dad wants him out of the way for this—before he realizes that Dad’s removing himself as well. He hesitates for a moment longer and then, on the off chance that Dad actually wants to have a civil conversation, steps over to the man’s wheelchair and pushes him out the door.

The cafeteria’s on the ground floor, which means using the elevator, and as soon as the doors close on them, Dad says, “Let me see it.”

Of course.

But Sam wordlessly pulls out the Colt and hands it over, keeping an eye on the elevator doors as he does so. Dad gives the gun a cursory once over and then passes it back so that Sam can hide it again before pushing him out onto the first floor. Even this late in the evening, it’s fairly populated in this area of the hospital, and Sam is more careful than usual about the fall of his jacket, making sure the Colt is concealed.

He parks Dad by an empty table in the cafeteria and then goes to get them both a cup of burnt, hospital coffee. When Sam returns, taking the seat next to his father and sliding one of the cups over, Dad doesn’t look at him. He’s too busy watching the elevator doors.
Sam knows how he feels: he’d rather be upstairs with Dean right now too.

“You sure we should be so far away from him?” he asks as Dad takes the top off of his coffee and blows on it. “The demon—”

“Bobby and I set up wards in his room. It could probably break through, but it’d take time and it’d make a hell of a lot of noise.” Dad pauses and then adds, “And I don’t want you in there when they’re washing him.”

“Yeah,” Sam mutters sourly. “I got that.”

“Just making sure we’re on the same page.”

Sam’s silent for a moment, doing his best to swallow his petty resentment, but in the end he can’t quite manage it. “So, is this how it’s gonna be from now on? You giving me the cold shoulder and treating me like I’m some kind of child molester?”

“For a while, yeah,” Dad answers evenly. As he sips from his coffee, he looks as calm as ever, and Sam’s anger twitches aside momentarily to reveal the rejected, guilty sorrow beneath. But the anger is more familiar, and it hurts less, so he pulls it close and clings to it.

“You can’t—you can’t just ignore me,” he hisses, still too aware of the other people moving around them to yell. “Dean’s gonna notice.”

“I’m talking to you now, aren’t I?”

Sam lets out a harsh laugh. “I don’t know, are you? Far as I can tell, you’ve been talking to the elevator, and the floor, and your goddammned coffee cup.”

Dad’s jaw pulls tight. “I look at you right now, Sam, and I’m gonna lose my temper. And I think you and me screaming at each other’s gonna be more upsetting to Dean than me not looking at you all that much. Not to mention how that kind of row would probably get both of our asses tossed into lockup. So I’m sorry if it hurts your feelings, but this is the way it’s gonna have to be.”

Except Dad isn’t sorry at all, his tone gets that much across loud and clear.

Sam’s filled with the overwhelming urge to haul the man out of his wheelchair and punch him until that calm, contemptuous attitude snaps. It isn’t his fault he feels the way he does about Dean, it isn’t something he planned or asked for, and it isn’t any of Dad’s goddammned business. Except he knows that it is Dad’s business, and there’s a large part of him that knows he deserves worse than the man is offering.

It still takes him more than two minutes of clenching his jaw and staring down at his own, white knuckles before he feels sure enough of his temper to ask, “Did the doctor stop by again when I was gone?”

“He said Dean’s doing well,” Dad answers immediately, and with more than a hint of gruff pride in his voice. “Boy’s a fighter.”

The evidence of Dad’s undiminished love for Dean in the face of all the abuse he’s been heaping on Sam makes Sam feel small and sick inside. God help him, he can’t help resenting his brother just a little bit for somehow managing to inspire in the man something Sam’s never quite been able to evoke. In the next moment, of course, guilt crashes in and leaves him even more off balance than he was a moment ago.
“Did you get anything more out of him about when they’re going to wake him up?”

“Nothing yet. They’re going to do some more scans tomorrow, try to get a better look at his lung. Doc said he’d talk to me again then.” There’s a pause and then, with a grudging grimace, Dad asks, “You want to be there?”

Coming on top of everything else, the implication that Sam could have any other answer for that question than ‘yes’ snaps his fraying control and he says, “Damned right I do. And I’m going to be there. You can’t—Christ, Dad, I promised you I wasn’t gonna touch him. You can’t fucking dictate to me when I can and can’t see him.”

“I think the fact that you thought it was okay to approach your brother about that at all means that I can dictate that to you, Sam,” Dad retorts, his voice low and terse. “And if you don’t like it, I can also get you thrown out of here so fast it’ll make your head spin. Go ahead—push me and see if I don’t.”

Sam doesn’t doubt for a second that Dad could sling some serious shit his way, but he also knows that he’s capable of making sure that he won’t be the only one who comes out dirty. He’s tempted to call Dad’s bluff for a moment—just to prove that he isn’t defenseless—until he realizes that doing so would only get them both banned from Dean’s room, which isn’t going to solve anything. Better for Sam to play along for now—let Dad have some semblance of control over the situation.

If a situation arises where he has to play hardball—where it comes down to being there for Dean and obeying Dad’s ultimatums—then there’s no doubt in Sam’s mind which side he’ll come down on, but until then it’s best to put Dad at ease. Play the properly repentant and chastised son.

“So lay out the ground rules, then,” he says. It isn’t too difficult to sound reluctant and miserable and surly, the way Dad probably expects him to. Not when it’s so close to the way he actually feels about this fucked up, wretched situation.

“I don’t want you in there with him when he’s undressed. Or on your own.” Sam’s head jerks up, and he means to protest, but before he can, Dad continues, “If I’m not there, you get a nurse to sit with you, or bring Bobby along.” He fixes Sam with a stern, uncompromising look. “This isn’t negotiable, Sam.”

Although agreeing is about as painless as swallowing glass shards, somehow Sam manages it. For Dean’s sake.

Sam doesn’t expect Dad’s conditions to curtail his time with Dean so quickly, but less than half an hour after they go back upstairs, the man starts to doze off. Rachel, popping her head in to check on Dean—she does that often enough that Sam alternates between reassured and annoyed—sees Dad slumping in the chair and frowns. Sam’s pretty sure he knows where this is going, and sure enough, a couple of minutes later another nurse appears in the doorway and heads over to tap Dad on the arm.

“Mr. McGillicuddy? Time to get you back to your room so you can rest.”

Dad’s head comes up sleepily and he looks around, blinking and confused. Sam isn’t used to seeing the man so off guard, even when he’s this exhausted. Probably a combination of stress and the painkillers he’s doubtlessly taking for his leg.

“Yeah,” Dad grunts after the nurse has repeated herself. “Probably a good idea.” Then, as he looks
over in Sam’s direction, he comes more awake and his eyes narrow. “Sam can push me down on his way out.”

“Okay,” Sam replies easily. After all, there’s nothing stopping him from dropping Dad at his room and then coming back up to see Dean. What the man doesn’t know won’t get Sam kicked out on his ass.

But as the nurse heads out in front of them, Dad twists in his chair and clamps a hand down on Sam’s wrist. “Don’t think I won’t hear if you come back up here, Sam,” he murmurs.

He will, too. Dad’s always been good at conning people, and Sam has no doubt that the man already has the nurses eating out of his fingers. He wouldn’t even have to be sneaky about his inquiries. All he has to do is ask whether Dean had any more visitors after he left.

Damn it.

By the time Sam has wheeled his father over to the elevator, he has graduated from glower to full-on sulk. He’s busy staring down at his own hands on the wheelchair when the door opens, so he doesn’t notice the car is occupied until a familiar voice says, “Mr. McGillicuddy. Didn’t expect to see you here so late.”

Sam looks up to see Jill—the smiling fruit on her scrubs has been replaced with ice-skating penguins—and backs the chair out of the way so she can step out of the elevator.

“This your dad?” she asks, and then, without waiting for Sam to answer, offers her hand. “I’m Jill Marushek. I was your son’s nurse until he went AWOL on me.”

“They released me this afternoon,” Sam protests.

“Good thing too,” Jill replies, straightening. “Any longer and Patty probably would’ve proposed.” To his surprise, Sam finds himself flushing a little, and Jill’s smile widens as she adds, “Not that I blame her.”

“If you were Sam’s nurse, you don’t actually have any business up here, do you?”

This time, Sam’s flush is deeper.

“Dad,” he hisses, and then, belatedly, realizes what his father is getting at. The eyes he raises to Jill’s after that are a little too wide: a little panicked. But there’s no knowing smirk on her face. No sickening, sulfuric gleam in her eyes. Her expression has gone slightly stiff, but that’s only natural, considering the rudeness of Dad’s observation.

Still ...

“Christo,” Dad says.

Jill’s eyes remain their usual nut brown, and Sam relaxes. “Sorry,” he apologizes. “He’s—”

“That’s okay,” Jill interrupts quickly. Now that she’s getting over the initial surprise of Dad’s attitude, she looks more pitying than anything else. “I came up to visit your other son, Mr. McGillicuddy,” she explains. “I was a floater down in the ER when they brought you in, and I’m the one who brought him up here. Rachel gives me updates—she’s my roommate—but I like to stop by when I come off shift anyway. If it makes you uncomfortable, I can—”

“No,” Sam interrupts. “No, go ahead. We’re just, uh, surprised. That’s all. People don’t usually ...
It isn’t a line.

Sam grew up understanding that human kindness is the exception rather than the rule. It’s a lesson he learned while living on the fringe of society, in the uncertain shadows where he and Dean grew up. He never even thought to question that truth until Stanford showed him that it’s different when your clothes aren’t bloodied and torn, when they aren’t either three sizes too big or a hair too small. It’s different when you look like you belong.

It hurts to think that if Dean could hear this conversation, he’d be giving Jill a befuddled, suspicious look, like a wary dog that’s been kicked one too many times. Dean, who doesn’t know what it means to belong anywhere, who never had the opportunity to understand that human kindness isn’t a myth or a fairytale. If Dean were here right now, his hackles would be raised so high he’d look like a porcupine. Especially if Jill were offering him the same soft, sympathetic eyes she’s currently giving Sam.

But of course if Dean were awake and here instead of unconscious in a hospital bed, they wouldn’t be having this conversation.

And suddenly, just like that, Sam realizes that Jill has just given him the perfect opening.

“You mind having company?” he asks. “I have to bring my dad back to his room first, but I can come right back up.”

“That’d be nice,” Jill agrees, smiling, and touches him lightly on the arm. Then, turning her attention to Dad, she adds, “It was nice meeting you, sir.”

“Likewise,” Dad agrees, ever the consummate liar. Outwardly, he’s all charm but Sam knows better; he can sense his father fuming from here. “Thanks for looking out for my boy.”

“My pleasure.”

Sam has to push the elevator button again, but the doors open right back up and he wheels Dad inside. Dad waits until the doors have closed on them and the elevator car is sliding down, and then grounds out, “When she leaves, you leave.”

The disgust in his father’s voice can’t derail Sam’s triumph at having found a way back to his brother’s side. That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt, though, and Sam’s voice is carefully polite as he says, “I got the message the first time.”

Dad nods, his expression grim and dark in the silvery reflection of the doors. “Just make sure you remember it.”

Sam makes it back upstairs in less than five minutes, worried that Jill isn’t even going to be there anymore, and then walks into his brother’s room to find her sitting next to Dean with his right hand clasped between both of hers. She’s looking down at him with a soft, sad little smile on her face, and Sam would be furious at the presumption if it weren’t immediately apparent that it isn’t really Dean she’s looking at.

He walks over to her and stands there quietly for a moment, looking down at his brother, who would look like he’s sleeping if it weren’t for the mask. And the gash on his forehead. The steady rise and fall of his chest, aided as it is by the ventilator, is deceptively healthy.
“So it’s like that, is it?” Sam asks finally.

Jill glances up at the question, her eyes both wider and wetter than Sam’s comfortable with. He shifts slightly and then, following his instincts, puts a hand on her shoulder.

Jill doesn’t respond to the touch, but she doesn’t act as though it’s unwelcome either. She just looks back at Dean, one corner of her mouth twitching sadly, and agrees, “It’s like that.”

Sam should let it go. He knows he should. But his own insides hurt too much to resist picking at someone else’s scab for a change.

“Who was he?”

For a long moment, he doesn’t think Jill’s going to answer him and then she whispers, “A good friend.”

“How did—”

“I don’t—I’m sorry, Mr. McGillicuddy, but I don’t want to talk about it right now. I know that’s selfish of me, considering I’m in here with your brother, but—”

“No,” Sam interrupts, suddenly shamed of himself for prying. “I understand. You don’t need to say anything.”

Taking a deep breath, Jill nods. “Thank you.” When she glances back up at Sam, she has herself a little more under control. “Whenever you want me to go, you can just kick me out, okay? I won’t hold it against you.”

“Stay,” Sam answers. He isn’t thinking about Dad’s conditions. Isn’t thinking about anything but the fact that she clearly needs this, that he can see distant reflections of himself in her. And it isn’t hurting Dean at all to have a pretty girl sitting in here worrying about him. “Stay as long as you want.”

The smile Jill gives him is slightly self-deprecating, which reminds Sam of Dean. “You’re going to regret that, Mr. McGillicuddy.”

“Can you—I mean, I’m not actually your patient anymore. Do you think you could—”

“Sam, then,” Jill corrects. Her smile widens a little, warming. “Now you’re never getting rid of me.”

Sam’s pretty sure he can live with that.
Chapter 42

By the time Jill leaves several hours later, Bobby’s back, and it’s easy enough for Sam to get the man to spend the night at the hospital with him. Worth Bobby’s near-constant bitching about what sleeping in a chair is gonna do to his back, too, to see the look of angry surprise on Dad’s face when a nurse rolls him in the next morning. Sam’s satisfaction is a pretty clear sign of backsliding as far as his relationship with their father is concerned, but Sam spent all night listening to a machine breathe for his brother while reminding himself how this is all his fault. He gets to be a little cranky and immature right now.

Bobby doesn’t make as good of a buffer as Dean—mostly because he catches on in about half a second and being used like that makes him even crankier than Sam—but he’s better than nothing. Sam manages not to point out too blatantly that he didn’t break any rules. In return, Dad manages to refrain himself from accusing Sam of molesting Dean in his sleep. It’s a win-win situation.

Sam isn’t able to see his brother as much as he’d like over the next two days—Dad’s scheduled for therapy or check-ups four or five times a day, and the man can’t seem to stay awake for more than a couple hours at a time anyway. Bobby does his best to be there for Sam, but the man’s also working on tracking down the demon and getting word out to trusted hunters to be on the lookout for demonic omens. Sam’s anger has revived enough that he can’t begrudge Bobby time for the hunt, no matter how often it bars him from Dean’s side.

Sam is angry all the time, it seems—at Dad, at himself, at the demon. Mostly he tries to be good and focus the rage in a positive direction, stroking the Colt where it’s hidden in the oversized pocket of his jacket and imagining the look of surprise on the bastard’s face when he puts a bullet between its mocking, leering eyes. Sometimes, though—not often, but sometimes—he loses focus enough to be angry with Dean: to be furious with his brother for believing it was Dad at first, for not seeing through the demon’s tricks straight off.

It wouldn’t have changed anything, of course, except for how it would have changed everything. Except for how it would have meant Dean isn’t as damaged as Sam is finally, shatteringly, realizing his brother must be. Because if Dean could believe, even for a second, that Dad would ever touch him like that, then there’s something skewed deep inside where Sam can’t see it—where Sam doesn’t know if he can reach in and set things aright.

Right about there in his thought process is where the guilt always creeps up over everything else, like floodwaters, and then Sam has to take himself into the private bathroom down the hall and huddle against the wall and cry. He doesn’t want to cry in front of Dad—doesn’t want to give the man the satisfaction—but it’s Dean who drives him from the room.

Dean may be unconscious right now, but Sam isn’t sure his brother can’t still hear what’s going on around him, and he refuses to chance upsetting Dean further. Refuses to chance influencing the dreams he’s sure his brother is having, despite Davidson’s assurances to the contrary.

Dean is dreaming. In the early hours of the morning, when Sam has roused Bobby from his sleep at the motel and dragged him back to the hospital, he thinks he can sense the edges of his brother’s nightmares. He’s sure that Dean is trapped in the cabin, helpless up against the wall. Or maybe it’s Vegas, over and over again, an endless kaleidoscope of violation and abuse and pain.

Dean will only wake to find his nightmares real—he’ll wake to a bruised, hostile world—but that has to be better than being trapped in the private Hell of his own mind. As far as Sam’s concerned, Davidson can’t wake Dean up too soon.
He sleeps, some. Chokes down a couple of bites of food here and there. Drinks cup after cup of coffee and not much else. He goes for his follow-up appointment and can’t remember, afterwards, what the doctor told him, although the prescription for sleeping pills that he finds shoved into his back pocket later tells him that he probably didn’t pass with flying colors.

Jill makes it a point to stop by at the end of every shift to see Dean, and Sam sits with her until it’s time for her to go home. They don’t talk much, and he doesn’t ask about her reasons for coming after that first night, but there’s something intimate in the silence, and Sam feels like he’s getting to know her anyway. He has no idea whether or not that connection goes both ways until the fourth day of waiting, when he has to leave Dean’s side for the twelfth time in as many hours.

Patty appears out of nowhere as Sam slouches toward the elevator behind his father’s chair, grinning and chatting away a mile a minute and calling Sam ‘gorgeous’ and Dad ‘handsome’ and generally disarming everyone involved. Dad doesn’t even get a chance to protest before Patty has hold of Sam’s arm and is leading him gently but inexorably back toward his brother’s room.

Confused by the attention, Sam tries to ask why Patty’s there and can’t get a word in edgewise. Finally, he settles for sitting in the chair Patty all but forced him into and nods along to her chatter while he watches Dean sleep.

Half an hour later, another nurse—one he hasn’t met before—is standing in the doorway. Patty introduces them before announcing she has to get back to work and hurrying off. The new nurse—Georgia—sits down in Patty’s seat and starts telling Sam about her two cats, Puss and Boots. The third nurse shows up half an hour after that, carrying a bagged lunch for herself and a coffee for Sam, and Sam might be slow on the uptake these days, but he’s beginning to think that he’s being passed from babysitter to babysitter.

He thinks, at first, that this is Dad’s doing—Dad’s way of keeping an eye on him. But that doesn’t make sense, because Dad looked as surprised as Sam when Patty absconded with him. And Dad would want him to have less time with Dean, not more.

When Jill finally pops up in the rotation four hours later, Sam has it figured out. Without really meeting his eyes, Jill drops a plastic-wrapped sandwich on his lap and then pulls a chair over to sit by Dean.

“T’m on to you,” Sam says.

“Eat your sandwich,” Jill replies without looking over. “Nurse’s orders.”

Sam picks the sandwich up—ham and cheese, and clearly homemade rather than cafeteria-bought—and then hesitates in the process of unwrapping it. “Aren’t you going to ask why?”

“You mean why you don’t want to be in here alone with him?”

That isn’t anywhere near the case, but Sam can see how Jill might have gotten that impression, and he isn’t going to correct her. “Yeah.”

“You didn’t ask me about Michael,” she answers, softly. She’s never said the name before—never given form to her loss—but Sam doesn’t comment on it. He doesn’t push. He just sits there holding the sandwich she brought him and alternating his gaze between his brother and this stranger who seemed so plain when he first met her. Maybe even a little ridiculous, wearing scrubs that belonged in pediatrics in a hospital neurology unit.

Jill’s scrubs aren’t any more serious today—there are teddy bears with sunglasses and walkmen
boogying across the bright pink fabric. She hasn’t lost any weight, her features haven’t refined. Her hair hasn’t grown silken and luxurious.

But somewhere along the line, something has shifted, and Sam doesn’t think he’s ever seen a more beautiful woman.

Jill spends her break ignoring him, eyes locked on Dean, and doesn’t move until a stocky, older nurse with grey hair and a motherly smile shows up to relieve her.

As Jill heads for the doorway, Sam stirs himself and says, “Thanks.”

That earns him a look: eyes soft and a little sad, but mostly friendly. Fond. “Thank me by eating your sandwich, Sam.”

“I will,” Sam agrees, and he means to—he really does—but he can’t manage more than a bite before an absent wave of guilt washes over him and makes his stomach lurch. Wrapping the rest of the sandwich up again, he puts it on the floor and sits quietly while his brother sleeps.

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The next five days pass by in an increasingly hazy blur.

Sam sleeps in his chair by Dean’s bed while nurses come and go. Once, he wakes up with a hospital blanket draped over him. Once, he wakes to a tray of what appears to be homemade minestrone soup and a chunk of bread. He manages to eat half the bread and a couple spoonfuls of the soup and then goes down the hall to the nurses’ station to fix himself a coffee. He sleeps only when his body forces him to, and then only for an hour or so, waking when he starts to slip out of the chair or his body cramps up on him.

Jill threatens him, says she’ll get the others to stop the rotation if he doesn’t get a good night’s sleep and eat a full meal for once, but Sam can tell she doesn’t really mean it. Eventually, they compromise and he ends up with unofficial access to the cot set up in the ICU staff lounge.

That night, he makes himself go in and lie down for several hours, back turned on the room while he stares at the wall and worries about his brother. He doesn’t think he’s particularly convincing—the lines of his body are probably far too stiff—but he doesn’t actually care. When enough time has passed—when his body hurts with how much he needs to be with Dean—he rolls back to his feet and returns to his station.

After that, Jill doesn’t bother him about his sleeping habits anymore, although Sam can tell the nurses are all watching him. Probably waiting for him to fall over so they can drag him downstairs and readmit him.

It isn’t going to happen, though. Sam has learned how to ignore the demands of his body—Dad and Dean taught him when he was growing up: one of those necessary skills for a hunter to possess—and he isn’t going anywhere until Dean has opened his eyes again. It’s easy to do; his stomach is too knotted up over Dean for him to feel hungry, so that isn’t a problem, and by now his exhaustion has reached the dull, grey stage that’s more like background noise than anything else.

But time keeps playing dirty tricks on him, slipping him from one instant into another. Sometimes, he’ll close his eyes on one moment and open them into another that feels hours removed. He’d think he’s falling asleep, except that he’s on his feet, and sometimes even in mid-conversation when he comes back to himself. It’s a little alarming, but keeping Dean safe is more important than his own fear, so Sam stands watch.
It’s one of those time lurches that tosses Sam into the middle of his brother’s morning check-up almost two weeks after his initial conversation with Dean’s doctor. Dad’s there, and Bobby, and Davidson, of course, and Sam’s nurse shadow of the moment—Kelly or Kristen, he can’t remember which.

Sam makes an effort to concentrate—Davidson’s daily reports are important—and everything sharpens. Bobby’s watching Sam instead of the doctor, Sam notices, and frowning. Sam tries and can’t remember the last time he had a real conversation with the man, or even the last time he saw him. He thinks Bobby might have been in and out of Dean’s room, but Sam hasn’t been taking note of anyone but strangers for the past three days or so.

Dad is very clearly not looking at Sam, who can recall in great detail the last time they spoke. They aren’t often alone these days, but during the several minutes when Sam’s current companion stepped out to go to the bathroom two days ago, Dad managed to say any number of things, not the least of which is that Dean’s condition is all Sam’s fault.

Sam wasn’t able to make a defense for himself. He knew Dad was right.

Davidson keeps up a steady patter of polite conversation as he reads through Dean’s charts and checks the various life support systems hooked up to his body. Then he moves on to actually physically examining Dean and, while he doesn’t check anything below the waist, the meticulous attention he pays to everything else leaves Sam even more stressed and on edge than he was before.

This isn’t the routine he’s become used to—the doctor is never this slow or thorough—and Sam wonders anxiously if something has gone wrong. It could have. Sam’s not sure what happened to the chunk of time he’s missing. Dean might have had some kind of relapse in those lost moments.

But while there is a nervous tension in the room, it doesn’t strike Sam as a bad kind of nervous. More ... expectant. Sam can’t quite piece everything together (the fog in his brain keeps getting in the way), so he squints more intently at Davidson, hoping to find a clue on the man’s face.

Then Davidson moves around to Dean’s head and pulls Dean’s eyelids back with two fingers. As Davidson peers down into his brother’s eyes, Sam has to dig his nails into his palms to keep from bounding forward and slugging the man. He knows his anger is irrational—the man’s a doctor, he’s checking pupil dilation or looking for burst capillaries or something—but that doesn’t make it any easier to watch what feels like an invasion of his brother’s privacy.

Dean’s eyes are the first thing he hides, the one place his armor never seems to fully conceal his vulnerabilities, and if Dean were awake right now he’d be cursing and jerking his face away. Davidson’d be lucky to draw back a hand with five functioning fingers. It’s instinct on Sam’s part to want to protect Dean from that kind of intrusion when Dean can’t protect himself.

Sam shoots a glance at Dad and their father doesn’t seem to like this anymore than he does. The man must feel the weight of Sam’s eyes on him, because he glances over and their gazes lock. For a moment, Sam feels united in their kindred concern, but then Dad’s eyes slip down to Sam’s hip (has he seen the tattoo there, twin to Dean’s? did he check two weeks ago when Sam was sleeping, or is he just guessing?) and his mouth tightens. When he turns his attention back to the doctor, his expression is as dark and disgusted as ever.

Sam does his best to tell himself that the sudden sharpening of the ache in his chest is for Dean. That the twisting in his stomach is only nerves about whatever he’s missing here. He succeeds, mostly.

“His vitals are good,” Davidson announces, releasing Dean’s face and straightening. “I’m going to want to get another scan of his chest, see how his lung and ribs look, and then we can talk about
waking him up this afternoon.”

Sam has been waiting for this moment every minute of the last twelve days, and now that it’s here he can’t quite believe it. But Davidson is giving him a smile, and Dad’s got honest to God tears running down his cheeks, and it’s real. Dean’s coming back to him.

Sam straightens as his entire body flushes with relief. For the first time since he realized Jill was taking him to the ICU, he knows—not just in his head, but in his heart and gut—that Dean is going to be all right. Physically, at least.

He tries to listen to the rest of what the doctor is saying, to understand the ins and outs of his brother’s condition, but the relief is turning everything else to static. It occurs to Sam that the people around him probably shouldn’t look so dim, and the room very definitely shouldn’t be rotating the way it is.

Well, shit, he thinks, and then everything goes dark.

Sam has Dad to thank for not getting checked back into the hospital when he comes around again a few moments later, although of course he has mixed feelings about that, since he’s pretty sure the man only did it because he wants to get rid of Sam for a couple of hours. If that’s Dad’s aim, it works like a charm. Davidson gives Sam a stern lecture about taking care of himself, and then all but hands him over into his “Uncle Bill’s” hands with the injunction that he ‘take Mr. Mc Gillicuddy to get some rest and some food—not necessarily in that order’.

It’d be humiliating if Sam weren’t feeling the beginnings of a dehydration headache snaking around his temples.

As it is, Sam holds out long enough to make Davidson promise not to wake Dean up without him, gives the man his cell number no fewer than five times, and finally lets Bobby lead him away. Bobby half-drags him out to the car, shoves him into the passenger seat, and then drives them directly to Burger King.

It’s weird being outside, and Sam keeps wondering how the world can be both overbright and washed out at the same time. When Bobby drops an overflowing bag into his lap, Sam methodically works his way through the three burgers and fries. He can’t really taste any of it, and he keeps forgetting what he’s doing mid-chew, but he does feel refreshed afterwards. Feels even better when Bobby forces a bottle of water on him and tells him to wash everything down.

Despite his anxiety over Dean, Dad and the demon, Sam finds himself drifting off a little as Bobby starts the engine again. His stomach is heavy and full, bordering on painful but not quite there. Leaning his head against the window, Sam shuts his eyes—just for a moment, just until they get back to the hospital—but when he opens them it’s with the sensation of having lost time again. The car is stopped and Bobby is shaking him.

“Come on, Sam. I ain’t carrying your heavy ass.”

Still mostly asleep, Sam unfolds himself and gets out of the car, dropping a hand on the rust-flecked roof to steady himself. He squints at the low, flat building in front of him.

“That’s not the hospital.”

“No,” Bobby agrees, taking Sam’s elbow and leading him forward. “That’s the place with the bed.”
“There’s a bed in Dean’s room,” Sam argues.

“That one’s sorta taken.”

“I can fit.” It’d be a squeeze, and Sam would have to snuggle even closer than normal, but he doesn’t have a problem with that. Maybe Dean will be able to sense him, even through the drug-induced darkness burying him. Maybe it’ll help chase some of the nightmares away.

“Fit a lot better here,” Bobby grunts, sounding a little annoyed, and then leans Sam up against the side of the building while he gets the door open.

The room on the other side of the door is dark, and smells a little bit like mothballs, and isn’t anything like home. Dean’s missing.

“’M not kidding, Bobby,” Sam insists even as he staggers inside with one arm tossed around Bobby’s shoulders. “I wanna go back.”

“We’ll go back when you can see straight,” comes the dry response.

Bobby sounds pretty determined, but Sam turns his head to check for signs of weakness anyway. He can’t see the man’s expression: can’t see anything because the world’s gone black. Which may or may not have something to do with the way his eyes have slipped closed.

“Can’t see,” he announces as he’s lowered onto something musty and sagging.

“Guess you’re stuck there, then,” Bobby responds. Heavy hands land on Sam’s shoulder and hip and roll him over onto his stomach.

Sam lets it happen. The musty, sagging thing beneath him is awful comfortable, now that he’s there.

“Mmmm,” he purrs, sliding one hand beneath the pillow and bunching it up against his cheek.

“Goddamned Winchesters,” Bobby grunts from somewhere above him, and that’s the last thing Sam hears before sleep takes him.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

“Sam.”

“Mph.”

“Sam.”

“Fug off.”

“Sam!” This time, his name is accompanied by a smart smack to the back of his head and Sam sucks in a deep breath and looks up.

“’M awake!” he announces, turning his head to the side and squinting at Dean.

Only it isn’t Dean. It’s Bobby.

For a long moment Sam peers up at him, trying to figure out why he’s swapped out his brother for an old, cap-addicted friend of Dad’s, and then it all comes limping back to him in scattered shots.

Dean. The crash.

Dean.

Sam shuts his eyes again and lets his hand drop back down onto the pillow with a groan. He hasn’t been asleep nearly long enough to handle that particular parade of memories, and his head hurts. Actually, he’s pretty sure he felt better before Bobby tricked him into taking a nap.

“Sorry to wake you, princess, but the doc called and I figured you’d feed me my own balls if I let you miss them waking him up.”

Sam’s off the bed and halfway to the car before he realizes he isn’t wearing any shoes.

Shoes and four espresso shots later, he stands by the foot of his brother’s hospital bed and watches anxiously as Davidson injects a clear liquid into the IV running into the back of Dean’s hand. Dad’s there as well—pulled up close in the wheelchair to Dean’s right with Rachel standing behind him—and Bobby, who’s hovering at Sam’s shoulder as though Sam is in danger of keeling over at any moment. Sam could tell the man to back off—that he’s fine—but he’d be lying.

In this moment, waiting to be reassured that his brother is still in there—that he’ll still be Dean when he opens his eyes—Sam isn’t fine at all.

“Okay,” Davidson announces as he disposes of the syringe. “We should see a reaction any second now.”

As he stares at his brother’s face, still slack beneath the mask, Sam wishes that Jill could be here. It’d be nice to have a friend standing next to him. Not that Bobby isn’t a friend, but Bobby’s complicated. He was Dad’s friend first, and he lied to Sam—kept the truth about Dean’s condition from all of them.

Jill is Sam’s. She’s Dean’s. Unfortunately, she’s also stuck downstairs playing fetch and carry for a hall full of cranky neuro patients.

In the bed, Dean’s eyes move rapidly behind his lids.

Davidson puts a hand on the metal railing and leans in. “Dean,” he says softly. “Dean, can you hear my voice?”

Dean stirs on the bed—the start of a stretch or a shift that’s quickly aborted when his nerves cue him in on the condition of his body.

“Dean? I need you to open your eyes.”

After what looks like a struggle, Dean does. He’s clearly disoriented, pupils dilated and irises thin, intense rings of green. There’s blood in his right eye—flecks of red that surely should have disappeared by now—but Sam is more worried by the lack of understanding he sees there. He watches his brother blink, and then blink again.

Now there’s a flicker of awareness, and with it comes a hitch in Dean’s breathing as he fights the machine’s rhythm. He chokes on the tube, eyes widening, and his right hand starts to come up off the bed. Dad catches his wrist before he can get his fingers on the mask or around the tube running down his throat, and then looks surprised at his own action.
“Don’t fight it,” Davidson urges, keeping his voice lowered. “There’s a tube down your throat helping you breathe, Dean. You need to relax and let it do its job.”

Dean shakes his head, still choking on the tube—still fighting the same way he always does—and tries to reach again.

This time, Dad pins Dean’s hand back onto the mattress and barks out, “Damn it, son, listen to the doctor!”

Dean’s eyes flare even wider at the sound of Dad’s voice, and he looks down and to his right, and Sam’s stomach hasn’t had a chance to finish sinking before Dean is panicking, and thrashing, and making trapped, hurt noises. Davidson swears, shouting for help and spinning away to prepare another syringe. Dad released Dean at the first sign of fear, and now Sam darts forward himself, moving around the bed to press both of Dean’s shoulders as gently as possible against the mattress.

“Dean!” he shouts. “Dean, it’s me! It’s Sam! It’s okay, you’re safe!”

Dean’s eyes flash from Dad to Sam, and then back again. He’s still bucking up against Sam’s hands, but Sam can tell that his brother is fighting the fear—that he’s struggling to comprehend where he is and what’s happening.

“You’re in the hospital,” Sam announces in an attempt to speed Dean’s understanding. “We were in a car crash, but we’re safe now. We’re safe, okay, man?”

And Dean gets it. Sam sees that his brother gets it. Dean is blinking at him, and there are furrowed frown-marks between his eyebrows, and his struggles are weakening.

Then Sam is shoved aside by Dean’s uniformed guard and a male nurse. He staggers back, catching himself after only a few steps, and calls out a useless command.

“No! Don’t hold him down!”

But the cop has Dean by one arm, and the nurse by the other, and Sam doesn’t need to see his brother’s eyes to know that the past has slipped its leash and fastened onto Dean’s mind with a death grip. Dean’s struggles, which were slowing only moments before, redouble. He kicks his legs violently and pitches to the side. Somehow, despite the broken ribs and numerous other internal injuries, he shoves the nurse off of him and back into Dad. The cop, used to restraining criminals and not patients, all but throws himself down over Dean’s chest to keep him on the bed.

Sam can hear the crack from where he’s standing, struck motionless by how absurd and pointless this latest disaster is. Another rib broken, or maybe just a new break in a bone that was already weakened by the accident or the demon or both.

“Hold him steady!” Davidson orders, getting in close as the nurse shoves himself off of Dad and rejoins the fray. Bobby’s holding Dean’s legs now, even though he’s grimacing like he knows it’s a bad idea, and between the four men, they manage to hold Dean steady long enough for Davidson to deliver the drugs.

Dean goes limp almost immediately.

For a long, frozen moment, Sam can’t hear anything over the blood rushing in his ears. Then the world starts up again, and sounds come back in. The nurse and the cop are breathing hard as they rearrange Dean’s limbs in the bed, and Davidson is shouting out orders to get Dean back down to x-ray, and Dad is ... Dad’s weeping. Dad has his face buried in his hands and his shoulders are shaking. His voice is wet and muffled, but Sam can still make out broken apologies, and something
that sounds the way prayers might if the supplicant didn’t think he’d ever be heard.

Davidson pauses in his orders to the nurse long enough to look at Rachel and snap, “Get them out of here!” and then Sam can’t stand to see anymore. He turns and, like the coward he is, runs out the hall and down the stairs.

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Jill finds him an hour later, sitting in the cafeteria and staring blankly into a cup of coffee that has long since gone cold. She’s wearing cake and party hat scrubs today, and her hair is pulled back in a tight ponytail, and she sits down next to him without asking.

“Seat’s taken,” Sam mumbles.

“Your self-pity is epic, Sam, but that doesn’t mean it gets its own chair.”

As Sam glances over at her, a flicker of anger burns through the numbness. “You weren’t there,” he says. “You didn’t see him. You didn’t fucking—” He swallows the rest of the accusation—pointless, it’s all fucking pointless—and drags his hands through his hair. “I should have stopped them.”

“From what?” Jill replies. “From doing their jobs? From keeping Dean from hurting himself? If he’d gotten up with that tube still down his throat, he could have seriously damaged his respiratory system.”

“He was calming down,” Sam argues. “I know he—he freaked, but he was—he was already starting to calm down when they pushed me away.”

“Not the way I heard it,” Jill responds. She isn’t disagreeing with him, just making a statement of fact, and Sam can’t find it in himself to be angry with her for it.

He shakes his head. “He was. They—Dean doesn’t react well to being pinned. I think he got—he got confused. When they held him down.”

He expects Jill to say something frustratingly useless in response—‘I’m sorry’, or ‘that must have been terrible’, or ‘I can’t even begin to imagine what you’re going through’—but instead she makes an interested noise in the back of her throat and taps a finger against the table.

“So it wasn’t seeing your dad?”

Sam has always figured Jill knew what happened—knew the official version, anyway—but this is the first time they’ve come even remotely close to discussing it. It’s less uncomfortable than Sam thought it would be.

“No,” he answers, and then tempers his response with, “I don’t—I don’t think so. I think he was starting to flip even before he realized it was Dad holding his hand.” Off of Jill’s questioning look, he explains, “He was trying to take the tube out on his own. Dad tried to stop him, and then Dean saw him and he—he’d just woken up. But he was starting to figure out where we were, and he would’ve been fine if they’d just given him a couple of seconds.”

“Hmm,” Jill says.

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

Jill’s mouth thins. “I know you’re upset, Sam, and you’re also tired, so I’m letting some of the language slide, but I’m not big on swearing.”
“Sorry,” Sam mutters. He doesn’t really feel sorry, though. A little foul language doesn’t mean much in comparison to everything else these days. “It’s just—Jill, I heard something crack.”

Jill’s expression doesn’t so much as twitch, but she winces with her eyes in a way that tells Sam she knows exactly what he’s talking about. Reaching out, he grabs her wrist and says, “You know.”

“I ran into Rachel in the elevator on my way up to see your brother,” Jill admits. “She filled me in.”

“How bad is it?” Sam demands. “How far did this set him back?”

“Let go of me and I’ll tell you.”

For a single, black moment, Sam wants to grip harder instead. He can force the knowledge from her if he wants to: can feel the bones in her wrist beneath his hand. They feel fragile as matchsticks, and just as easy to break. Pain is always a great incentive.

Then he remembers all the times she sat watch with him. Remembers the rotation of nurses she set up so that he could stay with his brother. He remembers that he has never, not once in his life, used pain to get what he wanted.

This isn’t him. It didn’t used to be him, anyway. Did it?

Shaken, Sam opens his hand and puts it back down in his lap. With his head lowered and his hair blocking his face, he says—more honestly this time—“I’m sorry.”

There’s a beat of silence where Sam has a chance to search inside himself for any hint of sickly yellow, or sulfur, or any sign that his momentary darkness was the demon fucking with him, and then Jill says, “Two ribs. They’re simple fractures, Sam. In the scheme of things, it could have been a lot worse.”

Sam isn’t sure how. Jesus Christ, is Dean ever going to catch a break? Are either of them? He realizes, with a tiny jolt of surprise, that he’s trembling. He isn’t crying—what’s the fucking point, it never helps—but the pain and the fear and the bitterness have to come out somehow and he can’t seem to hold still.

“How about we take a little walk? Get you some fresh air?”

Part of Sam is yelling at him to stop being such a weak pussy and get back upstairs with Dean where he belongs, but most of him aches with longing at the suggestion. He can’t stand this hospital, suddenly. Can’t stand the smell, or the sounds, or the way that the staff are starting to become familiar. He doesn’t want them to be familiar. He just wants to take Dean and get the hell out of here.

After a brief struggle with himself, he nods.

“Okay. Hang on a sec. I want to get something and then we can go.”

Sam keeps his head lowered as he waits, drawing protective symbols on the table. Neither of his tattoos hurt anymore. Sometime in the last two, nightmarish weeks, his skin seems to have healed. He wishes the loss of sensation didn’t make Dean feel even further away.

“Okay!” Jill announces as she returns. “Put this on.”

She’s holding out a poofy blue parka that looks like it was designed to fit an elephant. There’s a fur-lined hood attached.
Sam glances down at his own hoodie and then stands. “I think I’m good.”

“No coat, no walk.”

“Christ, Jill,” he complains. “It’s South Dakota, not the North Pole.”

“Yeah, well, you’re skin and bones, buddy,” Jill maintains. “Also exhausted and stressed. Which means you’ve laid out the welcome mat for every bug within a hundred miles. Your body doesn’t need the added burden of trying to keep itself warm. Besides,” she adds cheerfully, reaching back to the neighboring table. “You’re going to want it if you’re going to drink this outside.”

‘This’ turns out to be an oversized, pink drink in a plastic cup. The straw is bendy and purple and, Sam suspects, meant for visiting children.

“What is that?” he asks, eyeing the cup warily.

“It’s a nutrient shake,” Jill answers, waggling it at him. “Supposedly, it’s strawberry banana, but if I were you, I wouldn’t count on it tasting like anything other than wheat germ.”

Sam’s stomach curls into itself in protest. “I’ll just take my coffee, thanks.” As he reaches for it, though, Jill tosses the coat at him. Sam’s reflexes kick in, forcing him to catch the parka instead while Jill steals the Styrofoam cup away from him. Holding the parka in both hands, he watches with mingled annoyance and respect as Jill tosses his coffee into the trash.

“Your arms go in the sleeves,” she says, turning back to him.

Realizing when he’s being browbeaten and too worn out to argue any longer, Sam gives in and puts on the coat. He accepts the drink, too, although from his cautious sip as he follows Jill outside, she was underestimating just how gross it tastes. He isn’t stupid enough to complain, but Jill glances back as she holds the door open for him and catches him making a face.

“Hey,” she says unapologetically. “We gave you plenty of opportunities to eat something healthy and you thumbed your nose at us. Now you’re stuck with the nutri-shake. Learn your lesson and deal with it.”

“I had Burger King,” Sam tries.

The scathing look Jill gives him tells him exactly what she thinks of Whoppers as an acceptable food group.

They walk in silence after that, following the sidewalk around the hospital in a loop. Every once in a while, Sam sips on the shake, but mostly he just holds onto it and watches the manicured grass, and the trees, and clouds drifting across the sky. He tries not to think of anything in particular, but all too soon his mind brings him back to that hospital room, and to Dean. He can feel their friendly silence souring. If Jill’s aware of it, though, she doesn’t say anything to diffuse the tension, and it isn’t long before Sam’s starting to feel uncomfortable in his skin.

Finally, and without looking at him, Jill says, “I get that this is hard on you, Sam, but you need to get your head out of your ass.”

“I thought you didn’t like swearing,” Sam tries.

“‘Ass’ isn’t a swear, it’s a body part.” It’s stated with an automatic absent-mindedness that tells Sam she’s used that line before. With missing a beat, she continues, “Anyway, what I’m saying is that you need to pay more attention to something other than the fact that Dean’s hurt.”
“You say that like he fell down and scraped his knee playing basketball.”

“No,” Jill says, and stops, forcing Sam to stop with her. “What happened to your brother is horrible, Sam, and you have every right to be worried about him. But not so much that you ignore everything else around you. Not so much that you block everyone else out.”

Sam frowns as he struggles to understand what she’s saying. “Is this because I haven’t been listening to you?” he tries. “Are you angry about it or something?”

“No! I mean, yeah, okay, I’m a little annoyed you ran yourself so ragged you ended up passing out this morning, but that isn’t what this is about.”

“So then tell me.”

Jill hesitates for a moment longer, chewing on her bottom lip, and then says, “It's about your father.”

Sam’s muscles give a protesting ache as his entire body stiffens at the mention of the man and Jill sighs.

“Exactly. You know, I’ve asked around, and you haven’t really spoken to him since the accident. You sit in Dean’s room with him for hours on end and you refuse to so much as look at him.”

“Me?” Sam splutters. “Dad’s the one who’s treating me like a fucking leper!”

“You ever think there might be a reason for that?” Jill responds, holding her ground in the face of his anger.

Yeah, because incest isn’t on his top ten list of fun family activities, Sam thinks. He doesn’t say it, though. Partly because Jill is the closest thing he’s made to a friend since Jess died, but mostly because Dean doesn’t deserve the stigma that would accompany that revelation. Instead, he turns away from her and starts walking.

“Running away isn’t going to change anything!” Jill calls after him. She doesn’t—can’t—know how close to home those words hit, but that doesn’t mean they stir his anger any less.

Spinning back to face her, Sam growls, “You don’t fucking know me, Jill. You don’t know my dad, and you don’t know Dean. Don’t pretend you do.”

Closing the distance between them again, Jill lifts her chin and says, “I may not know your favorite color or where you went to school, Sam, but I do know you.”

“Why?” Sam sneers. He understands, way at the back of his mind, that he’s lashing out at the wrong person, but he can’t keep himself from saying, “Because you have some kind of sob story too? You lost a friend. Dean’s my brother. So boo-fucking-hoo to you.”

She slaps him. There are high, flushed points of color in her cheeks and her eyes are snapping. Sam lifts a hand to his cheek and thinks sullenly that he just got what he deserved, that maybe that strike is what he was angling for.

“You bastard,” Jill breathes. “I know you’re messed up right now, but there is no excuse for taking that out on everyone else around you.” She pauses and then nods, pursing her mouth for a moment before continuing, “You know, you’re right. I don’t know you. But, Sam, you don’t know me either. You don’t know the first thing about me.”

Sam unconsciously shifts back a step at the vehemence in her voice.
“I’m done coddling you. You’re screwing up, buddy. You want to run yourself ragged so that you don’t have to think about what happened? Fine. You want to refuse counseling services? Fine. Because that’s not hurting anyone but yourself.”

She shakes her head, mouth set in angry lines. “But what you’re doing to your father right now? That’s not fine. He needs you just as much as Dean does—and he’s awake, Sam, he can hear you—and all you’re doing is hurting him more.”

“What, by not talking to him?” Sam scoffs. “The man doesn’t want to talk to me, Jill. Trust me.”

“Of course he doesn’t want to talk to you!” Jill replies. “I’m surprised he can stand to be in the same room as you or Dean, but he does it anyway. He goes into that room and he sits there for hours at a time with his sons and you can’t even give him a single kind word.”

Sam never saw this coming—he never even suspected that Dad had gotten to Jill, that the man had somehow gotten to her and stolen Sam’s one friend away from him. Jill’s support for Dad feels like betrayal, and the sting leaves Sam feeling even more defensive and bitter than before.

“What do you want me to do,” he snaps. “Give him a medal?”

“I want you to talk to him!” Jill shouts back. “I don’t know if you’re blaming him or if you’re just too upset about Dean to notice, but your dad needs all the support he can get right now.”

That throws Sam off balance, and his anger slips away to be replaced by confusion. He looks at Jill, questioning but not quite ready to ask, and after a few moments her expression softens. She’s still angry with him—that much is obvious from the glint in her eyes—but her vehemence has flagged, and she grimaces wearily as she rubs at her forehead.

“You honestly have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

“Not really, no,” Sam admits.

Jill sighs before drawing herself up and lifting her eyes to his. “You stupid, blind idiot. Dean isn’t the only one in that cabin who was raped.”
Half an hour later, Sam still feels winded as he sits on a metal bench and looks out over the evergreen-accented landscaping. Jill is gone—she left right after she dropped her bombshell on him, and without another word—and the nutri-shake sits ignored at his feet.

After thirty minutes of thinking, he’s come to the stunning conclusion that Jill is right. He’s been stupid, and blind, and an idiot. He can’t believe how much of an idiot he’s been.

The clues were all there for him to pick up on if he cared to—Dad’s inability to meet his eyes should have been his first tip off. Sam has been assuming that particular quirk stems from Dad’s disgust at Sam’s incestuous designs on Dean, but now that Jill has put everything into perspective for him he knows that isn’t the case because it wasn’t the case in Vegas. Dad was sure his sons were fucking when he reproached Sam about it, and he had no trouble looking Sam in the eye. Looked at him with disgust and scorn, yes, but still. He looked at him. Which means that Sam’s relationship with Dean doesn’t explain Dad’s avoidance now.

And Dad might order Sam out of the room whenever Dean is being cleaned or having his lower injuries treated, but he never stays either. He’s out of the room faster than Sam sometimes, rolling himself out without waiting for a nurse to give him a push.

Sam casts his mind back over all of the brief glimpses he’s stolen of his father over the last week or so and it didn’t register then but it’s sure as hell registering now. Guilt. Pain. A steely, masochistic determination as he stares at his eldest with his jaw set and his eyes dark.

It isn’t rational—it wasn’t Dad’s fault, he was possessed—but Dad’s still blaming himself. And the fact that Dean actually believed it was him at first—that he let someone he thought was their father plunder his mouth and force him to his knees—that’s got to be killing Dad inside. The man must be turning over everything he ever said to Dean in his head, must be questioning every look and touch. For all of his venom toward Sam, Sam guesses that Dad feels responsible for that too—for twisting Sam around so that he’d want his brother.

Christ, how the hell is Dad keeping it together?

Not well at all, Sam suspects—especially after what happened earlier today.

Firming his jaw, he pushes up off the bench and goes in search of their father.

Sam finds Dad in his room. The man is lying in his bed, staring at the ceiling with wet, red eyes, and he doesn’t look over when Sam comes in. Doesn’t acknowledge his presence as he takes off the borrowed parka and pulls a chair over beside the bed so he can sit down.

Now that he’s here, of course, Sam isn’t sure how to start.

Finally, after long minutes of contemplation, he settles on, “Hey.”

Dad blinks, startled, as though he really didn’t know Sam was there. When he glances over, his eyes are bleary and dull—drugged, Sam realizes. He wonders if the hospital staff gave his father a choice or if they forced the sedatives on him regardless.

“How’s your brother?” Dad says. The word comes out sloppy and slurred, but it’s the exhaustion in his voice that...
hits Sam. The resignation.

“How’re you doing?” Sam asks. It occurs to him that he hasn’t asked that once since he first woke up, and his chest tightens with guilt.

Dad slowly turns his face away to look back up at the ceiling. “Been better.”

That isn’t even close to an actual answer, but Sam guesses that he should have been ready for it. Dean inherited all of his stoic, close-mouthed habits from Dad, after all.

“How’s your leg doing?” he presses.

“Fine.”

“How’s the therapy going?”

“Fine.”

Okay, now Sam’s getting frustrated. He isn’t feeling so hot himself, after all: still weak and exhausted from his weeklong stint of guardianship. He came in here to kiss and make-up, to be a good son. The least Dad can do is give him an honest, full answer.

“Dad,” he says, struggling to keep his voice calm. “Your leg obviously isn’t ‘fine’.”

Dad heaves out a sigh. “What do you want from me, Sam?”

“I want to know how you’re doing.”

“No, you don’t,” Dad mutters. “I don’t know why you finally decided to find your way in here, but you don’t want to know how my goddamned leg’s doing, so get to the point and spit it out already.”

And Sam ... Sam deserves that.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I don’t—I know it doesn’t make up for anything, but I’m sorry I’ve been so ... distant.” It isn’t the word he wants, but since Sam has no clue how to put all of his guilt and remorse into words it’ll have to do.

“You think I wanted you in here?” Dad responds, doing his best to bristle through the drugs. “Think I wanted to have to look at you, after what you did to your brother? Might as well have been leaving him alone with the damned demon all this time.”

“That’s not fair,” Sam protests. He keeps his voice soft because he knows now where most, if not all, of this venom is coming from, but it isn’t easy. The words still hit their targets. They still hurt. “I would never hurt Dean.”

Dad turns his head and looks at Sam with wet, muddy eyes. “That’s all you ever do,” he says, and before Sam can even begin to react to that, he adds, “’S all both of us ever do.”

With a slow exhale he turns his head back to look at the ceiling. As Sam watches, a tear slips free from their father’s left eye and snakes down his stubbled cheek.

“I’ve spent my whole life pushing and pushing to make sure you boys can handle what’s out there, and I—Dean’s not okay.” Dad’s voice cracks on the words, and he lifts one trembling hand to cover his eyes. “I messed him up. I messed both of you up, I don’t. I don’t know how that happened. I don’t know what went so wrong, and I—I can’t ever make that up to you boys.”
Sam doesn’t know what to say. He might have been better equipped to deal with this situation if he didn’t agree with the man, because he knows that a lot of what’s wrong with Dean—and a lot of Sam’s own unhealthy focus on his brother as the beginning and end of his universe—stems from the way Dad raised them.

Dad made Dean grow up too early. He muddied the waters between Dean and Sam by forcing them into positions where Dean had to turn himself into some kind of surrogate mother-figure in search of some small slice of normality—Jocasta to Sam’s Oedipus.

Dad allowed himself to become a distant authority figure who dispensed critique and rebuke with ease, but whose praise had to be earned with sweat and blood and tears. He parceled out kindnesses like ill-afforded luxuries, until Dean would do nearly anything to earn nothing more than a smile and a pat on the shoulder. Dad cut them off from outsiders, telling them time and time again that they could only rely on each other, couldn’t trust strangers.

What happened to Dean in that bathroom in Vegas only cemented that truth, just as the demon must have intended. It cut Dean off from the world, leaving him no one to feel safe with but Sam and Dad, and Sam really should have known, when Dean came to him so easily, that something was wrong.

So yeah, Sam agrees with their father’s self-accusation.

With his new perspective, of course, he also understands that Dad was forced into his role by circumstance and pain. Dad was living in his own kind of Hell in those early years, dealing with his wife’s loss and two young sons and the newly discovered, murderous underbelly of the world all at once. If Dad felt for Mary even a fraction of what Sam feels for Dean, Sam’s surprised that he managed to keep breathing, let alone keep his sons warm and clothed and fed. He’s sure that Dad lost a little bit of his sanity, for a while, and that when he finally emerged from the shadow of grief he was a harder man, and colder, and more focused on mechanical needs than on spiritual or emotional ones.

Dean and Sam are accidental casualties of their father’s attempt to salvage himself, plain as that.

Sam wonders again what things would have been like if Mary had never died, wonders what kind of man Dad would have been then, and whether Dean would be married now, with a couple of kids and a third on the way and a steady, 9 to 5 job. But all he can hear is Dean’s voice pleading for Dad to stop it, not to let the demon hurt him. All he can see is Dean lying small and still in his hospital bed, with tubes down his throat and a machine breathing for him while he sleeps.

Grief chokes him, stealing whatever air he might have used to offer some small measure of condolence.

“He didn’t know it wasn’t me,” Dad says, finally. “I want to blame you for that. I want to be so fucking angry with you that I can’t stomach it. And what you did with Dean does make me sick, Sam, but I—but that’s my fault too. It’s all a fucking mess, and I know that’s on me. I can’t change it now, I can’t—I can’t wave a magic wand to make it better. But I am damned well going to do my best to get you two straightened out. I want my boys to get at least a little happiness out of life.”

“Dad,” Sam says. The word comes out reluctantly, because he knows how this is going to go over, but he has to at least try to make their father understand. “I am happy. With Dean. Dean makes me happy, and I think—I think I was starting to make him happy too.”

“No,” Dad snaps, his voice strong and steady for a moment despite the drugs. “No more of that. It’s sick. It’s sick and it’s wrong, and I—I heard what the demon said, Sam, just as well as you. Dean never would have touched you without—” He swallows thickly and then repeats, even more firmly,
“He never would have touched you. You keep doing that with him and you’re only going to fuck him up more, Sammy, and he—he deserves better than that. I need your help on this one, son. I need to know that you’re on my side, and that you’ll help me get him back on his feet without sabotaging the whole damn thing.”

If Sam actually thought Dean didn’t enjoy being with him, he’d agree in a heartbeat. But he remembers those stolen kisses, and the lazy morning makeout sessions, and how content Dean used to be when he had Sam wrapped up in his arms. And what comes out of his mouth is, “Demons lie. How do you know Dean didn’t want me before?”

Dad’s face spasms with disgust at the idea, but to his credit he doesn’t immediately discount it. He’s silent for a time, thinking it through, and then he sighs. “I don’t. But it doesn’t make it any less wrong.”

“I love him,” Sam argues. “I’m in love with him. He’s in love with me. Why can’t that be enough?”

“Because he’s your brother,” Dad responds, exhausted but certain, and Sam lets the conversation lapse into silence. It’s obvious that neither of them is going to convince the other anytime soon, and this isn’t the conversation he came in here to have.

As though reading Sam’s mind, Dad stirs a little and grunts, “Whatever it is, just spit it out so I can get some sleep.”

Even under the impetus of that command, it takes Sam a few moments to steel himself enough to answer, “I don’t blame you. What happened in the cabin, that—it wasn’t you. Wasn’t your fault.”

“Jesus Christ,” Dad mutters, sounding almost like Dean in his annoyance. “Can you not—Stop stirring the goddamned pot.”

Dad says that last with a thoroughly disgusted resentment that tells Sam it isn’t the first or the second or even the tenth time someone has brought the subject up. And since Sam knows it hasn’t been him ...

“Bobby talked to you?” he guesses.

“Bobby, cops, doctors,” Dad growls. “Hell, even the goddamned nurses won’t leave me alone.”

“The nurses have been talking to you about it?” Sam says, surprised. He’s gotten to be on pretty good terms with the nursing staff, and he can’t picture any of them doing that. They’re more passive aggressive about their interventions, with the soup and the babying—or maybe that’s just with Sam. Maybe their approach shifts with the individual.

Dad huffs out a sour breath and complains, “Bunch of manipulative harpies. They never come right out and say anything, but I know what they’re thinking. Why the hell is everyone so keen to tell me things I already know?”

*Maybe because it’s clear you don’t actually know anything at all,* Sam thinks, but Dad’s clearly on a roll and he’s wise enough to keep his mouth shut.

“That friend of yours is the worst of the lot. I swear she comes in on her days off to roll me over to motherfucking therapy, cause she hasn’t missed a single fucking appointment yet. Spends the whole time yammering on about how well Dean’s doing, and how she can’t wait for me to introduce her. Like I haven’t seen him with my own eyes, like I don’t fucking know what I did—”

He cuts off abruptly, breathing hard and clearly agitated. Sam sits silently and waits for his father to
get himself under enough control to mutter, “Dean can’t wake up too soon. Maybe then that goddamned shrink’ll finally leave me alone.”

“What?” Sam blurts, surprised into speaking. “You mean—you mean you’ve been going to therapy?”

Dad tosses him an annoyed, uneasy glance, like he thought Sam already knew and is regretting letting the cat out of the bag. “What the hell else did you think I meant?” he says, clinging to the pretense that he doesn’t care, that it isn’t important.

“I thought you meant for, y’know, your leg.”

Dad snorts. “They drag me off five, six times a day and you think they’re spending all that time poking and prodding me like a side of beef. Christ, Sammy, I thought I taught you to reason better than that.”

Ignoring the intended barb, Sam challenges, “So straighten me out.”

Dad shifts a little, frowning at the ceiling as he tries to figure out how Sam maneuvered the conversation here, and then sighs. “I see Dr. Ketchershek for therapy once a day. Group every other.”

Sam tries to imagine Dad in a group therapy setting and fails miserably. After a moment, and still grappling awkwardly with the juxtaposition, he clears his throat and asks, “Is it helping?”

“It’ll help Dean,” Dad answers. “I wouldn’t’ve put up with it this long otherwise.” Before Sam can ask for an explanation, he adds, “I want to know what types of things they’d be telling him. If we know how these people operate, we’ll be better equipped to help your brother.”

“You aren’t—Dad, you’re not planning on pulling him out of here before they release him, are you?” Sam asks with dawning horror. “He’s—this is probably the best chance he’s gonna get at getting proper treatment.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Dad snaps, immediately defensive. “You think I wouldn’t give anything to be able to keep him here, get him enrolled in one of those survivor outreach programs in the pamphlets your nurse friend keeps leaving around my room?”

“Then do it!” Sam urges. “For God’s sake, Dad, for once in your life put Dean first.”

“I am putting him first!” Dad shoots back. “But all the therapy in the world isn’t gonna do Dean a lick of good if he’s dead. Or have you forgotten the demon?”

Stunned by the prospect of what Dad is suggesting, Sam flounders around a little before saying, “But you—you said you put protections around his room. Wards.”

“I did,” John agrees with a sigh as he sinks back into the pillows. “But I can’t ward the entire hospital, and when Dean starts getting better, they’ll be moving him around more and more. Besides, all wards can be gotten around eventually, Sam—you know that. Staying in one place for so long just isn’t feasible. It isn’t safe.”

And Sam does know that, but he’s been doing his best not to think about it over the past two weeks. He’s been doing his best not to think about what would happen if the demon decided to come back, if it decided to mount a full-scale attack on the hospital in order to get what it wants. He doesn’t know how deeply the yellow-eyed bastard’s obsession runs, but he knows that it wouldn’t take many demons to overrun the building.
It wouldn’t take much for the demon to kidnap an orderly’s child and demand that Dean be brought outside to it, even if it can’t come in to him.

God, they’re so vulnerable here, surrounded by so many outsiders. Dean is vulnerable.

“I hate it,” Sam rasps, choked by fear and futile rage. “I’m going to kill it. I swear to God, I will.”

“Gonna have to beat me to it,” Dad answers, grim even beneath the sedation. There’s a beat of silence, and then he says, “Look, I bought us all the time I could—called a contact and had him go out to the cabin, bleed around a little so they’ll keep chomping on the fourth man story and not put either of us in lock-up. But as soon as Dean’s ready to be moved, we’re gonna have to go.”

“What about your leg?” Sam asks.

It isn’t a protest—with the knowledge of just how exposed they all are fresh in his mind, Sam suddenly wishes they could take Dean out of here now, wants his brother tucked away and protected. But Dean isn’t the only one wounded. He isn’t the only one who needs steady psychiatric counseling, whether Dad wants to admit to that or not. And Dad’s probably also going to need some serious physical therapy if he wants to regain full use of his leg.

“I’ve been getting around on crutches in therapy a bit,” Dad answers, “So I won’t slow us down too much. We’ll worry about the rest once we’re out of here and Dean’s safe.”

Reluctantly, Sam nods. It isn’t anything he’s comfortable with, and the frustration that fills him at the realization that their way of life is shafting them yet again, that the demon is still fucking them over without having to lift so much as a finger, is stifling. But his urgent, redoubled fear for his brother’s safety is stronger.

“I’d better check on Dean,” he says, rising. “See if he’s back in his room yet.”

Dad’s hand on his wrist halts him, and he looks down at his father, surprised by the unexpected contact.

“Would you find out how bad it is?” Dad asks. His expression is heartbreakingly hesitant. “They—they wouldn’t tell me.”

There’s more than a touch of guilt in the words—in Dad’s eyes—and Sam says, “That wasn’t your fault either.”

Dad huffs a laugh. “Right.”

“He was disoriented,” Sam maintains. “He probably thought he was back at the cabin. But he was starting to figure it out.” He catches his father’s eyes with his own and holds his gaze. “He was starting to calm down. He only really lost it when they held him down.”

“I don’t know that that’s any better,” Dad admits after a few moments. “He still—they wouldn’t have done anything if I hadn’t frightened him first.”

“Dean knows you would never hurt him,” Sam says, but Dad just smiles bitterly and turns his face away. Sam knows he’s thinking of the cabin, and how Dean proved that he doesn’t know that, not at all. But Sam still has to try.

“Dad, you didn’t rape him.”

The man jerks at hearing it stated so baldly. Sam’s the one who said it, and he feels a little sick
himself, so he can’t imagine how his father must feel. But it only takes Dad a couple of seconds to regroup.

“I know that. Believe me, I do. I just.” His eyes go pained—confessional. “Sammy, I was there. I saw everything. I felt everything. It was—how much it enjoyed what it was doing, and I just. It’s hard to keep things straight in my head.”

“You have to,” Sam insists quietly, gripping his father’s shoulder. “You have to for Dean’s sake.”

And for Sam’s, because he can’t handle both of them at once. He can’t take that much weight on his shoulders. The responsibility of holding his brother’s head above water is more than enough.

Dad nods, clenching his jaw, and then wipes at his eyes with a trembling hand. “I’m tired, Sammy. You go on and see to your brother.”

“If he’s—I’ll get someone to come in with me if he’s alone,” Sam promises.

Dad drops his hand back down on his stomach. “No,” he breathes. “Just. You see to him, Sammy. I trust you.”

“Yes, sir,” Sam whispers. His throat feels tight as he stands, his chest is shivery and too full of conflicting emotions. But, miraculously, his eyes are dry as he leaves their father alone.

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Jill is sitting with Dean when Sam pokes his head into the room. She glances over as he comes in and stiffens slightly at the sight of him. When she turns back to Dean, her mouth is tight and uncompromising.

Sam shuffles forward, feeling like seven different kinds of a fool, and holds out the parka. “Uh, this is yours?”

“Maggie’s in peds, actually,” Jill answers curtly. But she does take the parka from him, so that’s something.

“Okay,” he says. Suddenly he doesn’t know what to do with his hands and, after a few moments of letting them hang awkwardly at his sides, he shoves them in his pockets. “Then, uh, tell her thanks.”

Jill continues to look silently at Dean, and Sam draws his hands free again so he can drag a chair over beside hers. “How is he?” he asks, keeping his voice lowered as he sits down.

For a moment, he thinks she’ll tell him the same thing Rachel always does, that he needs to ask the doctor, but then she grudgingly responds, “I told you he broke two ribs.”

Sam nods, eyes going to his brother’s blanket-covered chest. It doesn’t look any different than before from where he’s sitting, but he’s suddenly glad that he hasn’t seen much of his brother’s skin since the crash. He imagines that Dean is more bruises than healthy flesh at the moment. Imagines he has a few surgical scars where they had to go inside to stop the bleeding.

“What does that mean?”

“It means we wait a couple more days before we try again.” There’s a brief pause and then Jill adds, “Davidson’s going to do it in a closed room this time, just him and a couple nurses. Fair warning.”

Sam hates the thought of Dean waking up alone in a strange place when he’s in pain, hates the
thought of how scared he’s going to be. He hates the thought of being so far from Dean’s side when
the demon’s still on the loose. But considering how his brother’s first wake-up call went, he can’t
fault the doctor for wanting to try it this way.

“Thanks,” he says.

Silence falls between them again, uncomfortable if not quite hostile, and Sam picks nervously at his
pants. He hates having to apologize, even when he’s clearly in the wrong. Maybe especially then.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” he manages finally. “You were right.”

Jill inclines her head as the lines of her body ease, but she doesn’t say anything.

“I talked to my dad,” Sam continues. “We, uh, worked a couple of things out.”

Still nothing from Jill, although she has tilted her face to the side and is clearly listening to him.

Encouraged, Sam offers, “I’ve been an asshole. Especially with—with what I said to you about the
guy you lost. Mike? I was wrong to compare what you went through to how I feel about Dean.”

Jill is silent for a long moment and then she says, “He was nineteen. Went up to Montreal for Spring
Break with a couple of our friends, and they.” She stops short, mouth contorting, and then continues
in a hoarser voice, “They got separated—some bar, I forget the name—and they were all too piss
drunk to realize he was missing until the next afternoon. Took them a couple more hours to call the
police, but by then of course he was already dead.”

She’s gone quiet again, staring at Dean’s face but seeing another guy there—someone younger than
Dean, although Sam has to admit that in his vulnerable state Dean doesn’t actually look much older
than twenty. He hesitates, torn between intruding on Jill’s grief and mending the bridges between
them. Finally, though, he can’t think of anything else to say.

“What happened?”

“He was beaten and violated.” Bitterness twists her face. “With a baseball bat.”

Sam’s stomach lurches. “God, I’m—I’m sorry.”

They’re paltry words, not nearly enough to describe the horrified pity and sorrow in his chest—not
for Dean for once, but for this stranger he’s never met and never will. Sam doesn’t get people
sometimes. He doesn’t understand how they can be capable of such cruelty, of doing things that Sam
wishes he could ascribe to the darker, supernatural undercurrents of the world.

“They found the guys who did it,” Jill says, taking that option away. “Three sixteen year old kids out
to teach a faggot a lesson. Only Michael wasn’t actually gay, so their lawyers managed to avoid
having it labeled as a hate crime.” Her eyes swing toward Sam finally, reddened but dry. “Like that
mattered. Like it changed the fact that they targeted him because he had a pretty face and pierced
ears.”

Sam moves without thinking, leaning forward and taking Jill’s hand. She grips back and shakes her
head.

“He died alone,” she whispers. “He died alone in a foreign country for no goddamned reason at all.”

Sam wishes there were some kind of consolation he could offer, but everything he considers sounds
as hollow and useless as his earlier words. “Is that why you became a nurse?” he asks eventually.
Jill laughs, a single tear spilling over, and takes her hand back. “No,” she answers as she wipes her cheek. “I became a nurse so I could marry a doctor.”

Sam smiles a little at that himself—would have laughed if he were more certain that’s what Jill wanted.

“But I became a good nurse because of Michael.” Jill smiles as she says it: a genuine expression despite the sorrow still lingering around her eyes. “And I try to believe that there was someone there for him in that hospital when he went. Someone who was good at her job.”

Sam wishes he could assure her that there was, but he knows all too well that most hospitals are too understaffed to allow their employees to sit in on what amounts to a deathwatch.

“Well,” he offers awkwardly, “I’m glad you’re here for Dean.”

The warmth of the smile Jill tosses him tells him that, for once, he found the right words.

“Yes,” she says. “Me too.”

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Two days later, an infection gets into Dean’s damaged lung and almost kills him.

Sam spends Dean’s four worst days—the days he’s barred from his brother’s room—pacing through the hospital like a trapped coyote, head down and hackles raised. Jill takes him out on her day off, driving him around town and pretending that his attention is with her instead of chained to Dean’s hospital bed. Bobby drags him away once as well, insisting that he needs Sam’s help to prepare a protective gris-gris he’s planning on sneaking into Dean’s room in a bouquet of flowers. Otherwise, Sam remains stubbornly in the hospital—in the chapel, since he can’t get any closer to his brother than the small lounge area by the ICU nurses’ station.

He spends his hours there on his knees, getting reacquainted with the God he’s never quite been able to stop believing in, despite all the crap he and his family have had to endure. If there are demons, after all, there has to be an opposing force of good. Sam refuses to live in a world where the only powers watching over humanity belong in the dark.

Praying is like breathing these days, and it gets so that Sam can’t tell anymore where one prayer ends and the next begins. He prays until his bones ache with how much he needs this, how much he needs Dean, and beneath the prayers is a constant refrain begging the powers above not to blame Dean for the broken thing between them.

If, that is, the broken thing between them really is wrong, which Sam isn’t entirely convinced of. It’s love, after all. How can love be anything but pure and good and right? Especially the fervent, worshipful love he feels for his brother?

He doesn’t know for sure—it isn’t his place to know—but he isn’t going to take any chances with Dean, and so he makes Dad’s excuse for his brother while he prays. He tells whatever angels that are listening that Dean never wanted it, that Dean only came to Sam because he was hurt, because he was bleeding out internally and didn’t know what else to do to staunch the flow.

He tells God that Dean didn’t want him, that Dean only wanted the faint comfort of being wanted and the security of being safe.

At the same time, Sam tells himself he doesn’t believe any of it—that they’re Dad’s words, and the demon’s, and not his own—but it gets confusing in that small, quiet room. It gets confusing with his
head bowed and his knees aching from hours spent on the floor, and sometimes all he can hear is the
demon’s mocking voice in his ears.

You didn’t actually think he’d ever have let you touch him if I hadn’t taken him first, did you,
Sammy?

But his heart is steady when Jill comes to him in the morning on the fifth day. His confidence in his
brother is strong when she rests a hand on his cheek and says the magic, wondrous words—Dean’s
fever broke, he’s stable—and he comes to his feet with a loud whoop that he doesn’t even bother
trying to hold in. There are two older women in the chapel with him, and they look over with wide,
startled eyes, but Sam doesn’t care.

He isn’t sure if he’s crying or laughing as he grabs Jill and swings her off her feet in a hug before all
but carrying her out of the chapel. They’re halfway down the hallway toward the elevator and
Dean’s room before it registers that she’s hitting him on the chest and telling him to put her down
already, she can walk on her own two feet. When Sam does so, she makes it a point to drag him over
to the nearest nurses’ station, where she snags a handful of tissues and thrusts them out in his
direction.

So it turns out that he is crying after all, even though he’s also grinning widely enough that his mouth
is already starting to hurt.

Even during that dangerous patch, though, Sam takes better care of himself than he did during his
first wait. He actually uses the cot he’s offered—the chapel has hours of operation, he can’t stay there
indefinitely—and makes sure to eat at least once a day. He’s still losing weight, he knows, and
muscle mass, but time is no longer passing in a haze.

He’s able to thank Bobby, after, for coming down to the chapel and sitting with him, and for the
small cross he pressed into Sam’s hand before leaving again. He’s also able to remember that Dad
didn’t come down, but he doesn’t blame the man. He knows that their father kept vigil in his own
way: sat with him there from time to time, in Dad’s hospital room with the TV a blur of noise in the
background.

Dad doesn’t use a cross to pray—as close as he was to Pastor Jim, Sam doesn’t think his father
believes in God. No, Dad uses Dean’s amulet—the one Sam gave his brother in a boyish fit of angry
resentment at their father’s lies. Watching Dad’s restless hands caress the brass face, Sam wonders if
Dad knows what the amulet is supposed to do, if he knows it was meant for him and regifted.

In the end, he decides the answers to those questions don’t matter. Dad knows that the amulet is
Dean’s. He knows that his son hasn’t willingly been parted from it since it first appeared around his
neck. That’s more than enough to turn it into a kind of holy symbol for whatever prayers he has it in
him to offer—different from Sam’s, but no less heart-felt.

After Dean begins to recover again, the tentative silence that lay between Sam and his father slips
into awkward attempts at communication. Every conversation is rough and limping—painful—and
they inevitably come around to Sam’s relationship with Dean, and how the hell could he do that to
his brother, how could he abuse Dean’s love and trust like that. Sam only loses his temper once,
when it’s storm out of the room or punch Dad in the face, and he’s back within the hour.

He never apologizes. He can’t apologize for the way he feels about Dean. Not to Dad.

That isn’t to say, of course, that Sam isn’t aware of his guilt. He’s aware as hell—feels it pulsing
inside him with every beat of his heart, after those long hours spent in prayer. Because the doubts
raised by his apologetic begging on his brother’s behalf haven’t quieted at all in the face of Dean’s
recovery. All that proves is that God doesn’t blame Dean for what lies between them. All it proves is that Dad was right, that the demon was telling the truth, that Dean doesn’t want him.

And even if Dean does want Sam, then it’s possible that it’s only because he was broken—Sam’s fault again, the demon attacked Dean because Sam wanted him—and the knowledge curdles and festers in his chest, filling him with putrid darkness.

Sam wonders, sometimes, when he’s too tired to keep the doubts away, whether he wants Dean because of the sickness inside of him. He’s the demon’s favorite, after all: a psychic pride and joy. Maybe the way he feels about Dean is a reflection of something even deeper. Maybe he’s already begun to turn.

Sam wasn’t able to see it before—he’s lived his whole life cloaked in violence, so it’s difficult to gain perspective—but spending so much time with Jill is reminding him of what Stanford was like. It’s reminding him that in the real world, good people don’t solve their problems with their fists. They don’t start bar fights that end in the hospital or the morgue—and Sam still doesn’t know what happened to those three men, but Dean picked a fucking tooth out of his knuckle so it can’t have been anything good.

And not a week later, Sam was outside in a Vegas parking lot, trying to take his father apart with his fists.

Sam understands, for the first time, that he’s dangerous.

A lot of that danger is wrapped up in Dean, same as the rest of Sam’s life, but at the core it’s just Sam. Just Sam and his anger and the darkness within, which he’s becoming more and more aware of.

He closes his eyes and sees the demon’s yellow eyes leering at him, taunting him, praising him. He looks into those eyes, which live inside his mind where holy water and exorcisms can’t touch them, and knows that he should leave. But then he opens his eyes again and knows that he can’t, not as long as there’s the slightest chance that Dean needs him here.

Not as long as there’s the faintest, ghost of a chance that Dean loves him back.

And until Sam hears from his brother’s own lips that Dean doesn’t want him—that he was twisted into this against his will—he’s clinging to that particular ghost (memory of Dean’s lips on his skin, of Dean’s arms holding him close, of the warm depths of Dean’s eyes) with all the strength of a drowning man.

In the dimly lit reaches of the night, he sits by his brother’s side with Dean’s hand held loosely in one of his. His eyes are closed, and the soft, steady sounds of his brother’s life support machines fill his ears.

_Come back to me_, he pleads silently. _God, Dean, please come back._

But Dean never answers.

Dad’s therapist comes to see him on the day Dad is discharged—seventeen days into what Sam can’t help thinking of as Dean’s coma. She’s an older woman with grey-streaked red hair cropped so close to her skull that Sam mistakes her for a cancer patient at first. She straightens him out quickly enough, forcing a fistful of pamphlets on him and spouting off a list of instructions that boil down to “be supportive and make sure he knows you don’t blame him.” When Sam realizes she’s giving him
outpatient advice for how to care for John Winchester’s emotional stability, he has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing in her face.

Then she gets to the real reason she’s there and his urge to laugh evaporates in uncomprehending surprise.

“I’m sorry?” he says.

Patiently, and with the same unflappable kindness Sam associates instinctively with mental health professionals, she repeats, “I said I have an opening Wednesdays at three, if that’s a convenient time.”

“You want to see me?” Sam checks, shuffling the pamphlets absently as though they’re an oversized deck of cards and the woman has just invited him to play poker.

Dad’s therapist—she introduced herself, but Sam wasn’t really paying attention to her name—frowns slightly and says, “I’ve been leaving messages to that effect on your phone for the last three weeks.”

“I haven’t been checking,” Sam explains, still confused. He hasn’t actually touched his phone since the accident—it’s probably in the plastic baggie of belongings he was given when he was discharged, but he can’t be sure because he hasn’t looked for it. Hasn’t felt the need, with everyone important to him right here in the hospital where he can see them.

“Good thing I stopped by, then. So, Wednesdays at three?”

“I’m sorry, I—what’s this for again? Did you want to talk about Dad? Or, uh, Dean?”

“We could start there,” Dad’s therapist agrees, giving him a meaningful look.

After a couple of blank moments, Sam gets it. “This is an appointment for me.”

Dad’s therapist gives him an encouraging smile.

Sam thinks, for a wild moment, that Dad actually told her that his sons were fucking, and then realizes that he’d likely be talking to the police instead of a therapist. Also, she’s giving him far too sympathetic a look to know about his relationship with Dean. Of course, that leaves him pretty damned clueless as to why in the world she’d want to see him.

“Why?” he asks.

“Well, the initial visit would be a type of triage. We can talk for a bit and determine any areas where you might be struggling—”

“With what? I’m not the one who was raped.” Funny how that word doesn’t get any easier no matter how many times he says it.

“I understand that, Mr. McGillicuddy, but—”

Sam shakes his head sharply, cutting her off. For some reason, his heart’s beating too quickly in his chest. “I really appreciate everything you’re doing for Dad, but I’m fine.”

Dad’s therapist looks pained now, and slightly anxious, as she says, “I’d really feel better if we had at least a preliminary meeting, Mr. McGillicuddy. If it’s a financial issue, I’ve already checked and your insurance completely covers the first ten visits.”

“It’s not about the money,” Sam assures her. He’s not sure whether to feel offended or amused by
her insistence that he needs to talk to a therapist. A cardiologist might not be such a bad idea, though. Rubbing his chest with one hand, he adds, “I’m fine. Really.”

Dad’s therapist doesn’t say anything this time, just looks at him pleadingly, and Sam offers her a smile and a wave of the pamphlets.

“Thanks for these.”

“Mr. McGillicuddy—”

“I’ll make sure Dad keeps showing up for his appointments,” Sam interrupts, and then escapes down the hall and into the open elevator doors before she can follow.
They wake Dean up on a Tuesday.

True to Jill’s warning, Sam isn’t allowed to be there, so he and Dad and Bobby sit down the hall by the nurses’ station. There are only two folding chairs, but Dad’s hands were shaking too badly this morning to use his crutches, so he’s sitting in a borrowed wheelchair with his hands clasped in his lap. Bobby has his hat off for once—looks weird and unsettling, and Sam would have commented if he’d been able to focus on anything but the police-guarded door down the hall.

His leg keeps jigging up and down: a nervous twitch that he can’t stop anymore than he can stop staring at his brother’s room. He’s able to keep his own seat—barely—because he knows that Jill is in there looking out for Dean. Sam asked for her specifically a couple of days ago, and the approval eked through just in time this morning.

It isn’t just a question of having someone in there whom he knows—whom he trusts—but a question of having someone in there who knows Dean. Jill might not actually have met him yet, but Sam’s told her enough stories about his brother—heavily edited around the hunting and the lawbreaking—that by now she must have a sense of him. Dean won’t know her in return, of course, but, considering the circumstances, it’s the closest Sam can come to providing his brother with a friendly face.

Jill’s the one who comes to get them, a little less than fifteen minutes after Davidson went in, and Sam can tell from the look on her face that it’s (finally) good news.

“He’s awake,” she announces when she gets close enough. “You can see him now.”

Sam’s out of his seat in a heartbeat, moving to wheel Dad in, but Bobby’s there first. With his hands firmly wrapped around the plastic-coated grips, he gives Sam a deceptively calm nod.

“Go ahead, Sam. We’ll be in in a sec.”

Sam hesitates, confused—why the hell would they want to wait longer?—and then he really looks at his father and catches sight of the shamed, nervous tension in Dad’s expression. When he glances back up to Bobby, the man’s eyes are soft and sad with understanding, gently urging Sam away.

Sam knows that he should be helping Dad out here as well—he should be reassuring the man that Dean’s awake now, and lucid, and isn’t going to be frightened—but the sorry truth of the matter is that Dad is always going to come second for him. It isn’t something Sam’s proud of, turning away from his father’s distress with nothing more than a curt nod, but Bobby’s taking care of it and Dean’s waiting for him and he just can’t do anything else.

With hurried steps, he moves toward Dean’s room.

Jill immediately falls into step beside him and murmurs, “He’s a little groggy, but there doesn’t seem to have been any neurological damage. And he says he doesn’t remember anything after you got to the cabin.”

Sam nods, but he knows that doesn’t mean anything. Of course Dean’s going to play dumb: he doesn’t know what story Dad and Sam worked out between themselves. It’s their usual tactic whenever they’ve been knocked out cold and wake up again surrounded by hospital staff.

“His lung?” he asks, hurrying his steps even more as they approach the open door to Dean’s room.
“He’s breathing on his own.”

That’s less reassuring of a response than Sam wanted, but he doesn’t have time to grill Jill any further because he’s at the room now, moving past the cop and stepping inside and there’s Dean.

His brother is still lying down, but the top half of the bed has been raised slightly in order to make it easier for him to look around the room. The frightening mask is gone from his face, but there are still tubes snaking across both of Dean’s cheeks and running into his nose—oxygen lines—which makes Sam nervous that his brother’s lungs aren’t working as well as they should be. Dean’s skin has been looking healthier for the past week or so—all the tiny cuts from the accident have long since healed, although the gash across his forehead is still raw and red—but it’s different, seeing Dean without the mask.

Seeing him awake.

Dean is looking at him—eyes open and aware, thank God, and just as green as ever—and all the tumbled, misaligned pieces of Sam fall back into place. He flushes with relief: a tingling sensation, like his entire body fell asleep and is finally coming back online.

Then Dean’s lips twist into a weak smile and he rasps, “Hey, Sammy.”

Sam blinks and loses a couple of seconds of time, because he doesn’t remember crossing the floor to get to his brother’s side, but here he is. Here he is clutching Dean’s hand and wishing to God they were alone so that he could kiss his brother the way he wants. He’s crying, which is childish and stupid because Dean’s okay, Dean’s here, Dean’s going to be fine, but he can’t help himself.

“Yes, I know,” Dean says, squeezing his hand. “You’re stuck with me. Sucks to be you, huh?”

Sam manages a laugh through his tears, lifting Dean’s hand and pressing it against the side of his face. “You’re a fucking jerk, you know that?” he mumbles, and presses a quick, surreptitious kiss to the inside of his brother’s wrist before lowering Dean’s hand again.

Suddenly, Dean’s smile doesn’t look quite as genuine anymore. Sam doesn’t know if that’s because of the kiss or what Dean maybe perceives as Sam pulling away from him, and the uncertainty makes his stomach clench. He wants to ask and can’t—too many strangers in the room, and anyway he wouldn’t be able to get the words out through the lump in his throat.

Then Dean glances past Sam toward the door and asks, “Where’s Dad? He okay?”

It could be a normal question about Dad’s health, but something in Dean’s tone tells Sam that it isn’t. No, this is Dean checking whether Dad’s still possessed or not, which means that he remembers at least some of what happened.

Sam isn’t sure how to feel about that. On the one hand, Dean remembering might mean that he’s coping with it all right, and anyway they’ll need to deal with it sooner or later. On the other hand, there’s a big part of Sam that wants Dean to have the peace of forgetfulness—for a little while, at least.

He realizes Dean is still waiting for an answer and looking tenser by the second and hurries to say, “He’s fine, just a little slow. His leg got banged up. Bo—uh, Uncle Bill’s wheeling him in.”

Sam expected his response to calm Dean, but instead his brother’s face creases with alarm. “How banged up?” he demands, struggling to sit up straighter. Almost immediately, he grimaces and rips his hand from Sam’s to grab at his own chest.
“Easy,” Davidson says, moving forward. “Remember, your ribs haven’t finished healing. If you want to sit up, just let someone know and we’ll raise the bed.”

Dean’s mouth thins, and Sam knows what’s going through his brother’s head. He knows how much Dean hates relying on anyone else, let alone strangers. No way in hell is Dean ever going to ask for help, especially with something as mundane and simple as sitting up.

Which means that Sam is going to have to anticipate his brother to keep Dean from hurting himself.

There’s a selfish, resentful part of Sam that wants to scream with the realization. He knows how much he’s already watching out for Dean’s wellbeing enough, damn it: it isn’t fair to keep adding to his plate. For an instant, he can see the future stretching out before him—running himself ragged to keep Dean functioning, to help Dad—and his hands reflexively clench on the sheets in Dean’s bed.

But Dean’s eyes are flicking past him again—fast enough that Sam knows his brother is responding to movement. There isn’t time for Sam to break down. Not right now. Shoving his own feelings aside, he concentrates on his brother’s face as Bobby wheels Dad into the room.

Dean’s shadowed expression is fleeting—gone quickly enough that it might have been no more than pain from the change in position as Davidson raises the bed. But as much as he prays otherwise, Sam just can’t bring himself to believe that’s all it is.

“Dad,” Dean says, flicking his eyes up and down their father’s body in something Sam deciphers as an attempt to figure out which leg is injured. It should be difficult to tell with the bulky bandages gone and Dad sitting quietly in the chair, but Dean’s eyes quickly settle on the man’s right leg.

Maybe he remembers the bullet.

“Dean,” Dad replies. His voice isn’t as hoarse as Dean’s, but then again Dad didn’t spend the last four weeks with a tube down his throat. “How do you feel, son?”

“Kinda like I got body checked by the Hulk,” Dean answers with brittle heartiness before nodding at Dad’s lower body. “How’s your leg?”

Dad wasn’t looking too comfortable to begin with, but his face stiffens at the question. When he speaks, his voice is stilted: his eyes hesitant. “You remember that?”

“Nothing after getting to the cabin,” Dean answers. “Sam said you were hurt.” His voice is light enough—believable even if you know him—but he isn’t actually meeting anyone’s eyes as he says it. His hands are curled into tense, defensive fists.

He does remember, then. He remembers everything.

The mood in the room sours—the demon’s filthy touch soiling what should be a joyful reunion—and Sam fumbles for a way to salvage the moment. But all of his thoughts get stuck on the question of what Dean’s memories mean for them, what they mean for Dean. He came so close to suicide before: to ending everything. With a second degrading violation so fresh in his mind—this time with Dad and Sam as unwilling witnesses and participants—there’s no telling how he’ll react. No telling what dark, twisted emotions are coiling beneath the surface, deep down where it doesn’t show.

To Sam’s right, Dad’s just as lost for words, and in the end it’s Bobby who steps in and saves them.

“You gonna say hey to your Uncle Bill, boy, or am I gonna have to disinherit you?” The warmth in Bobby’s voice is enough to bring Dean’s eyes back up from his lap and Sam watches as his brother visibly forces the darkness away and puts a lopsided smile on his face.
“Hey, Uncle Bill,” Dean says dutifully. It’s odd hearing such a light-hearted tone coloring the hoarse rasp of his voice. “You been keeping these two out of trouble?”

“Been doing my best, but you know how they are.”

Dean’s mouth twitches a little—a flicker of genuine humor, Sam thinks—and he guesses, “Couple of stubborn idjits?”

“I was gonna say chuckleheads, but that’s the general gist.”

Dean laughs, softly, and then immediately starts to cough. The coughing is clearly painful on Dean’s healing ribs, which makes Sam wince, but it’s the way that his brother’s eyes go wide and panicked that makes Sam’s chest clench.

“Can’t—” Dean chokes out. “Can’t breathe.”

Davidson steps in again from where he’s been observing, resting a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “You can breathe, Dean. You just need to focus on a rhythm. Follow me, okay? In ... and out. In ... and out.”

It takes almost five tense minutes before Dean’s breathing is anything resembling normal, although it’s still far too labored for Sam’s peace of mind. For his brother’s as well, if the fear on Dean’s face is anything to go by.

His brother’s first question, as soon as he can manage it, is, “Fuck’s wrong with me?”

“A machine’s been doing your breathing for almost a month, Mr. McGillicuddy,” Davidson replies. The words are smooth and practiced and not at all believable.

“Bullshit,” Dean replies. His arm shoots out and grips the corner of Davidson’s coat. It’s evident that his hand has none of its usual strength, but there’s enough grab to show he means business. “Why can’t I catch my breath?”

Davidson hesitates, which means that he’s weighing Dean’s probable distress at the answer against his definite distress at being left in the dark. Which means, in turn, that the answer isn’t anything any of them are going to want to hear.

Then Davidson says, “Your left lung was badly damaged in the crash. Combined with possible tissue necrosis from the infection—”

“Wait, necro-what? That’s death, right? Are you telling me my lung’s dead?”

Sam isn’t feeling all that calm himself at the news—why didn’t Davidson tell them—but that minor anger is lost in the more urgent problem posed by the fact that Dean’s losing control over his breathing again. Postponing his own freak out, Sam moves around Davidson to grab his brother’s hand and squeezes it, trying to offer some comfort.

Dean shakes him off without so much as glancing at him.

“I’m saying that some of your left lung might—might—be too badly damaged to continue functioning the way it should.”

“Jesus Christ.”

That’s Dad’s voice, not Dean’s, but it carries all the damned misery Sam can see in his brother’s
eyes. If Sam weren’t sure Dean isn’t hearing anyone but the doctor right now he’d be tempted to berate their father for his lack of filter. Dean doesn’t need to be exposed to that kind of doubt right now, damn it—not when it’s clear that his own self-confidence is less than stellar.

“What the fuck does that *mean*?” Dean rasps. Sam can see from his brother’s expression that it was supposed to be a demand, but Dean just can’t put enough air behind the words to make it anything but a plea.

“It means that for the time being, when you become upset—like you are now—or when you lose control of your breathing for any reason—laughing, coughing, things of that nature—you’re going to feel like you can’t get enough air.”

“Forever?” It’s barely a whisper, forced out while Dean stares up at the doctor with wide, horrified eyes, and Sam knows instantly where his brother’s mind has gone.

Hunting.

Davidson spreads his hands in a helpless gesture that makes Sam want to punch the man. “There’s just no way of knowing that at the present time. You could regain full capacity, or partial capacity. Regardless of how your condition progresses, though, you can still live a perfectly healthy, full life with one functioning lung.”

But Dean’s shutting himself down: Sam can see it happening in the way his brother’s eyes dim.

“Dean,” he says, quietly and urgently. “Dean, look at me.”

“Get out.”

“Dean, please.” Dad this time, his voice low and choked with emotion.

Dean doesn’t look at either of them, turning his head to stare at the wall instead while his chest rises and falls in shallow pants. “I want them out of here. Now.”

Sam goes—not because he’s afraid of causing a scene by resisting the officer on duty, who has heard the commotion and stepped preemptively into Dean’s room, but because he knows that he’s not going to be able to hold his tears in much longer. Dean has enough to deal with right now without adding the useless guilt of having made his little brother cry into the mix. And Dean is just fucked up enough to feel guilty over something like that.

Sam pauses on his way out, though, stepping aside to let Bobby push Dad out into the hall before offering, “When you want me, I’ll be down the hall, okay?”

Dean keeps his face turned away and doesn’t respond.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It’s a little over two full days before Dean asks for him, and those days are worse than all of the past four weeks put together. It’s worse because Sam knows his brother is awake just down the hall, and avoiding Sam as firmly as if he’d run away. Jill keeps visiting under cover of checking on Dean, and the other nurses will sneak him information, but it’s no substitution for actually seeing his brother, or for talking to him. It doesn’t give Sam the chance to tell Dean about all the research he’s done on pneumonectomies, and how Davidson wasn’t lying.

It’ll take a few years, maybe, but even if Dean’s right lung is the one doing all the work, he’ll still be able to run and jump and fight. He’ll still be able to *hunt*, if that's what he wants.
And Sam wants to talk to Dean about what happened in the cabin as well: find out how clear his brother’s memories are. How much more damage the demon has done.

He’s thrilled to see Dad’s therapist when she shows up to visit Dean several hours after Dean wakes up. Although Sam can tell from her tight-lipped, worried expression when she leaves again that Dean either cussed her out or refused to say anything, it’s still a step in the right direction. At least Dean didn’t punch this one.

Two days isn’t that long objectively, but it’s feels like forever. Waiting for Dean is anxiety-inducing enough, of course, but the way that people keep giving Sam kind, understanding smiles doesn’t help. Neither does the way that they seem to think that anything but a low undertone is going to make him shatter. He wonders if Dean’s enduring the same just down the hall.

By the time Dean’s guard raises a hand to gesture him over around noon on the third day, Sam’s on edge enough that he practically springs up from the chair he was sitting in. Dad’s down at physical therapy, Bobby’s off doing God only knows what, and Sam doesn’t spare either of them a thought as he hurries down the hall.

“Yeah?” he calls as soon as he’s close enough, not quite daring to hope this means what he wants it to. The way their luck’s been going, the man probably just wants to tell him that the police have found evidence that contradicts the story Sam and Dad fed them. And then he’ll ask Sam to step downtown for a couple of questions.

But instead the cop gives him a friendly look and says, “He’s asking for you.”

Sam doesn’t need to hear any more than that, all but charging into the room. He makes himself slow as he approaches the bed—Dean looks slightly alarmed at his wild approach—and then shoves his hands in his pockets to avoid touching when he isn’t sure of his welcome.

“Hey,” he says, trying to keep his tone neutral and failing miserably.

Dean looks at him for a moment and then says, “I’m gonna ask you some questions, and after that I don’t want to talk about it. You keep pushing, I’ll have Chris toss you out on your ass, are we clear?”

Sam nods—silently, to show that he can keep his mouth shut—but Dean’s tight expression doesn’t ease.

“Where’s the demon?”

“We don’t know,” Sam answers. “Bobby’s been looking for it, but it dropped off the map. I think I hurt it, though, when I ...” He trails off, not sure he wants to bring that particular memory back up. But of course, he should have thought that through before, because his brother has already latched onto it.

“When you shot Dad,” Dean finishes for him, voice sharp and accusing. “With a gun that can kill anything.”

“Yeah.”

“Beating the crap out of him wasn’t enough, you had to add attempted murder to the list?”

They haven’t ever actually talked about Sam’s fight with Dad in Vegas, and it’s been long enough that Sam thought he lucked out and got a free pass on that. Looks like Dean was just saving the accusation for a rainy day.
“Dean, I had to, he was—”

“I know what he was,” Dean cuts in harshly. “I was there, remember?”

The sudden, sore lump in Sam’s throat makes it difficult to swallow, but he tries his best to do so anyway. “Dean—”

“How bad’s his leg?”

Sam struggles with himself for a moment—God, he wants to apologize, he wants to haul Dean into a hug and tell him it’s going to be okay, he wants to break through his brother’s distant, icy facade and drag some real honesty out of him. But he remembers Dean’s warning and says only, “I haven’t been able to get a clear answer out of him. I think it’s his knee and his ankle, though. Not—not from the bullet. It was a clean shot.”

It feels important somehow to make that distinction, that he isn’t responsible for Dad’s lingering mobility issues. Although from Dean’s expression, his brother isn’t registering much of a difference between the two.

Dean frowns down at his lap for a moment and then, turning his face away from Sam, asks, “What the demon said about you—when we were kids. About you wanting me then. Was that true?”

Sam actually feels his heart stop. He hasn’t been letting himself think about that at all, about all the hateful things the demon said. About how it twisted their past around until even Sam wasn’t sure that wasn’t how things were.

The demon didn’t tell Dean the whole truth, but it didn’t lie either. And Sam can’t defend himself. He doesn’t have the right.

“Yes,” he whispers, left breathless by the sharp pain in his chest.

Dean nods like he didn’t expect anything else and then falls silent.

The quiet stretches out between them—Dean thinking about how fucked in the head Sam is, how vile and disgusting and perverted, and digesting that it’s Sam’s fault he’s like this. It’s Sam’s fault he got attacked in that Vegas bathroom and raped so roughly it scarred him up inside; Sam’s fault he remembered the attack at all; Sam’s fault it happened again, the demon driving Dad’s body and spewing hurtful filth from Dad’s mouth. It’s Sam’s fault Dean is in this hospital bed, down one lung and banged all to hell and barely dragging himself from one moment to the next.

Dean's face is blank, and Sam knows he's being irrational—no way to tell what's really going through his brother's head right now—but it's all so obvious, he can't even begin to imagine Dean missing it. Sam tries to be good, he really does, but he knows where his brother's thoughts have to be, and Dean's question has stirred all of the demon’s taunting words up in Sam's own head and he just. He has to.

“I’m so sorry.”

Stirring, Dean shakes his head with a weary movement. “You didn’t rape me, Sam.”

“No, but I—”

“Stop. It happened. You didn’t fucking ask the son of a bitch to do that, and that’s all that matters. End of story.” He looks up finally, regarding Sam with dry eyes. “You don’t get to take the fall for what that bastard did, you hear me?”
Dean can’t do this—he can’t just take the blame away with a word—but Sam can see that it isn’t something his brother’s prepared to yield on, so he nods. “Yeah.”

“Okay.” And his tone says that that’s it: topic closed, end of discussion.

Except for how it’s not.

“Dean, we have to talk about what happen—”

“No, we really don’t,” Dean interrupts. “And I don’t want to know whatever cock and bull story you and Dad came up with to smooth things over with the cops, either. Far as anyone here’s concerned, I don’t remember squat. And that’s gonna go for you and Dad too. We never had this conversation, you understand?”

No, Sam thinks. Please, baby, don’t do this. But it’s a faint, hopeless protest, and he finds himself nodding again. He’d agree to anything to be allowed to stay right now. He and Dad can deal with the inevitable fallout (Dean can’t lock this away forever) later.

Dean’s posture finally relaxes at Sam’s nod and he reaches out a hand. “C’mere.”

Sam slowly leans down, wary of startling his brother, and then starts himself when Dean grabs the back of his neck and pulls him in. He thinks Dean’s angling for a kiss at first, and then, when his brother stops several inches short, blinks in confusion. Dean’s right hand is heavy on the back of Sam’s neck while his left comes up and touches the bridge of Sam’s nose, traces over his eyebrow.

“What are you doing?” Sam asks finally.

“Went and got yourself banged up,” Dean replies, which is surprising in a dull kind of way until Sam remembers that he hasn’t actually spent a lot of time in front of a mirror lately. He’s had more important things on his mind.

“You too,” he says now, flicking his eyes up at Dean’s forehead.

When he drops them again, the look in Dean’s eyes has changed. It isn’t heat—Sam doesn’t expect to see anything resembling heat for a long time—but the warmth makes Sam’s stomach lurch pleasantly anyway.

“Gently, okay?” Dean says, and then they’re kissing, soft and tentative.

Despite the fact that his whole body is demanding more, Sam immediately pulls back.

“What?” Dean asks, looking confused and a little scared.

The fear tells Sam he made the right move: that this isn’t Dean kissing him because Dean wants to. This is Dean kissing him because he thinks he has to prove to Sam (or maybe it’s himself that Dean’s trying to convince) that he isn’t damaged goods. And that ... that just isn’t a good enough reason anymore.

Did you want me before, Sam wonders for what feels like the thousandth time, or was the demon telling the truth? Do you just want me because you’re too afraid to try with anyone else?

But he doesn’t ask. He isn’t ready to hear the answer.

“When you mean it, okay?” he says instead. “I’m not going anywhere, I can wait.”

“I do mean it,” Dean snaps, bristling.
“Yeah, well, not here anyway. I promised Dad,” Sam replies, and then gives himself a mental kick as all the blood drains from Dean’s face.

“Oh my God,” Dean whispers. His breathing has gone erratic and labored again.

“Dean, you have to calm down, okay?”

“He knows!” Dean says instead. “Fucking Christ, you and your ... your goddamned ... tattoos.”

Sam’s pretty sure the demon would have found a way to out them regardless of whether they had the tattoos, but Dean is really struggling now and it isn’t the right time for that argument. Resting one hand lightly on his brother’s shoulder, Sam turns his head and calls, “I need a nurse in here!”

Dean gives him a pissed look, but he’s too short of breath to say anything, which means Sam is totally justified in calling for reinforcements.

Rachel appears in the doorway a moment later, along with another nurse whose name Sam can never remember. Two minutes after that, Davidson is jogging into the room, already prepping a syringe. Dean’s expression shifts from annoyance to pleading—those eyes boring into Sam and begging him not to let Davidson stick him—but no way in hell is Sam going to watch his brother struggle for a second longer than he has to.

Dean’s eyes go hurt and betrayed as Davidson injects the contents of the syringe into his IV, and Sam doesn’t understand how his brother can still look so surprised. After all of Sam’s fuck ups, after what the demon said in the cabin, he doesn’t know how Dean can possibly still expect Sam to have his back.

The betrayal doesn’t last long, thank God—almost immediately replaced by the hazy dullness of the mild sedative Davidson just injected Dean with. Setting aside the syringe, the doctor bends near, voice low and soothing as he talks Dean through relaxing and letting his lungs work.

Now that Dean isn’t panicking, it doesn’t take more than a couple of minutes for his breathing to go back to normal, and soon enough he’s lying back on the bed, eyes shut and face turned toward the wall. He isn’t sleeping, though: Sam can sense it. He waits quietly for the room to clear out and then pulls a chair over to the bed and sits down, resting a hand on top of his brother’s forearm.

Dean pulls his arm away.

“Dean—”

“Asshole,” Dean mutters, the word slurred and loose.

“I’m sorry, man, but I wasn’t going to sit here and watch you suffer just because you have issues accepting help.”

Dean grunts and then slurs, “’s not—’s not the help, moron. I don’ ... don’ like this. Can’ move right. Can’ fuckin’ think.”

Now that Dean mentions it, Sam understands why his brother wouldn’t be thrilled with the prospect of being so helpless. He feels a deeper flush of shamed guilt and grabs his brother’s hand.

“I’m here,” he promises. “I’ve got the Colt, not gonna let anything happen to you.”

“Wan’ you t’go.”
Sam can’t possibly have heard that right.

“What?”

This time, Dean turns his head back and opens his eyes, looking up at Sam. There’s painful honesty in his gaze, all of his barriers stripped away by the drugs, and the level of fear and confusion and self-loathing Sam finds there hits him like an openhanded slap.

“I need some time,” Dean says. “I can’t—Sam, when you’re here, I can’t. Need some fuckin’ time.”

“Okay,” Sam makes himself say, even though it isn’t anything of the sort. “I’ll wait down the hall. When you want me—”

But Dean makes an inarticulate, frustrated noise and lifts his left hand to push sluggishly at Sam’s arm. “No. Need you t’go. Don’t wanna think of you down th’ hall. Geh out. Go ‘way.”

As Sam realizes what his brother is saying, his eyes water and immediately start to overflow. He takes his hand back, setting it in his own lap and bowing his head. He should probably get up and run now, but he needs a few seconds to process just how much Dean’s rejection feels like being ripped up inside.

“Don’ fuckin’ do tha’,” Dean says from the bed, sounding unbelievably weary.

“’M sorry,” Sam gasps out, lurching to his feet. “I’ll go.”

“Sammy.”

Dean’s voice doesn’t hold any of the self-awareness or command he can usually manage—the drugs again—but Sam stops anyway. It’s an automatic, instinctual response to that tone. He stands with his head lowered, vision obscured by tears and the fringe of his hair. He can still see the edge of his brother’s bed, though, and Dean’s pinky finger.

“’M not fuckin’ breakin’ up with you,” Dean says. “Jus’ need some space. So I can think. ‘Bout Dad. Rest of this shit.”

Sam feels even guiltier for accepting reassurance from his brother when Dean is the one who should be falling apart in Sam’s arms, but he can’t deny that he does feel better. Sniffing, he wipes his eyes on his sleeve and chances a glance at his brother. Dean’s watching him, bleary and pain-filled and patient.

“How much space?” Sam asks.

“Outta the hospital. Go—go geh a goddamn meal in you. Go sleep. An’ take Dad ‘n Bobby with you. Y’can all come back t’morrow. Movin’ me downstairs.”

Downstairs means out of intensive care, which is good enough news to make Sam straighten. But he doesn’t like what Dean’s telling him to do, can’t stomach the idea of leaving, of leaving Dean alone and unprotected. Dean sighs and turns his face away again.

“Be fine. Think I haven’t noticed all the wards ‘n shit?”

Sam hadn’t given it much thought, actually, but of course Dean must have been able to see the protective symbols on the cards set up along the counter, and the gris-gris hanging in the middle of the bouquet of flowers. Probably also guessed at the invisible wards Sam and Dad and Bobby have spent the last three weeks lying down.
They’ve coated the room with as much protection as they can muster, but Sam still isn’t satisfied. Maybe he’d feel a little better if the hospital were located in the middle of the Arizona salt flats. Maybe. Just a little.

But he can see that Dean’s determined, that he needs this, and there hasn’t been so much as a peep out of the demon since the cabin. Maybe Sam hurt it badly enough to cripple it.

“I’m coming back first thing in the morning,” Sam announces.

“Y’can come back’t ten.”

“First thing,” Sam repeats, and then adds, “You’re lucky I’m leaving you alone that long.”

“Don’ notice you leavin’ me ‘lone t’all righ’ now,” Dean points out.

It’s close enough to his normal bitching that Sam allows himself to hope they’ll get through this. He leans forward over Dean’s bed, pressing a light kiss to his brother’s forehead, and regrets it when Dean belatedly flinches away from him.

As he leaves without another word, Sam’s mouth is bitter, and he wishes it didn’t taste so much like goodbye.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

It’s Dad’s idea to take Jill out to dinner. They run into her on their way out of the hospital, and once Dad has brought it up Sam won’t let her say no. They bundle her out the door between them, calling Bobby and asking him to meet them on the way to The Copper Kettle, which Jill swears makes the best steak in the county.

The Kettle is nice enough inside, and the twenty minute wait seems to indicate that Jill’s right about the food, but Sam isn’t actually sure how the steak is. It tastes like the air in Dean’s hospital room when he chokes down a couple of bites, tastes like sickness. Anyway, he can’t stop thinking of Dean lying in bed, drugged and hurt. Alone and unprotected.

It isn’t a thought designed to do anything for his appetite.

Finally, after watching Sam push bits of steak around on his plate for about five minutes, Bobby leans over and murmurs, “He’ll be fine, Sam.”

Sam glances to his other side, where Dad is all grin and charm as he wheedles Jill’s life story out of her, and then, under his breath, replies, “We shouldn’t be leaving him unprotected. Not when the demon’s still out there.”

Bobby’s eyes sharpen, and Sam can tell from the fresh concern in the man’s gaze that some of his own understanding about the demon’s fascination with Dean has leaked into his voice. Bobby isn’t going to ask Sam about it here, but now that he’s gotten wind that Sam’s holding out on him, he isn’t going to drop it either. Uncomfortable, Sam drops his eyes with a grimace.

He doesn’t want to have that conversation—not with Dad, and not with Bobby. He doesn’t want to have to say aloud that he thinks the demon isn’t interested in Dean for Sam’s sake anymore but for its own. It wants Dean because it likes hurting him. Because Dean is its own special brand of heroin: gives the son of a bitch a high like it hasn’t encountered before.

This time, when Sam pokes at his steak, he does it viciously enough to drive the fork right through and into the plate beneath with an audible clink. Jill and Dad both look over at that—Jill’s eyes are
startled, Dad’s worried—and Sam covers by giving a foolish, ‘didn’t know my own strength’ grin and lifting the steak toward his mouth. It’s going to be difficult to swallow past the mournful, angry lump blocking his throat, but he’ll manage.

The steak feels cold on his tongue, nothing more than a lump of dead flesh, and he’s grimacing even as he presses his lips together and draws the fork free. He’s contemplating spitting the chunk out into his napkin and blaming gristle when he feels the first, ripping crackle of pain behind his eye sockets.

Sam has an instant to recognize what’s coming and drop the fork before he can do something completely stupid like jab himself in the eye, and then the vision slams into him and turns the world on its head.

Flowers on a windowsill.

—flash—

Steady beep of a heart monitor.

—flash—

Dean. Dean’s dull eyes as he flips through the channels on the TV one of the nurses must have rolled in for him.

—flash—

The TV image rolls. It fuzzi.

—flash—

Dean tensing, looking toward the door.

—flash—

In the hallway now, looking in past broad shoulders filling the doorway to Dean’s room.

—flash—

“Can’t get in, you son of a bitch,” Dean spits, venomous, but his hands are shaking on the white hospital blanket. His eyes are too wide. Terrified and trying not to show it.

—flash—

The figure steps forward, into the room, and the door slams shut behind it, knocking Sam out of the vision and back into his body.

He opens his eyes to find himself on the floor, gasping for breath with Jill’s fingers on his pulse and a clamor of voices around him. Turning his head, he searches for Dad’s face in the curious crowd that Bobby’s doing his best to hold back. His brain feels sick and red, like someone took a baseball bat to it one too many times.

“Sam, you need to be still,” Jill insists.

Sam shakes his head in refusal and the sharp motion sends a nauseating bolt of pain through him. He doesn’t have time to be sick now, though—Dean doesn’t have time.

Fighting to keep those few mouthfuls of steak down in his stomach where they belong, he chokes
A hand reaches in from somewhere outside Sam’s narrow field of view and grips his shoulder. Blunt, thick fingers: heavy gold band on the ring finger. Dad. It’s Dad. Dad’ll know what to do.

“Dean? Sammy, did you say Dean?”

“It’s there,” Sam answers, twisting so he can blink up at his father’s face through the haze of pain blurring his vision. “The demon. We have to—” He tries to get up again and can’t make his legs work. “We have to save him.”

“Demon?” Jill echoes, sounding even more shocked and concerned than she did before. “What—”

“Not now, lady.” That’s Bobby’s voice, and a moment later Jill is shouldered aside so that a new hand can grab Sam’s elbow and haul him up. Sam squeezes his eyes shut as he’s lifted—hears a faint, merciless chuckle in his head, Dean’s labored breathing—and then immediately opens them again. Bobby has him now, supporting Sam with one arm while he pushes a path through the crowd.

“It’s coming,” Sam announces, desperate to get the information across before he passes out. “It’s coming for him, Bobby. It’s going to take him.”

And there’s no doubt in Sam’s mind what will happen then.

“No one’s taking Dean anywhere,” Bobby replies grimly. “Not on our watch. Now move.”

Somehow, they manage to get out of the restaurant and the cold burst of night air revives Sam enough for him to notice that Jill is still with them. She’s arguing with Dad about something, gesturing at Sam with color high in her cheeks. Or it might be more accurate to say she’s yelling at Dad about something because Dad’s ignoring her as he uses his crutches to hurry around to the passenger side of the car and get inside.

Sam lets Bobby shove him in the backseat and actually manages to revive enough to get the door closed on his own. He’s saying something—a constant stream of ‘hurry, hurry’ as though he can get them there faster by repeating it often enough. His head is splitting open but he doesn’t care. Not when all he can see is that hospital room door swinging shut.

“I am hurrying,” Bobby snaps as he gets behind the wheel, and then the other back door opens and Sam squints across the expanse of the backseat as Jill gets inside. “Get out, lady!” Bobby yells immediately, and the loud sound makes Sam cradle his head in his hands with a whimper.

Fat fucking lot of good he’s going to be against the demon if he can’t get this under control.

“No,” Jill answers. There’s a click as she shuts the door behind her. “I’m not letting you drive off like this when Sam’s obviously sick.” She slides across the seat and grips Sam’s wrist, trying to bring his hand down from his head. “Sam. Can you hear me?”

“Get out of the car.” That’s Dad again, voice drawn tight and threatening.

Jill goes still, her breath catching, and Sam knows before he opens his eyes that Dad has a gun out and pointed Jill’s way. It isn’t The Gun—not the Colt, Sam has that—but it’ll kill Jill just as easily and Sam thinks Dad might actually pull the trigger.

“No,” he manages. “Bobby, drive. Dad, we don’t have time. We need to—Dean. Dean needs us.”
It occurs to him that Jill works at the hospital. That she might know back ways in and out. That she might be able to Help Dean.

“Tell her,” he gasps as the car lurches forward. “Just fucking tell her.”

And then the pain in his head crystallizes and drops him into the mocking dark.
“Sam, wake up. We’re here.”

There’s no moment of confusion. No delay between the words and complete understanding.

Sam opens his eyes, pulse pounding in his ears and head aching, and asks, “They told you?” He’s already moving—no need to unbuckle the belt he never bothered with in the first place—and Jill helps get him upright and steady and moving the few steps away from the car and into the hospital.

“Yes,” she answers, and Sam doesn’t have to ask how much. Her voice is too tight and unhappy for it to have been anything less than the entire truth.

“You don’t believe any of it, do you?” he grunts. He’s moving on his own speed now—not running, which would draw too much unwanted attention, but using the fastest gait he can get away with under the circumstances. Bobby and Dad are just behind him, Dad’s crutches clacking noisily against the floor at a rate Sam didn’t think the man was capable of.

“I think you’re all under a lot of stress,” Jill hedges as Sam draws up short in front of the elevator and mashes his thumb repeatedly against the button. Pushing it over and over again isn’t actually going to make the car come any quicker, but Sam can’t seem to help himself anyway. Giving him a wary look, Jill continues, “As soon as you see Dean’s all right, I’m bringing you straight over to psych to get checked out.”

Sam’s fine with that. He’ll sit through all the poking and prodding Jill wants if everything is okay, if Dean is sitting upstairs bored in his bed and tells Sam to get the fuck out. But the black pit in his stomach leaves him sure he isn’t going to have to.

“Come on,” he mutters, hitting the button with the side of his closed fist.

“Careful,” Bobby mutters from behind him. “You’re gonna startle the natives.”

Bobby’s right, but that doesn’t make the wait any more palatable. When the doors finally—and slowly—open up for Sam almost a full minute later, he dives into the thankfully empty car and hits seven. As Jill steps into the car along with Dad and Bobby, Sam wonders whether this was actually a good idea—she’s a civilian, she’s going to be a liability—and then shrugs the concern away. They’re past the point where they could have left her behind.

As the elevator doors close again, Sam focuses on her long enough to say, “Stay behind us and keep your head down. And if I say run, you run as fast as you can and don’t look back, got it?”

“I’ll be fine,” Jill replies, hooking her thumb through a gold chain around her neck and bringing out a cross. “See?”

It’s naïve and stupid and Jill has no fucking clue of the mess she’s stepped in, but Sam doesn’t have time to give her the Cliff Notes for Demonology 101. “Just stay behind us,” he repeats, turning back to the silver doors. His wavering reflection stares back at him, nothing but harsh planes and shadowed eye sockets. In the doors, he looks like something they’d hunt.

As the elevator climbs past the third floor, Dad shifts closer and asks, “You have it?”

No need to ask what ‘it’ is.
“Yeah,” Sam answers shortly. His palms ache for the gun’s weight—for the reassuring, cool grip of the handle clasped in his hand—but he knows that he can’t risk it yet. He can’t risk causing a panic before they’re with Dean and know he’s safe.

“How’s what?” Jill asks sharply. There’s fresh alarm in her voice, and Sam thinks she might be rethinking her decision to let what she considered a harmless delusion play out. But it doesn’t matter because the elevator doors are pinging open on Dean’s floor.

The smell hits Sam first—sulfur everywhere: soot clogging his throat. And underneath that, the metallic tang of fresh blood, and the baser reek of piss and shit. The smell of death. He gags on it a little, and he knows that at least some of that smell is real because Jill coughs next to him, and Bobby and Dad both mutter muffled swears.

“What is that?” Jill asks, covering her mouth and nose with one hand, but Sam has seen what’s waiting for him now and he pulls the gun out without another thought, sprinting forward.

“Dean!” he yells—stupid giving that much warning of their arrival, but he can’t keep the word in.

As he rushes forward, his mind slips into that still, calm place it finds on hunts, protecting him from the horror that would otherwise be clogging his throat. He notices in a detached kind of way how red all the blood looks against the sterile hospital walls and floor—ceiling in one spot. He sees a nurse slumped over the duty desk with a pen stuck in her eye—her own hand is still curled loosely around the protruding end. One of the orderlies used a stethoscope to strangle himself. Another is still twitching as the current from a crash cart courses through him. Mostly, though, there are just body parts.

“Oh my god!” Jill yells from behind him. She sounds on the edge of a hysterical breakdown—Sam can’t blame her: he’s never seen carnage this bad and he’s been dealing with violent death his whole life.

But any thoughts of Jill and the people who died here vanish from his mind as he skids in the blood pool outside Dean’s room—crumpled nurse’s body on the floor that probably matches the pool and the arterial spray on the wall. Sam can’t see her face, but the spill of dark hair obscuring it and the trim lines of the body make him think it might be Rachel. When he left tonight, she was sitting at the nurses’ station filling out paperwork.

Now he stumbles over her without a backward glance, gun up and already turning to cover all the corners as he enters his brother’s room. There’s no blood here, but the bed, the bed is fucking empty and there’s a hospital jonnie lying discarded in the middle of the floor. The flowers are wilted, the hex bag open and the contents scattered. The areas of the walls that Sam and Dad and Bobby spent the last three weeks coating with protective symbols are smoking and cracked.

“Sam,” Dad calls from behind him. His father’s voice is choked and desperate, begging, but Sam doesn’t have any response. His hands and chest are numb; his legs weak as they give out and drop him down to the knees.

“He’s gone,” he mumbles through clumsy lips. “It took him.”

A heavy tread in the doorway alerts him to Bobby’s arrival—man must have stayed back to handle Jill—but Sam still doesn’t turn. His hands tremble where they’re folded around the Colt. Useless now, with nothing to shoot at. With no one to save.

“The blood’s still fresh,” Bobby announces from the doorway. “They could still be here.”
But Sam remembers the way that the demon had just vanished from the burning nursery window, and he’s sure that isn’t the case, that the demon has already flown the coop and taken his brother with it. He unhooks one hand from the Colt’s handle and reaches out. Brushes his trembling fingertips against Dean’s discarded jonnie.

—flash—

A stairwell, grey walls and blue linoleum.

—flash—

Bloody hands grasping at the wall.

—flash—

Bare feet stumbling on the clean linoleum of a landing and leaving red streaks behind.

There’s a sound laid over everything, harsh and labored, and it’s Dean trying to catch his breath: trying to get his injured lungs to work the way they’re supposed to.

Spurred by a sharp spasm of hope, Sam jerks himself out of the vision this time instead of waiting to be booted. It hurts even more to do that, and he feels something give way in his head with an agonizing snap. Blood trickles out one nostril and onto his lips, hot and coppery.

But for all the pain, his mind has cleared. His fear and anger and desperation have coalesced into a hard, determined calm.

“They’re still here,” he says, scrambling to his feet. “In a stairwell somewhere. But we have to move fast.” When he turns around, Bobby and Dad are standing just inside the room, both clearly ready for action, but ... “Where’s Jill?”

“I put her in one of the rooms,” Bobby says. “It was empty.”

“Which one?” Sam’s already moving, pushing past Bobby and out into the hallway. Now that his brain is working better, the sight leaves Sam slightly breathless. Fuck, the demon had to have been seriously pissed off to do something as showy—and as blatant—as this.

“Seven fourteen,” Bobby calls, trotting after him. The clack of Dad’s crutches trail after him as well, but Sam doesn’t look back as he races down the hall and pushes through the door.

Jill is sitting on the empty hospital bed. Her face is twisted into a horrified mask, but her eyes are blank. Vacant.

Sam needs her here.

“Jill,” he calls, crossing the room with three strides and grabbing her by the shoulders. “Jill!” he repeats, louder, and gives her a shake.

She blinks at that, coming back a little, and tilts her face up toward him. “Sam?” she mumbles. “Why’re you . . .” She trails off as her eyes sharpen with awareness, and then her breath hitches. “Oh my God. Everyone’s—Wendy’s eye, she—”

“Jill! Jill, look at me. Look at me, okay? I need you to calm down.”

But Jill’s wide eyes are overflowing with tears and her breath is speeding. She looks like she’s headed for a full blown freak out, and Sam doesn’t blame her—he’s used to this kind of thing and he
could do with one himself—but they don’t have time for it. Not if they’re going to get Dean back in one piece.

Driven by the need to get Dean back—to save him—Sam’s mind twists. It’s similar to the sensation that came over him in the cabin when he struck out at the demon, and he instinctively clings to the feeling as he says, “Jill, I need you to be calm and here with me.”

The terror in Jill’s eyes vanishes immediately. She looks around at the walls of the room, and then at the gun crushed awkwardly between her shoulder and Sam’s right hand, and then, finally, at Sam.

“What the hell happened out there?” she says as she lifts one hand to wipe at the tears on her face.

“Stairs,” Sam demands, ignoring the question. “I need to know where the stairs are.”

“Stairs? What—”

“The thing that butchered everyone out there has Dean and it’s taking him out through the stairs. I need to know where they are.”

More awareness filters into Jill’s gaze at his words, along with a hesitant determination that would make Sam proud to be her friend if he weren’t so focused on getting to Dean.

“There are four,” she answers. “Two main stairwells and two back.”

Fuck. Four is too many to check. Hell, two would be too many.

“The stairs were blue,” Sam says, dredging up as many details from the vision as he can remember. “The walls were grey.”

And oh thank God Jill nods like that means something.

“East stair,” she says confidently. “There’s an emergency exit at the bottom, leads out next to the ambulance bay.”

“Show me.” It’s inexcusable, dragging her further into what has clearly turned into a clusterfuck, but Dean’s face is foremost in Sam’s mind and he doesn’t even hesitate. Jill doesn’t question the request either. She just nods and then hurries out into the hall, where Dad and Bobby are waiting.

She turns to the right—toward Dean’s room—and then freezes, her eyes wide.

“R-Rachel?”

Sam curses silently, thinking that Jill has caught sight of the body—her roommate, should’ve dragged it out of the way first—and then steps out into the hall and freezes himself.

The body he stepped over to get into Dean’s room was indeed Rachel’s. Her throat has been slit, deep enough and widely enough for Sam to see bone through the gaping, bloodied wound. Above the wound, Rachel’s mouth is twisted in a sneer. Her eyes are black, mocking holes.

Demon.

Something falls over behind him and Sam whips his head around to see the nurse who was slumped over the desk rising. The pencil is still sticking out of her left eye socket, but her right eye has filled with black. She’s wearing the same twisted smile.

Of course the demon left rearguards.
He senses movement at his elbow—Jill starting forward—and turns around to grab her arm. She looks up at him, confused and frightened.

“That’s not Rachel,” he says tightly.

Down the hall, the demon possessing Jill’s former roommate opens its mouth in a silent laugh.

“No,” Jill breathes. She’s crying now—in a resigned, quiet way. “No, I know. But we—the stairs are that way.”

Past Rachel.

Then again, better past Rachel than past the three demons closing in behind them.

“We’ve got this,” Dad says, balancing on one crutch while pulling a gun out of his oversized coat pocket. “Just get Dean.”

Sam still isn’t sure how he’s supposed to get past Rachel without getting tossed around like a rag doll, but then Bobby lets out a roar and charges forward. The demon in Rachel looks startled for a moment, as though it didn’t expect such a suicidal move, and then Bobby crashes into it and sends them both through the open door and into Dean’s room.

The path before them is wide open now and Sam doesn’t need any more invitation than that. Still holding onto Jill, he runs to the end of the hall and then, at Jill’s urging, spins them both left. There’s more carnage here—nothing but body parts and blood, nothing complete enough for possession, thankfully—but Jill lets out a hysterical shriek and jerks back. Sam, shooting a frustrated glance down at her, notes the upturned direction of her gaze and follows her line of sight to find a severed head hanging from one of the sprinklers. The head looks like it’s grinning.

His own stomach lurches, but he shoves the horror away and yanks Jill forward again. “Come on,” he says. “They can’t hurt you.”

“Sam,” Jill sobs as she stumbles along with him. “Sam, I can’t—Jesus, what’s happening?”

“Demons,” Sam answers succinctly. “Bobby and Dad told you in the car.”

“Sam, please. Please, just stop—I can’t. I can’t do this, I can’t—”

And fuck, Sam can’t take it anymore. He stops moving long enough to shove her against a wall, forearm across her throat to shut her up as she blinks up at him with wide, panicked eyes.

“It has Dean, do you hear me? It has Dean, and it’s going to rape him over and over again unless you get your shit together and fucking help me!”

He jerks back without waiting for a response, time not just slipping through his fingers but rushing past with supersonic speed, and then starts forward again, jogging this time with his hand still clamped around Jill’s arm.

“What way?”

“R-right there,” Jill stutters, and when Sam makes the turn, he realizes that he doesn’t need Jill anymore because there’s more carnage here—red dripping from the ceiling and coating the walls and floor with a slick layer of blood. Jesus Christ, the demon didn’t even bother trying to be subtle as it made its way out: it just ripped through everything in its path, turning the seventh floor into a slaughterhouse.
Releasing Jill’s elbow, he moves faster, ignoring the sound of her calling his name as he follows the trail of blood and death. There are footprints on the floor now: two sets. One of the sets—clear and confident—belongs to a pair of shoes with looping soles; the other—slipping all over the place and smudged—to bare feet. And those prints—one of them on the wall about a foot up from the floor—are signs of Dean. Dean still fighting, trying to slow the demon down any way he can.

Sam’s heart beats faster and he manages to push himself to one last burst of speed, bloodied shoes squeaking on the floor as he does his best not to step in anything that used to be human. Then, suddenly, the trail vanishes. Sam skids to a halt, breath freezing in his lungs, and spins in a tight circle, trying to figure out what happened. They can’t have vanished into thin air, not now, not when Sam was so—

The door to his left is marked STAIRS.

He bursts through without any thought of subtlety or silence, banging the door wide on its hinges. There’s more blood on the walls here—Dean’s hands scrambling for purchase—and more bloody tracks and smears on the linoleum. Sam’s nose has adjusted to the demon smell on the seventh floor, but the scent is stronger in here and he gags again, reflexively lifting the back of one hand to his nose to block out the reek.

And then he hears the sounds of struggle rising up from below: labored breathing, the thud of something knocking against the stairwell walls, the squeak of bare feet sliding on the floor.

Dean.

Sam takes the stairs two or three at a time, heedless of any possibility of falling. The Colt feels warm and electrified in his hand—feels deadly. There’s only one bullet left, but Sam knows exactly who’s getting it. This time, he isn’t going to hesitate. Isn’t going to spare a single thought for whatever poor schmuck got himself possessed.

He’s on the second floor landing when he catches sight of his brother below—just a sliver of Dean’s bare shoulder, down on the ground floor. It drives all thought of caution from him and he launches himself over the railing, dropping the last two flights to land with a crash. He hits the ground wrong, misses his footing, but he’s up in the next moment, gun up and eyes sighting for a target.

He finds himself facing Dean.

His brother isn’t completely naked, Sam sees now—he’s wearing a pair of those flimsy hospital pants—but for the first time since the accident, Sam’s getting a clear view of his brother’s chest. Healing bruises cover Dean’s skin like storm clouds, shot through with jagged lightning bolts of scars from the incisions the doctors made when they were trying to stop Dean from bleeding out internally. The protection tattoo is whole and unblemished over Dean’s heart: Sam’s claim solid and dark on Dean’s hip. And layered on top of everything is a splattering of blood that makes it difficult to tell whether Dean’s been hurt tonight or not—too much cast off from the slaughter upstairs for Sam to be sure.

There’s an arm slung low around Dean’s waist. Another hooked around his throat. The rest of the demon is hidden behind the bulk of Dean’s body, leaving Sam with nothing to aim at except a thin sliver of face and one mocking, yellow eye.

Dean’s clearly struggling for breath, and likely has been for some time, but he’s still fighting even now: one hand trying to pull the demon’s arm away from his throat, the other groping behind him for the son of a bitch’s face. Sam doesn’t think his brother even knows he’s there.
Sickened by the sight of the demon’s hands on his brother—of Dean held so close—Sam sights down the gun, trying to focus on that single, mocking eye. It doesn’t take him more than a couple of seconds to realize that he can’t take the shot. Not and be sure he won’t hit Dean too.

Damn it.

“Sammy,” the demon greets him cheerfully. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Let him go.”

“What, so you can shoot me? I don’t think so.” The demon trails its hand inward from Dean’s hip to push against the center of his stomach, pressing him more tightly against its borrowed body. “Besides, Dean and I have business.”

“You said he was for me,” Sam tries.

“Oh, he is. But he’s not quite ready yet, are you, Dean-o? Need a little more training to be perfect.”

It pushes its hand down, into Dean’s pants, and Sam’s finger twitches reflexively on the trigger—not quite enough pressure to make the gun go off, thankfully, because Dean grunts and twists and Sam has lost line of sight completely now. He wants to tell Dean to stay still so he can at least try to shoot the bastard, but he knows that he can’t waste their one chance on a maybe. Besides, Dean’s past being able to obey that kind of order right now.

Sam’s vision pulses red as watches Dean give up on the arm around his throat to drive an elbow back into the demon’s body. The blow is clearly weak—pathetically so, as far as Sam can tell—and Dean doesn’t bother trying again. Instead, both of his hands grip the demon’s forearm just above where it disappeared into his pants and pull.

Sam doesn’t have to see the flex of the demon’s hand through the thin fabric to know that the son of a bitch has tightened its grip. He can tell from Dean’s strangled shout, and the way his brother finally goes still, mouth open and gasping fruitlessly for breath.

“There,” the demon purrs, forearm flexing around Dean’s throat. “That’s better, isn’t it?”

Dean blinks with studious deliberation, eyes vague and unfocused, and fuck, Sam can’t take this anymore.

“Let him go!” he yells, lowering the gun slightly and moving forward. He might not be able to shoot the demon from here, but if he can pull it off of his brother, he’ll get his shot all right.

“Careful,” the demon warns, backing Dean up toward the emergency exit behind them. “Wouldn’t want to have any accidents, would we?” Its arm pulls tighter around Dean’s throat, making Dean choke and grab at its forearm again.

“You’re not going to kill him,” Sam accuses. “You want him too much.”

But he stops anyway, pulse racing and mouth bitter with desperation, because he isn’t sure if that’s true. He isn’t sure, and he can’t handle the panic in Dean’s eyes as he struggles for breath.

Now that Sam isn’t trying to come any closer, the demon relaxes slightly—enough to let Dean get some air in—and makes a tsking sound low in its throat. “He’s pretty, Sam, but he’s still just a toy as far as I’m concerned. If it comes down to a choice between him and me, I’m pulling the plug.”

It isn’t bluffing. The demon’s sense of self-preservation is stronger than whatever fascination it has
for Dean. If Sam pushes this, it'll kill his brother. Even if it doesn’t need to in order to get away, it’ll kill him. It'll kill Dean in a fit of pique, just to make sure no one else can have what it can’t.

Heart in his throat, Sam backs up a few steps and lowers the gun, ignoring the betrayed flash in Dean’s eyes as he does so.

“Jesus Christ!” Jill’s voice comes from behind Sam. He’s startled by the sound—thought he left her behind on the seventh floor—but he doesn’t turn around.

The demon’s one visible eye flicks over briefly and then returns to Sam. “Gonna introduce me to your lady friend, Sammy?”

“Get out of here, Jill,” Sam says, keeping his eyes on the demon.

Instead, he senses her moving closer—moving right up behind him where his own vulnerability makes his skin crawl. “His eyes,” she breathes. “They’re ... they’re yellow.”

“Oh, I like her,” the demon announces. “She’s observant.” Its eye dips as it gives a mostly-concealed nod behind Dean. “Now, toss over the gun.”

“How about you go fuck yourself,” Sam suggests.

“How about I go fuck your brother?” the demon counters. Dean’s face screws up as its hand does something in his pants. “Oh wait, I forgot. I already did.”

Sam has no way of knowing for sure, but he prays like hell it means before, that it means in Vegas. Not upstairs. Not here. Not tonight.

“...shoot it...” It’s just an exhale, barely audible with no breath behind the words, but Sam’s eyes snap to his brother’s instantly. Dean finally looks more pissed off than panicked, although Sam knows the fear has to be in there somewhere, buried down deep while Dean fights to get himself out of this.

And Sam knows what Dean means—knows that in order to be sure of getting the demon, he’d have to shoot it right through his brother’s chest. He can tell from the fatality lacing Dean’s expression that Dean knows exactly what he’s asking for.

“Shoot it,” Dean gets out again, louder this time.

It’s such a stupid command that Sam feels justified in ignoring it altogether.

“I’m not asking again, Sammy,” the demon says, jerking his attention back to that mocking, yellow eye. “Toss the gun over now or your brother’s going to learn what it’s like to have to piss sitting down.” Dean grimaces, throat cording as the demon illustrates its threat, and Sam is tempted to obey if it’ll get the demon to stop hurting him.

Then he realizes that the moment he gives up the gun Dean is gone.

Hell, he doesn’t understand why Dean isn’t already gone—why the demon hasn’t just tossed Sam against the wall and walked him out. Why it hasn’t pulled the Colt out of Sam’s hand and into its own.

As he hesitates, working that problem through in his head, he challenges, “Why don’t you just take it, if you want it so bad? What was it you said? Make the gun float to you there?”
The demon’s eye narrows, and the flare of its rage pulses against Sam’s skin like heat.

“You can’t, can you?” Sam pushes, groping after comprehension. “What, you use up all your mojo murdering innocent people upstairs?”

“That?” The demon laughs. “That was fun. Think I’ll do it again when we’re done here. Children’s ward, maybe.” It tilts its face toward Dean and nuzzles at his neck, making him scrunch his face in revulsion. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, Dean-o? Paint all that pretty skin of yours with baby’s blood.”

The thought is enough to turn Sam’s stomach, but he refuses to let himself be distracted. “Why didn’t you just take Dean from the room?”

“...tried...” Dean pants, and then shuts up again as the demon’s arm jerks back against his throat.

“It’s the tattoo, isn’t it?” Sam says—less of a guess by now than a realization. “Maybe you can still touch him, but you couldn’t just take him.”

And how it must have pissed the demon off when it realized that. How angry it must have been. Hell, the evidence of its fury litters the trail it took through the hospital—all those people butchered because the demon was throwing a temper tantrum. It’s a sickening thought, and later Sam thinks he’s going to come in for his own share of guilt over it, but right now he mostly feels triumphant.

It worked. The tattoo worked.

“That’s why you’re down here with him,” he says. “You can’t just disappear.”

“Don’t get too used to it,” the demon snarls. “First order of business is ripping it out of his skin.”

“You tried that too,” Sam guesses, and knows from the demon’s silence that he’s right. “That’s why you can’t just grab the gun. You used up all your strength trying to remove it.”

“Anything can be broken,” the demon says.

Sam thinks of the wards they left on Dean’s room, all of them blown wide open and smoking, and knows that the demon’s words are true. Given a month, or maybe no more than a week, the demon would probably find a way to strip Dean’s protections away like it wants. Hell, the solution might be as simple as getting a human to do its dirty work for it.

“Maybe,” he agrees, tightening his grip on the gun. “But you aren’t going to have that chance.”

The demon catches the flex of his fingers and flicks its eye down to his hand. “You going to shoot me, Sam?” it asks. “You’ll have to shoot Dean-o too, and I don’t think he’s in any condition to survive that kind of shock, do you?”

Dean isn’t. Even if Sam just clipped him—shot through his shoulder, maybe—the shock would be enough to kill him. Hell, getting shot with a normal gun right now would probably finish Dean off.

As he hesitates, the demon says, “Tell you what, Sammy. Since I’m such a sucker for a sob story, I’ll make you a deal. You toss over the Colt and I’ll let you have Dean. What do you say?”

A hunk of metal for Dean. It seems like a ludicrously unbalanced bargain.

“For good?” Sam checks, hardly daring to believe his luck. “You won’t bother him again?”

Sure enough, the demon laughs. “You aren’t in a good enough bargaining position to ask me for
Dean’s breath is rasping in and out in a really alarming way, but he still manages to gasp, “No. Sammy, no.”

“Well, Dean,” the demon says mildly, and Dean throws back his head and says, “No, son of a bitch!”

“Who asked you?” the demon says mildly, and Dean’s mouth snaps shut. His eyes flood with fear and Sam knows instantly that Dean didn’t decide to shut up on his own. Which means the demon’s power is already starting to come back. A few more minutes and Sam won’t need to worry about giving the gun to the demon because it’ll be able to just take it from him.

The demon’s single visible eye glitters triumphantly. “Tick tock, Sammy.”

“Okay,” Sam blurts, flicking the safety back on and holding both hands out in front of him. “Okay, the gun for Dean. Deal.”

He crouches, keeping his eyes on the demon, and sets the gun on the floor. The son of a bitch stays hidden behind Dean, watching as Sam pushes the gun across the floor. The Colt hits one of Dean’s bare feet and his brother jerks away from it with a grimace.

“Oh, uh, Dean-o,” the demon reproves.

Sam looks more carefully at his brother, confused, and realizes that Dean wasn’t jerking away from the gun. He was moving to kick it back in Sam’s direction. The self-sacrificing, stupid shit.

“Pick it up and give it to me.”

There’s power lacing those words, enough that Sam can feel it even if he isn’t tempted to do anything. But he sees the words take root in Dean, and the demon releases his brother so that he can bend down and pick up the Colt. Dean closes his hand around it like he means to use it, and it’s clear to Sam that he wants to, but when the demon reaches out, Dean lets it take the gun away.

“Good boy,” the demon says, mocking, and then yanks Dean in again. With a single movement, it cocks the Colt, setting the muzzle against Dean’s temple, and then slides its arm back into place around Dean’s neck. “Pleasure doing business with you, Sammy.”

“No!” Sam yells. He jerks forward a step before bringing himself up short, mindful of the gun barrel pressed against his brother’s head. “We had a deal!”

“It’s not a deal unless it’s sealed with a kiss,” the demon responds, backing up and bringing Dean with it. “That was just you playing the sucker. Don’t worry, though: I’ll take good care of your brother for you. You didn’t want him yet anyway—boy can’t suck cock for shit.”

Sam chokes at that, looking to Dean for confirmation that it isn’t just an idle taunt—that the demon knows what it’s talking about. Dean isn’t looking back at him, though. He has his eyes closed, his face stiff with determination as he struggles to pull the demon’s arm away from his throat. He’s either oblivious of the gun at his temple or just doesn’t give a shit.

Sam prays it’s the former.

“Pity,” the demon muses insincerely. “You’d think he’d be a natural with that mouth, wouldn’t you?”

“You son of a bitch,” Sam whispers, sickened by how much it’s enjoying this, by what it’s saying, by the fact that he just gave his brother to it again, and that’s when Dean gives up on trying to get
Instead, Dean grabs the barrel of the gun with one hand and the grip with the other. Before Sam has time to process the movement, Dean has shoved a finger over the trigger on top of the demon’s. The sound of the shot is deafening in the closed stairwell, and Sam’s scream of denial is lost amid the echoes.

He sprints forward, catching Dean before he can fall, and staring at the blood spilling down through his brother’s hair.

“No,” he moans. “No no no no no.”

But then Dean blinks, and his hand comes up to grab Sam’s shoulder. He moves in Sam’s arms, conscious and alive, and Jesus Christ, how is that possible? Sam shifts his grip on his brother, getting Dean up into the crook of his arm so that he can position Dean’s head with one hand and feel for the bullet hole with the other. There is no hole, though: there’s only a furrow of torn skin back behind and above his right ear, no more than a flesh wound.

Belatedly, Sam looks back at the demon and finds it on the floor, staring sightlessly up at the ceiling while its body shakes and flashes with white lightning. There’s a red hole where its right eye used to be, and the left is draining of yellow, returning to its normal brown.

Dead.

The demon’s dead.

Dean killed it.

Sam recognizes the body now that he can see it fully—one of Dean’s two police-provided bodyguards. The man is still wearing his uniform, which isn’t as bloodied as Dean’s body, but still sports its own share of gore. A dead cop. A dead cop Dean just killed.

Jesus Christ.

“Sam,” Dean coughs, and Sam’s attention snaps back to his brother.

“Hey man, it’s okay,” he promises.

Cradling Dean’s body close, he soothes a hand through his brother’s hair, careful of the wound behind his ear. Fuck, he doesn’t want to think of how close Dean came to sending that bullet through his own skull instead of the demon’s. He doesn’t want to consider the possibility that Dean didn’t particularly care which one of them died when he pulled that stupid, stupid stunt.

There’s a footstep behind him and Sam spins, reaching for a weapon he doesn’t have. In his arms, Dean makes a frightened, lost noise and pushes closer, hiding his face against Sam’s chest.

But it’s just Jill. Jill standing there with her face ashen and her eyes wide and shocked. “Is it dead?” she whispers. “Is it—” Then she catches sight of the body and her breath catches. “Jesus, it’s Chris.”

“He was possessed,” Sam explains shortly, already turning away from her to see to his brother. When he tries to ease back, Dean’s hold on him tightens, resistant. “Hey. Dean, it’s okay. It’s just Jill. You’re safe.”

“No,” Dean pants between labored breaths. “ Doesn’t matter ... demons ... could ... could come back.”
“It’s dead,” Sam promises, rubbing a hand up and down his brother’s bare back. “You killed it, man.”

Dean doesn’t respond, but Sam realizes that his brother is shivering every time his hand drops lower than the bottom of Dean’s shoulder blades, and then he remembers the demon’s taunts, and he freezes. “Dean, are you—did it hurt you?”

Dean goes stiff.

“Dean?” Sam asks again, chest clenching.

Dean shakes his head once, which could really mean anything, and Sam looks back up at Jill. “Can you help me get him up?” he asks. “He needs to be checked out.”

But Dean pulls away at that, shaking his head again and scrambling to his feet on his own. “I’m fine,” he says, although the way he’s clutching at the wall and fighting for breath brands him a big fat liar. “Nothing happened.”

Not looking at Sam. Not looking at any of them.

“Dean,” Sam tries softly. “If you’re hurt, we need to have the doctors—”

“No one’s touching me,” Dean gasps out.

“At least let Jill look at your head, okay?” Sam compromises, but Dean shakes his head again and backs up, still hugging the wall. He’s trembling all over, like a frightened dog. There’s blood dripping from his head onto his shoulder now, adding to the mess already there.

“Dean,” Jill says, keeping her voice as soft as Sam’s. “Dean, can you let Sam look at you if I talk him through it?”

Sam glances at her, surprised and grateful for the suggestion. Jill still looks shocked and winded, but she manages a wavering smile in Sam’s direction, and Sam has never felt so much like kissing anyone in his life. When he looks back over at his brother, Dean has straightened a little, and he isn’t meeting Sam’s eyes but he’s at least looking at his chest. Which is a start.

After a moment, he licks his lips and nods.

They keep the examination above the waist and as brief as possible, and by the time Jill declares herself satisfied, Sam’s touch seems to be calming Dean again instead of frightening him. Dean’s leaning into his hands, heedless of Jill’s presence, and his eyes are painfully trusting as he watches Sam’s face.

When the stairwell door slams open unexpectedly, he flinches into Sam instead of away.

Sam’s heart lurches as he jumps forward, pushing Dean behind him, and Jill lets out a startled, half-smothered shriek. Then Sam catches sight of a familiar baseball cap and floods with relief as Bobby steps into the stairwell. From the wide-eyed, breathless look on the man’s face, Sam is pretty sure he’s safe, but he gasps a check out anyway.

“Christo.”

Bobby doesn’t even acknowledge it, too busy taking in Dean pressed close against Sam’s back and the body behind them on the floor. He’s holding his left side and moving with a weary limp, and Sam would ask if he’s okay if his attention weren’t suddenly snapping to Dad as he limps in after
him. Their father doesn’t look much better off, using only one dented crutch and sporting a gash high on his right cheekbone. The fingertips on his free hand are coated with blood Sam guesses isn’t his own.

Dad’s eyes sharpen as he catches sight of Dean behind Sam, face filling with a terrible emotion that isn’t quite relief or sorrow or guilt but some mix of all three.

“Dean,” he breathes, starting forward.

Dean jerks into Sam more firmly. His hands tighten where they’re locked on Sam’s arm and bunched in the back of his coat. Sam can feel his brother trembling against him; can hear Dean’s breathing, which was starting to calm, slip into an erratic, shallow rhythm again.

Over by the door, Dad stops. His face crumples into a broken, devastated expression and his eyes water. Sam’s chest tightens uncomfortably at the sight, and he searches for something to say—some small comfort he can offer as a patch for the moment—but before he can find anything even remotely suitable, Dad straightens. His mouth twitches once and then the professional, cool mask of a hunter at work slips down over his face. Only his eyes give him away, darker and more damned than Sam has ever seen them.

“He okay?” Dad asks, turning his attention on Sam.

The answer to that question is no, not at fucking all, but Sam knows that their father isn’t asking about Dean’s emotional or mental state so he only answers, “The bullet grazed him, but he’s fine.”

Dad’s eyes flick down to the body on the floor and back up again to linger on Dean’s hand where it’s visible on Sam’s arm. “The demon?”

“Dead.”

Bobby nods where he’s leaning against the wall with his hand still clasped to his side. “Figured as much. Bastards had us cornered when they suddenly decided to blow out of here for no good reason.”

“Okay,” Dad says, taking a deep breath and forcing his eyes away from Dean’s hand. “We can’t stay here. We’ll drive for a couple of hours, get Dean checked in somewhere else.”

“No,” Dean says. His face is still pressed between Sam’s shoulder blades, but the protest is clearly audible. “No hospitals.”


Although he’s gripping Sam tightly enough now to be leaving bruises, Dean lifts his head at that. Sam can’t see behind him, but he knows from the sudden stiffness of Dad’s body that Dean’s peering over his shoulder. “I’m okay. She said I was okay.”

Dad frowns a little at that, looking around as though he’s confused just who ‘she’ might be. Sam can sympathize. He keeps forgetting Jill is there too. The nurse fidgets uncomfortably as their attention shifts to her—to the outsider in their midst—and then the alarm over the emergency exit door goes off. Sam hears the same siren echoing deeper within the hospital, the sound of panic.

Someone found the bodies.

Bobby swears and Dad’s face creases in annoyance, but Sam can only laugh softly. Fucking figures. With their luck, the police will throw them all in lockup as murderers, Dean included.
“You have to get out of here,” Jill announces, yelling to be heard over the alarm.

Sam blinks at her, surprised, and Jill looks back at him with the clearest expression she’s worn since they stepped out of the elevator into ICU.

“I’m not stupid,” she says. “There’s going to be a whole host of questions you can’t answer about this, and Chris—” She swallows thickly, turning her face further away from the body on the floor. “You need to get out of here. Take Dean and go. I’ll call you later. I can—if you’re worried about Dean, I can check on him.”

Sam feels a thick pulse of gratitude, and he offers her a sincere, “Thank you,” before turning to herd Dean back over the cop’s body and out the emergency exit and into the night.
Chapter 46

Dean won’t let Sam come into the bathroom with him when they get to Bobby’s. He’s weak enough that Sam could force the issue—wants to force the issue—but Dean has his shoulders hunched and his eyes lowered, like he’s already expecting as much, and in the end Sam doesn’t have the heart. He can always check later—check the thin hospital pants for traces of blood even if Dean won’t let him look.

After what Dean’s been through, Sam’s going to do his best to respect as many of his brother’s self-imposed boundaries as he possibly can.

He leaves Dean there with an oversized towel and a change of clothes—sweats and a t-shirt, nothing fancy—and goes downstairs to the kitchen, where Dad and Bobby are sitting with an open bottle of whisky on the table between them. The bottle’s almost full, but Sam senses from their grim expressions that by the end of the night it’ll be empty and sitting in the trash. He pulls a chair out and sits down himself, grabbing the bottle and taking a swig before passing it to his father.

“How’s he doing?” Dad asks, one hand wrapped loosely around the neck of the bottle. He isn’t really looking at Sam, staring off in the vague direction of the fridge, but that’s okay because Sam doesn’t feel like meeting anyone’s eyes right now anyway.

“Showering,” he answers, although that much is already obvious from the steady sound of water running through pipes above them.

“I asked how, not what,” Dad grunts, and takes a swig of the whisky.

Sam gets the distinction—he got it the first time. He just doesn’t know how to answer that question, or maybe he does know but doesn’t want to. After a brief, confused pause, he rallies enough to offer the easy response.

“His breathing’s back to normal.”

Not new news, exactly—Dean’s lungs settled after only a half hour or so in the car—but Dad nods like it’s the answer he was going for and then slides the bottle over to Bobby, who immediately tips it back.

The mood in the room is all wrong: the demon’s dead, it’s over, they should be celebrating. But instead of relief and joy, Sam only feels a numb emptiness, underlain with concern for the fourth member of their victory party alone upstairs. Bobby and Dad are wearing similar expressions—weariness tinged with grief—and the air in the room seems too heavy. The silence is too present, like an uninvited guest, and when Sam takes the bottle back from Bobby and chases his first swallow with a second, the burn of the whisky barely registers.

The demon’s dead and they’re sitting around the table like shell-shocked, defeated soldiers. Like they lost instead of won.

“So what happened?” Bobby asks finally. “You shoot it?”

There’s a dim pulse of remembered panic as Sam sees the moment again in his head—blood in Dean’s hair, Dean’s crumpled body on the floor—and then it sinks again, pulled down by what Sam thinks is probably shock.

“No,” he says. “Dean did.”
And then he tells them everything, not sparing himself—his own stupidity in tossing the gun over—at all. It takes a while, mostly because he has to keep stopping to clear his throat or ask for more whisky. By the time he’s done, there’s less than two inches of alcohol left in the bottle, but Sam doesn’t feel drunk. Much as he’d like to be right now.

“Did it touch him again?” Dad wants to know, and Sam is in no way up to dealing with that question.

“He wouldn’t tell me,” he answers after a moment where he tries and fails to collect himself. “But the demon—what it said.”

Dad doesn’t nod or acknowledge the point, but he reaches over and reclaims the bottle, taking a long, slow swig, and Sam guesses that’s response enough. Silence falls again, more uncomfortable than before, and Sam finds himself tipping his head back and looking up at the ceiling. Looking in the direction of the shower, which is still running.

It’s been a while now, and he’s starting to think he should go up and check on Dean, but before he can, Dad stirs and clears his throat. When Sam looks over in his father’s direction, Dad still isn’t looking at him, but he’s coming closer to it.

“I’m going to let you boys share a room,” Dad says, “But only because I don’t think Dean’s up to being alone. And I’m expecting you to hold to your promise and keep your hands to yourself.”

The reminder of Dad’s disapproval stings, but Sam’s less concerned with that than he is with the fact that Dad’s airing family business in front of Bobby. He glances in the man’s direction and finds Bobby still looking glumly down at his own lap—no cap again, and the kitchen light is shining off the top of his head through his thinning hair. For a moment, Sam thinks maybe Bobby was too lost in his thoughts to have made any sense out of Dad’s words.

Then he remembers that he didn’t censor himself at all when reporting his meeting with the demon in the stairwell, and fuck, he just outted them to Bobby.

“Sam,” Dad says, pulling his attention back. “You mind me.”

“Yeah, I heard you,” Sam mutters. He wishes Bobby would look up so that he could gauge just how disgusted the man is. Wishes Dad weren’t here so that he could tell Bobby it isn’t Dean’s fault—any of it.

But when Bobby does lift his head, he bypasses Sam altogether to stare at the ceiling. “Boy’s been up there awhile,” he comments, echoing Sam’s earlier thought. “Maybe someone should go check on him.”

From the way Dad shifts restlessly in his seat, Sam knows that their father wants that someone to be him. But Dean hasn’t been reacting well to anyone but Sam, and all three of them know it.

Sam still gives Dad a chance to volunteer—to pull his courage together and try—but when the silence continues to stretch out, he heaves himself up to his feet and says, “I’ll go.”

Now Dad moves, sitting up and grabbing onto Sam’s wrist. His grasp is bruisingly tight—almost punishing—but Sam’s initial anger at the blatant display of mistrust fades immediately when he looks at his father’s face. Dad’s staring at his own hand, eyes wet and a little shocked, as though he’s just as startled by his actions as Sam.

“You want to come with me?” Sam asks after a moment, keeping his voice carefully modulated and his opinion as to what a monumentally bad idea that would be to himself.
But Dad shakes his head. “No, you—we don’t want to spook him. Too many people at once, it’s not —” He releases Sam, shaking his head and shutting his mouth on the disjointed flow of words.

Sam glances over at Bobby for confirmation that someone’s going to be watching Dad while he’s dealing with Dean—and gets a slight, almost imperceptible nod in return. Released from at least that small responsibility, Sam turns to go.

This time, it’s Dad’s voice that stops him.

“Sammy.”

Sam glances back, one eyebrow quirked in question, and then stills when he sees Dean’s amulet hanging from Dad’s hand.

“He might want this back,” Dad says, and Sam nods, reaching out to take it. Dad lets go with reluctance, like it’s Dean he’s giving up instead of a hunk of metal. Sam guesses maybe it feels that way. He takes a moment to clap a reassuring hand on his father’s shoulder before finally making his way out of the kitchen and over to the stairs.

The trek up to the guest room is unexpectedly exhausting—suddenly, all Sam wants to do is get Dean in his arms and go to sleep—and he rubs wearily at his eyes with the thumb and forefingers of his left hand as he knocks on the bathroom door.

“Dean? How you doing, man?”

There’s no response but the steady patter of water hitting ceramic.

Fresh fear pushes through Sam’s exhaustion, leaving everything in sharp outline again. Making him more aware than ever that it’s been almost an hour since he left Dean up here to wash up.

“Dean?” he calls again, knocking louder this time.

Still nothing.

He tries the door then, and when the knob won’t turn his stomach kicks and a hard, sharp pain clogs his throat. Stupidly, he jiggles the handle as though it’s just stuck and will open if he tries long enough, and then pounds on the door with the side of one fist and yells, “Dean! Answer me!”

When the noise of falling water continues unabated, Sam clenches his jaw and gets a better grip on the knob before lining up his shoulder with the edge of the door.

“I’m coming in!” he warns, and then slams his body against the wood as hard as he can. It rattles in its frame, but otherwise doesn’t budge. Sam’s shoulder and side ache from the first impact, but he doesn’t give it a moment’s thought before throwing himself against the door a second time, and then a third.

On the fourth blow, the door snaps open and Sam stumbles into the bathroom.

Steam billows out, making it difficult to see and breathe (fuck, this can’t be good for Dean’s lungs), but Sam narrows his eyes and details come to him through the white swirl. There’s a pile of ashes in the sink: a discarded lighter on the floor. The towel is wet and crumpled on the tiles beside it, and the clothes are gone from the toilet seat where Sam left them because Dean is wearing them. Dean is wearing them and standing dumbly beneath the full spray of the shower, staring at the tiles with absolutely no expression on his face. He looks like an oddly placed mannequin.
As a second ticks past and Sam recovers from his abrupt entrance—from seeing Dean alive and not dead with slashed wrists or a makeshift rope around his neck—he realizes that what he can see of Dean’s skin is bright red. Which makes sense, considering the steam-packed room.

“Shit,” he mutters, lurching forward and wrenching the water off. The few seconds he gets of the flow is bad enough to leave his own skin stinging, and he shakes his right hand as he gets hold of Dean with his left and pulls him out of the shower.

Dean comes docilely enough, blinking up at Sam with a confused, mostly vacant expression. “Sammy?” he mumbles.

“Yeah,” Sam answers. God, Dean’s burning up. Sam’s brain stutters around for an acceptable solution and then, after a few seconds of synaptic delay, he maneuvers Dean right back into the shower and turns the water back on—cooler this time, although hopefully not so cold as to shock Dean’s system.

Dean starts at the sensation, eyes clearing further, and tries to step forward. Sam grips him by both arms and holds him in place. There’s a brief moment where Dean struggles with him, panic surging in his expression, and then Sam says, “Dean, it’s me. It’s Sammy,” and Dean quiets again.

He stands there shivering, and looks up at Sam from beneath waterlogged lashes with a questioning, wounded look on his face.

“Sorry,” Sam says, loosening his grip and rubbing his hands up and down his brother’s arms. “You burned yourself. Gotta get your temp back down, okay?”

Dean continues to watch him silently, uncomprehendingly.

“How’d you end up in the shower with your clothes on?” Sam asks, keeping his voice gentle. The answer to the question doesn’t really matter, but it’s the only one Sam can think to ask and Dean clearly needs some mental direction right now. He realizes he’s still holding onto the amulet with one hand—muscle habit—and takes a second to shove it into his pants pocket before getting his hand back on Dean again.

Dean frowns slightly as he thinks about it, and then, sluggishly, answers, “I was—I showered, and then I got dressed.”

“Okay,” Sam agrees, using one hand to smooth back the short spikes of Dean’s hair and keep the excess water from running into his eyes. “Then what?”

“Then I... skin felt... wasn’t clean yet. I didn’t.” His eyes clear a little more and he grimaces. “So stupid,” he mumbles. “Forgot to get undressed before I got back in.”

“Hey, it’s okay, man. Don’t worry about it, okay?”

Dean nods, but he doesn’t really look convinced, and a moment later he reaches out and grabs hold of the front of Sam’s shirt. He doesn’t so much pull Sam in as he lets his arm go limp and lets the dead weight of his hold do the asking for him, but Sam gets the message. Ignoring the chill of the water, he joins his brother under the spray. Dean leans into him, still hanging on with one hand. His other comes up to grip Sam’s hip as he drops his forehead against Sam’s shoulder with a shiver.

“Is it dead?” he breathes. “Did you—did I get it?”

Sam cups the back of his brother’s head gently with one hand, thumb just brushing the bullet groove. “Yeah, you did. You nailed the son of a bitch. It’s over. You’re safe.”
He stays there with his brother longer than he actually thinks is necessary for Dean’s minor burns, letting Dean have the illusion of privacy while his tears mingle with the water and the wracking shudders of his sobs can be passed off as nothing more than a reaction to the freezing temperature. But finally, when he thinks Dean is ready, he reaches around his brother and turns off the spray.

In the small bathroom, it’s difficult to maneuver them both out of the shower without barking his shin and knee on the toilet, but Dean shows no signs of wanting to let go and Sam isn’t about to make him. A couple of bruises is totally worth keeping an arm around Dean as they move from the bathroom and into the bedroom Sam guesses they’ll be sharing. He considers the bed for a moment and then detours and eases Dean down onto a musty chair instead.

“Can you hang here for a minute, man?” he asks. “I need to get some more towels.”

The look Dean gives him is a clear ‘no’, frightened and reluctant, but he nods anyway. With a nervous lick of his lips, he unclenches the hand he still has locked in Sam’s shirt and sets it down in his lap.

“One minute,” Sam promises, and then all but sprints out the door and down the hall to the linen closet. He grabs an armful of towels, not really caring how many or how large, and then runs back to the room.

Dean’s in the process of struggling with his wet, clinging t-shirt when he returns, and Sam throws the towels down on the bed.

“You want help?” He doesn’t expect his offer to be accepted, but Dean nods silently and doesn’t flinch away when Sam’s fingers brush his wet, bare skin. Sam leans away from his brother to toss the wet shirt back into the bathroom and then turns around to grab a towel. When he turns back, Dean is just straightening from having pushed the sweats down around his ankles.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Sam’s stomach gives an all too familiar lurch at the sight of his brother standing there naked and dripping. Dean has to see it on his face, but he doesn’t shy away or drop his eyes. He just stands there, waiting.

After a few moments, Sam makes himself hold out the towel and Dean takes it and starts wiping himself down. Sam turns away, giving his brother as much privacy as he can, and takes another towel into the bathroom, where he strips off his own sodden clothes.

He looks around for Dean’s hospital pants as he wipes himself off, and then catches sight of the ashes in the sink again and knows that he isn’t going to be checking for blood. Of course, the fact that Dean felt the need to burn the pants is pretty telling in and of itself: he wouldn’t have done something like that if he hadn’t had something to hide.

Sam feels fresh tears stinging behind his eyes but, after a moment of struggling with himself, the threat eases. In the other room, he can hear Dean moving around—the sound of zippers and clothing—and hurriedly balls all the wet clothing into a lump and tosses it into the shower to get it out of the way. The lighter goes into the medicine cabinet behind the mirror over the sink, and he wraps the towel he was using to dry himself around his waist.

When he moves back into the bedroom, Dean is sitting on the bed wearing a dry pair of sweatpants and an old, worn sweatshirt. It’s cold in the room, but Sam doesn’t actually think that figured into his brother’s choice of clothing. He carefully doesn’t comment on it, finding his own bag and getting dressed with his back to Dean before turning around to look at him again.

“How’s your head?” he asks then, moving forward to check. He keeps his movements slow,
broadcasting them well in advance, but he might as well not have bothered for all the concern Dean shows as he tilts his head to the side and lets Sam brush the wound gently. Sam frowns when he finds blood there—sluggish and half-congealed—and makes Dean wait while he gets a bandage from the medicine cabinet to wrap around the wound. It looks stupid, like a war dressing in a kid’s cartoon, but Sam’s too tired to do the job properly.

It’s a measure of how out of it Dean is that he doesn’t comment on the haphazard first aid.

“You want some Tylenol?” Sam asks, resting one hand on his brother’s shoulder and gently rubbing at his collarbone through the thick material of the sweatshirt.

Dean hesitates, which means he could really use some, and then shakes his head. “I’m good,” he mutters. “Just tired.”

Sam struggles with himself for a moment—he wants to let it go, let Dean have tonight—but he knows that if he doesn’t get an admission out of his brother now, he probably never will. Crouching, he puts himself in his brother’s line of sight and catches Dean’s eyes.

“Dean? Baby?”

No protest at the pet name, which is worrying, but Dean is focused on him and seems cognizant enough.

“I need to know what happened at the hospital before I got there.”

Dean shuts his eyes, hiding, but doesn’t—maybe can’t—conceal the flicker of pain across his face or the disgusted shudder that shakes his body.

“Dean, please,” Sam begs, even though he already hates himself for putting his brother through this again. “I can’t help if I don’t know what happened.”

“Was watching TV,” Dean mumbles, keeping his eyes shut. “Then Chris was in the doorway, just standing there, and I. I knew before he showed his eyes, cause he wasn’t coming in the room.”

Sam can’t even begin to imagine what that must have felt like for his brother—the moment of realization where he figured out what had come for him when he was alone and unprotected—and Dean’s voice, dull and matter-of-fact, isn’t giving anything away.

“It blew the wards open. I don’t know how, it just. One minute it was just standing there and the next it was in the room.” He licks his lips—a quick, nervous tick—and then says, “It got pissed when it couldn’t just pop out of the hospital with me. Tried to cut the tattoo off, but it—fucker couldn’t get the scalpel close enough to do anything.”

Sam has a moment of fierce triumph—because his design maybe wasn’t enough to protect Dean completely, but it was good enough to delay the demon: give them time to get there.

Then Dean whispers, “I laughed at it. I shouldn’t’ve—I pissed it off worse. I’m sorry.”

“Dean,” Sam starts, but his brother rides right over him, continuing, “It made me get dressed and then it—it brought me out in the hallway, and we ran into Rachel, and it—she—son of a bitch made them kill themselves. All of them, he just. He told them to, and they were—they didn’t even hesitate.”

And Sam can guess what the demon was saying to Dean in the meantime—what sort of sweet nothings it was whispering in his brother’s ear.
“It wasn’t your fault, Dean,” he says now.

Dean gives his head a slight shake and is still.

Sam could push the point, but Dean clearly isn’t in a receptive frame of mind, and so instead he brings his hand down from Dean’s shoulder to take his hand, and asks the question his mind has been dancing around all night.

“Did it touch you?”

Dean is still for a moment, unresponsive, and then he says, “No.”

Sam’s gut clenches at the lying rasp of a word, and his own voice is thick with emotion as he says, “Dean—”

“I’m tired,” Dean says, pulling his hand away. He opens his eyes, but his gaze slides right over Sam as he heaves himself up onto the bed and rolls onto his side.

What Sam wants to do is yell at his brother to stop lying. What he wants to do is grab him and hold him close. What he wants to do is resurrect the yellow-eyed son of a bitch so that he can kill it all over a second time—slower this time, making damned sure that it knows it can’t hurt Dean and get away with it.

What he does is stare at the plaid bedspread and ask, “You want me to leave you alone?”

“No,” Dean says immediately. There’s an edge of fear to the word, and as much as it hurts to hear that emotion in his brother’s voice, Sam can’t help the wash of relief that accompanies the knowledge that Dean still wants him here. That Dean needs him here.

Dean rolls back a little, opening both eyes and looking down at Sam. “Stay?”

Sam forces down the tears that want to come and manages a smile. “Yeah,” he promises. “Always. I’m not going anywhere.”

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Jill shows up early the next morning, sporting red eyes and carrying a borrowed EMT case. Sam’s surprised to see her until Bobby tells him that she called Sam’s phone late last night, while Sam was busy upstairs with his brother. Then he’s just grateful, and pulls her into a brief, tight hug.

“You okay?” he asks as he releases her.

“No,” Jill answers honestly. “But I’m surviving. Where’s Dean?”

Upstairs is the answer. Holed in their room upstairs and refusing to come down and see anyone.

Dean isn’t thrilled to see Jill, and gets into a shouting match with Sam over whether or not he’s going to allow himself to be examined. It isn’t until Sam threatens to drag him to another hospital that Dean finally relents, feigning annoyance that’s pitifully easy to see through. His eyes are untrusting with a stranger in the room, darting around in search of escape as Jill shaves the area around his head wound. He keeps trying to keep her in his line of sight, turning his head to see her better and getting himself nicks from the razor in the process. The tiny cuts aren’t helping Dean’s trust issues, Sam can tell, and he watches unhappily as Dean’s knuckles turn white where he’s gripping his thighs.

But hurting or not, Dean is as stubborn as ever, and now that Sam has maneuvered him into it, he sits
through Jill’s examination and answers her questions—monosyllabically, but it’s better than the sulky, unresponsive silence Sam was fearing.

Finally, Jill declares herself satisfied and Dean immediately disappears into the bathroom, and locks the door behind himself.

Sam looks at the closed door, frowning, and then starts as Jill’s hand brushes his.

“Hey,” she says. “How are you holding up?”

Sam can only laugh hollowly and shake his head. The way Jill rubs his arm reassuringly only makes him feel worse—she just lost her roommate last night, not to mention getting tossed headfirst into a world that would make any sane person run screaming the other way. He should be trying to comfort her, not the other way around.

“I already told Bobby, but you’re going to have to ditch your phones,” Jill says. “They got some of what happened last night on camera. The police will be looking for you.”

“How bad is it?” Sam asks, trying to force his head back into hunter mode.

Then Jill answers, “They have Dean slitting Rachel’s throat,” and the world stutters to a halt.

Sam’s lungs feel five sizes too small as he rasps, “What?”

“They made me watch the tape, when they were—some interrogation tactic, I don’t know.” Jill’s voice is emotionless, her eyes haunted.

“He wouldn’t,” Sam says, starting to shake his head. “Jill, Dean would never—”

“I know,” Jill interrupts. “Chris—the, the thing—was making him. I think—I think the cops got that it wasn’t his fault, what happened, but they’re looking anyway.”

Sam can’t respond for a moment, too caught up by the horror of what Jill is telling him. He can see it clearly in his head: the demon holding Dean around the waist, keeping him close. The demon forcing a scalpel into Dean’s hand, wrapping its own fist around Dean’s fingers and guiding the cut. He can see the spray, warm and wet and damning, over Dean’s hand, splattering his bare torso. Dean’s protesting yells dying out into horrified, bitter curses as Rachel’s body collapses.

“I didn’t tell you to hurt you, Sam,” Jill says, pulling his attention back.

Sam realizes his cheeks are wet and shakes himself, wiping them with his forearm. “No, yeah. I know. Thanks. I don’t—God, Jill, we don’t deserve you.”

Jill purses her mouth and shrugs. “Well, I can’t help them. Rachel’s dead. They’re all dead. You aren’t. Dean isn’t.”

Maybe not, but Sam’s pretty sure Dean wishes he were. He can’t imagine what else the demon would have done to Dean, to transform him into the whorish killer it seems to have wanted, but he’s sure that the image Jill just gave him is going to feature in his nightmares for a while.

“Was there anything else?” he asks. “Dean won’t—I asked, but he won’t tell me.”

Jill doesn’t have to ask what he means. “There’s no camera in his room, but, Sam. Chris was in there for a while before they came out again.”

Sam closes his eyes at the dull, aching throb of confirmation in his chest. He struggles with it for a
moment, and with his twisting stomach, and then nods. “Okay. Okay, thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Jill falls silent as she repacks her equipment, and then she says, “I don’t know when I’ll be able to get away again. Things are kind of nutty.”

“No, right,” Sam agrees. Of course they would be, with that kind of carnage.

“Call me if you need anything, though, and I’ll see what I can do,” she adds, shutting the clasps on the case. But it sounds like goodbye, and Sam acknowledges that it probably is.

In a couple of days, Jill will be doubting what she saw last night. She’ll be telling herself that the Winchesters are nothing but trouble. He doesn’t think she’ll inform on them—it won’t go that far—but Jill is scared beneath the weariness and the good intentions, and Sam knows all too well how strong a deterrent fear can be. There’s no reason to make her feel bad about abandoning him on top of everything else she’s dealing with.

“Thanks,” he says, letting the lie pass. “I’ll do that.”

But Jill straightens, holding the case in one hand, and meets his eyes with a steady, sad look. Sam guesses that they can both read the writing on the wall.

“I can, uh, walk you out?” he offers, but she shakes her head.

“I can figure it out. Take care of yourself, okay?”

“Yeah, you too.”

Jill’s lips twitch into a weary smile and she nods as she walks forward and past him. “Goodbye, Sam.”

Sam doesn’t respond. He’s never been good with goodbyes, and he doesn’t think Jill expects one anyway. He stands there, listening as she walks down the stairs and says her farewells to Dad and Bobby, and then stirs himself and goes to see to his brother.

Dean shaves his head. He says it’s because he looks stupid with a bald, bandaged patch, and Sam has to admit that it did look a little odd, but this is worse. It makes Dean look sick—that short, barely there fuzz, like a cancer patient. But Sam keeps his mouth shut and doesn’t comment, just like he doesn’t comment on Dean’s mood swings, or the fact that he won’t leave the bedroom, or the nightmares that wrench him awake in the night. Or all the times Sam wakes up in bed by himself while Dean pukes or sobs in the bathroom.

Dean’s been through a lot, after all, and as worried as Sam is, his brother deserves some time to process everything. He needs breathing space—literally sometimes, when his emotions get the better of him and his damaged lungs have to struggle to keep up with his racing heart—and Sam’s determined to give that to him.

So what if Dean doesn’t talk as much as he used to? It isn’t like Sam expects him to be eager to discuss the elephant in the room. Besides, they never needed words to communicate anyway: never needed more than a glance or a brush of a hand.

And it’s slow going, but Sam begins to notice signs of improvement.

Dean doesn’t protest when Sam says he has to go downstairs anymore. He starts reaching out to Sam
more often, crawling into his arms and lying there quietly. Trusting. He doesn’t wake Sam up with nightmares in the night, doesn’t run off to the bathroom for any more minor meltdowns. The periods of near panic, when Dean loses control of his breathing and has to be soothed and talked into calming down enough for his damaged lungs to do their job, decrease in frequency and severity.

And then, almost three weeks after they get to Bobby’s, Sam wakes up with Dean’s tongue in his mouth. He startles back at that, terrified of hurting his brother, and Dean lies where he is and looks at him.

“What—what was that?” Sam asks, breathless and a little confused. After all, he was sound asleep a moment ago, and now his heart is racing and his lungs are struggling to keep up—fuck, is this how Dean feels during one of his episodes?

“You said when I wanted it,” Dean answers. His eyes are steady on Sam’s: guileless. Or maybe they’re just empty. Or possibly Sam just isn’t looking hard enough.

“Dean, are you ... are you sure?” he asks, trying to chase down all of his brother’s possible motivations and failing miserably. He’s just ... he’s too tired to look for the hidden answer. Too worn out from constantly trying to outthink the silent cipher in bed with him.

“Yeah,” Dean says, reaching out and getting a hand on the back of Sam’s neck. “I’m sure.”

Sam still isn’t sure—he isn’t sure at all—but ... but he can’t keep second-guessing everything Dean does and says anymore. It makes his brain ache and leaves him not just confused but bewildered. Leaves him craving just a couple of hours on a desert island somewhere his brother and father can’t ever find him: somewhere he can just lie down and sleep without fear of what he’ll wake up to. He just wants to put the unbearable, unrelenting load of responsibility down for a few moments, damn it —surely he’s allowed that much of a break.

Maybe it’s time for Dean to start trying to get back on the horse, so to speak. Who is Sam to decide when Dean can and can’t do things, if Dean thinks he’s ready for it? And Sam can’t deny that he wants this, that he’s wanted this every night for the past three weeks. It’s been torture lying with temptation in his arms and being unable to touch, to show Dean how he feels, to prove Dean is still loved and wanted in every way possible.

So Sam lets it happen. He lets Dean’s mouth cover his; opens so that his brother’s tongue can push past his lips.

Dad is downstairs somewhere, either awake or dreaming uncomfortable dreams, and Sam is breaking his promise to the man, but Dean’s body pushes closer against him, and Dean’s mouth is eager and loving against his, and Sam is only human, and he doesn’t care. Betrayal or not, he doesn’t fucking care.

“Love you,” he breathes into the kiss, and caresses the side of his brother’s face.

Against his lips, Dean smiles.

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It’s amazing how quickly Dean improves after that: how insatiable he is. He’s forever hauling Sam into kisses, and smiling at him, and rubbing their bodies together. He doesn’t shy away from Sam’s hands on his hips, or from the exploratory fingers Sam eases up beneath the t-shirts Dean is beginning to wear again instead of that oversized sweatshirt. Within the space of a week, Dean goes from terrified to fearless, and on Christmas morning, he wakes Sam up with a clumsy hand job that
leaves Sam dazed and smiling.

Dad and Bobby are both in the kitchen when Sam wanders down to put a tray together, and they both immediately start pressuring him to get Dean downstairs as well—so they can have a real celebration, for a few minutes at least. Sam begs off as quickly as he can—Dean isn’t ready yet, it’s too soon—and then hurries back up to the room to spend the rest of the day curled up in bed with his brother, kissing Dean everywhere Dean will let him. Dean is wonderfully, addictively responsive, and encourages Sam with little gasps while hanging onto his shoulder or hair, and it’s the best Christmas Sam can remember ever having.

Over the next few days, Dad’s as easy as ever to sidetrack from his attempts to get Dean downstairs—all it takes is a hint of how traumatized Dean still is by what happened in the cabin. Dad shuts up immediately, eyes going dark as he limps into the kitchen on his crutches to pour himself a drink. Sam feels a little bad about manipulating the man like that, but not so bad that he’s going to stop running interference while Dean gets back on his feet.

When Dean’s ready, after all, he’ll come down on his own.

After Christmas, on the other hand, Bobby’s like a weasel with a chicken. He sinks his teeth into Sam as soon as he catches sight of him and refuses to let go. It’s slightly annoying on Day One, more so on Day Two, and by the time New Years Eve rolls around Sam is seriously considering punching the man in the mouth if that’s the only way to get him to shut up.

“He needs to be around people, Sam,” Bobby says as he dogs Sam around the kitchen that afternoon. “People other than you.”

Sam isn’t sure he likes what Bobby’s implying—if the man’s implying anything. Although they haven’t talked openly—or even circumspectly—about Sam’s feelings for his brother, Sam can guess what Bobby’s opinion on that topic is. Still, Bobby has never been shy about expressing his disapproval before, and Sam can’t imagine he’s picked up any degree of subtlety now.

If he wanted to chew Sam out for being a sick fuck, he’d use simple, monosyllabic words to do it. Probably with a lot of colorful swears thrown in for emphasis.

“He’ll come down when he’s ready,” Sam says for what feels like the hundredth time as he gets a Coke out of the fridge and puts it on Dean’s tray.

Bobby usually accepts that for the dismissal it is—even if he continues to loom disapprovingly over Sam until Sam goes back upstairs—but today he steps in and grabs Sam by the shoulder, forcibly turning him. “You think you’re protecting him, boy? Well, you’re not. You’re crippling him.”

Sam’s gut clenches at the unjustness of that accusation and he wrenches his shoulder out of the man’s grip. “You want us gone, Bobby?” he demands. “Is that it? Does it bother you that much to have him here?”

“It bothers me to have him locked upstairs like some kind of princess in a tower, yeah,” Bobby answers sourly.

Even in the midst of his righteous anger, the image strikes Sam as amusing and he snorts. “Dean’d kick your ass if he heard you call him that.”

“Fine,” Bobby grunts, squaring his jaw. “Go tell him and let him come on down here and prove otherwise.”

Sam’s brief amusement slips away again and he turns, heading for the stove where Dean’s soup is
almost ready.

“He won’t, will he?” Bobby persists, following him. “Have you stopped pushing him on it? Did you ever really start?”

“He’s been through a lot, Bobby,” Sam says tightly as he grabs a spoon and stirs the soup. “He deserves some time to—”

“He’s had time! He’s had a whole month. And the longer you keep on isolating him, the worse he’s gonna get.”

Sam’s insides are twisting with guilt at Bobby’s words—unwarranted guilt, he’s sure, but Bobby has a way of sharpening his words for maximum impact—and he slams the spoon down onto the surface of the stove defensively before looking at Bobby and saying, “Look, if he was getting worse, I’d notice. But he’s not, okay? He’s getting better. He talks to me, he isn’t dreaming as much, he’s—”

*Kissing me again. He’s letting me love him.*

But Sam can’t say that, of course, so instead he softens his tone slightly and repeats, “He’s getting better. Just ... He just needs a little more time, that’s all.”

Bobby regards him steadily for a moment and then says, “I never liked the way your daddy raised you two.”

Sam laughs softly while rubbing a hand over his face, because he couldn’t agree more but now is Not The Time.

Then Bobby follows up with, “Dean’s too focused on you. Always was. He picks up on your moods like keeping you happy is a matter of life or death and changes himself to fit.”

Sam frowns, hands closing on the edge of the stove. The heat from the burner cooking Dean’s soup warms the back of his knuckles. “What are you trying to say?”

Bobby hesitates, chewing on whatever he wants to say, and then declares, “Boy’s always twisted himself inside out for you. Never mattered much to him what that required.”

“And you think that’s what he’s doing now,” Sam says slowly. “You think he’s pretending to be okay because I want him to be better.”

“You trying to tell me that isn’t what’s going on up there?”

“It’s not.” Sam would know if it were. He would.

“So prove me wrong,” Bobby challenges. “I’ll take the tray up and we’ll see how he does with me in the room—I won’t go near him,” he adds as Sam opens his mouth in instinctive protest. “I’ll just bring the tray in and put it down on the dresser.”

Sam hesitates, trying to locate the source of his discomfort with that plan, and then grudgingly nods his agreement. After all, it isn’t like Bobby’s asking anything unreasonable, and Sam’s confident that Dean will pass the test with flying colors. Hell, maybe Dean will even be happy to see Bobby. Just because he hasn’t asked after either Bobby or Dad since they got here, doesn’t mean he hasn’t been thinking about them.

Sam shadows Bobby upstairs anyway, ready with his ‘I told you so’, which means he’s close enough to hear the crash and Bobby’s strangled “Sam!” that follows. Heart lurching, he sprints
The soup Sam prepared downstairs is all over the floor. Bobby is on his back beside the tray and dented can of Coke, with Dean straddling his waist. Both of Bobby’s hands are wrapped around Dean’s right wrist, and his whole body is trembling with the tension of keeping the knife in Dean’s hand from his throat. There’s nothing human on Dean’s face—no panic or anger, no emotion. Nothing but blank darkness.

“Dean!” Sam snaps, starting forward.

Dean’s head comes up immediately at the sound of his name—or maybe it’s Sam’s voice that does it—but he doesn’t stop trying to skewer Bobby’s throat and Sam realizes that yanking Dean bodily off of the man might not be the way to go. He stops, keeping hold of his brother’s eyes and putting both hands up, palms out.

“Dean, stop,” he says, trying to keep his voice steady.

Dean just stares at him.

“Dean,” Sam repeats, more harshly this time, and finally something filters through Dean’s eyes.

“Sammy,” he mumbles. “Hey.”

Beneath him, Bobby grunts and drips sweat as the knife edges closer to his throat.

“Dean, you have to put down the knife,” Sam says quickly. “Please.”

That gets him an actual expression—puzzlement—and he urges, “Dean, I want you to think about what you’re doing right now, okay? Where are you?”

Dean blinks, obviously trying to focus, and then looks down at Bobby. There’s a moment where confusion wars with panic on his face and then he throws himself backwards and staggers into the bathroom, dropping the knife as he goes. Sam can hear his brother retching as he moves forward to help Bobby to his feet.

“Christ,” Bobby breathes, feeling at his throat where there’s a single drop of blood beading.

Sam looks at the red smear on Bobby’s finger, and then at the discarded knife, and then toward the bathroom, where Dean is still puking up everything he ate for breakfast, and then drags a shaking hand over his chin.

“Okay, I’ll—I’ll start making him come downstairs,” he offers. “If you still want him down there.”

Bobby gives him a look that’s one part relieved and two parts pissed off. “Just make sure he’s unarmed.”

On their first excursion, Dean sticks close enough to Sam that Sam keeps tripping over him. It’s pitiful how frightened he looks, starting at every noise and continually reaching for a weapon that he doesn’t have. When he actually catches sight of Dad for the first time, Sam’s thankful Dean is unarmed because the way Dean stiffens and loses control of his breathing tells Sam his brother would be filling Dad full of holes if he were able to.
“Sam,” Dean says tightly, grabbing Sam’s arm and trying to pull him back.

Sam does his best to ignore the broken hurt on Dad’s face, putting an arm around Dean and keeping him where he is. “It’s just Dad,” he murmurs into his brother’s ear. “The demon’s dead, remember?”

Dean shakes his head, eyes clouded enough by terror that Sam thinks maybe Dean doesn’t remember right now—thinks that maybe he’s halfway to another flashback.

Before Dean can lose himself completely, Sam tightens his grip and says, “Go ahead and Christo him if you want. He’s fine.”

Dean’s mouth twists, somehow both disbelieving and stubborn, and he spits out, “Christo.”

Dad doesn’t flinch, and his eyes don’t flood with yellow or black, but Sam doesn’t miss the tear that spills unchecked down the man’s cheek.

Beside him, Dean drops his head, all of the cornered tension running out of him, and mumbles, “Sorry.” But Sam notices his brother isn’t moving toward their father: doesn’t show signs of wanting to let go of Sam either.

“That’s okay, son,” Dad says, his voice thick with emotion. “It’s good to see you.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, but a few seconds later he’s bumping Sam’s cheek with his forehead and muttering, “Can we go back upstairs now?”

Dad’s eyes are on Sam, sharp through his own distress, and Sam carefully disengages from his brother, removing Dean’s hand from his waist. The flash of hurt in Dean’s eyes as he does so lodges beneath Sam’s ribcage and makes his chest ache, but he’ll make it up to his brother as soon as they’re alone.

“Five minutes, okay?” he bargains. “You can help me make breakfast.”

When Sam leads Dean away into the kitchen, Dad doesn’t move to follow, but Dean doesn’t relax even outside of their father’s presence. His hands are shaking and he keeps getting distracted—attention flicking nervously to the faintest stray noise. Sam has to grab the milk out of his hand to keep him from turning the entire counter into a mess of wet cereal when Dean forgets to stop pouring.

His brother isn’t much better when they get upstairs, refusing to touch any of the food and huddling against Sam for the next three hours. He doesn’t actually beg Sam not to make him do that again—not with words, anyway, but the shivers running through his body make his position on the matter quite clear.

Sam almost doesn’t have the heart to make Dean go back downstairs the next day, but in the end he thinks of Bobby—of Dean with a knife to Bobby’s throat—and sucks it up. The second excursion is pretty rotten too, even if Dean is already better at hiding how it makes him feel to be so exposed. The third isn’t much better. But Dean is nothing if not stubborn, and strong, and adaptable, and eventually he’s drifting further from Sam’s side and offering Bobby soft greetings. He still flinches whenever Dad’s around, but Sam guesses that will get better as well, given enough time.

By Dean’s birthday, he’s doing well enough for them to have a family dinner downstairs—and if Dean won’t look directly at Dad during the festivities, he’s still able to mumble a hello in the man’s direction. If Sam overlooks that small sliver of awkwardness, if he overlooks the stress lines around his brother’s eyes and mouth, then it’s almost as though nothing’s wrong.
Dean actually smiles during dinner, and he’s an absolute, eager glutton with the cake, and he thanks Dad and Bobby for the new tool set they both chipped in to get him with a voice almost loud enough and warm enough to pass for normal.

“We thought you might like to work on the Impala when it gets warmer,” Dad offers as Dean sits with the tool set in his lap.

“Yeah, I’ve got enough pieces of shit lying around here without that hunk of junk cluttering things up,” Bobby adds, his smile turning the words into a shared joke.

Dean smiles back tentatively, and even if he doesn’t agree, he isn’t shaking his head no either. Sam hasn’t considered the possibility before, but maybe the Impala would be a good way to get Dean outside. The snow blanketing the salvage yard right now means that working on the car isn’t a great idea, but maybe he can take Dean out to make a preliminary damage assessment in the morning.

Sam offers his own birthday gift later that night, although it’s been put off for so long now that he isn’t sure of his reception. He’s nervous when Dean comes out from the shower, naked skin still wet and gleaming—he doesn’t bother much with clothes these days when it’s just them, which is the best sign of progress Sam has seen. Sam lets his eyes trail over his brother’s body as Dean approaches the bed—notes how slender Dean is now that he isn’t working out everyday and trying to bulk up.

Maybe it’s time to get Dean moving again: Sam guesses that the hospital would have had Dean on some kind of exercise regime long before this if he’d been able to stay. They’ll have to be careful, though: not push too quickly. It’s going to take Dean a while to adjust to only relying on one lung.

“You have a good time?” Sam asks as his brother gets on his side of the bed and immediately crawls over to lie against Sam’s side.

“Yeah,” Dean answers. “Good cake.”

“And you liked the tools?”

“They’re nice,” Dean agrees, but Sam can tell his mind isn’t really on that gift because he’s kissing and nipping at Sam’s nipple and reaching for his cock.

“Wait,” Sam says, catching his brother’s wrist.

That gets Dean’s attention—it’s the first time Sam has said no to this kind of thing—and he lifts his head to look up at him, blinking in question.

“I wanted to—” Sam clears his throat, unaccountably nervous, and then finishes, “I thought if you wanted, I could try blowing you.”

Dean blinks—no fear, though, which is a relief. Only surprise. “I, uh. Yeah, sure. If you want. Just don’t expect—”

“I’m feeling pretty lucky,” Sam interrupts, and he is, even though the three or four handjobs he’s tried giving Dean have been monumental failures. He thinks this might work where those failed because it’s clean. It’s an act that he’s pretty sure the demon never tainted for Dean—not from this angle, anyway. It may have made use of Dean’s mouth, but it probably didn’t bother returning the favor. So this will be new, just them.

A fresh start.

Sam starts off slowly anyway, rolling Dean onto his back and then slowly mouthing his way across
Dean’s chest and down his stomach. Dean’s breath hitches as Sam reaches the tattoo, same as it always does, and Sam pauses there, tracing over the design with his tongue a ritualistic three times before sucking at the skin.

Dean groans from above him, both hands tangling in Sam’s hair and gripping tightly, and as Sam laves at the fresh bruise covering the marked patch of skin on his brother’s hip, he thinks that he can’t wait for Dean’s hair to grow back out so that he can feel it again, soft and silky beneath his fingers. The peach fuzz sensation he gets when he trails a hand over his brother’s head to cup his skull now isn’t unpleasant, but it isn’t nearly satisfying enough.

Besides, Dean looks wrong like this, with his head shaved and body so slender. It’s too close to looking ill, even though Sam knows Dean is healthy, that he’s improving. Sam wants his old, bulky and gel-haired big brother back.

Then Dean spreads both legs wide and pushes at Sam’s head, using the grip he has on Sam’s hair to urge him lower, and Sam forgets all about his brother’s hair. Dean hasn’t ever been this demanding before, and the confirmation that he wants this, that he’s okay for it, sings in Sam’s chest. This moment may be coming months late and from the other side of the incalculable weight of pain, but Dean’s finally getting what he asked for. He’s getting what he wants: getting Sam.

When Sam shifts down, settling between his brother’s spread thighs, he finds his brother’s cock half hard, which sends a thrill of pride and relief and excitement through him. He still isn’t completely sure this is going to work, but the tiny spark of hope inside of him—the stubborn faith that he can heal Dean if he only tries hard enough—builds into something resembling certainty.

With a soft smile, he nuzzles his brother’s cock and places a slow, lingering kiss where the base meets his brother’s balls. Dean’s cock doesn’t twitch, but it does fill a little more, and he makes a breathless, aroused noise above Sam. His hands tighten in Sam’s hair. Sam does it again, this time open mouthed and with a hint of tongue, and that gets him a moan and a reflexive clench of brother’s thighs.

It’s more intoxicating than he thought it would be—being so close to Dean, so wanted. So trusted. Sam hasn’t even gotten to the main event yet and he’s already hooked, addicted to Dean’s helpless, unconscious reactions. He can’t help teasing, just a little, restricting himself to nudges with his nose and brief, fleeting kisses while Dean lies still beneath him. With the exception of the occasional moan, Dean is quiet as Sam works: almost passive.

In Sam’s fantasies—and yeah, he’s fantasized about this a lot—Dean always curses him and tells him to stop fucking around and suck him already. Sometimes, Dean loses patience and flips them, getting one hand on Sam’s jaw and forcing it open and shoving in. More often, he just lies there squirming and hard and pleading until Sam takes mercy on him and begins to suck.

This quiet, mostly still Dean isn’t anything like Sam imagined. His cock isn’t full and dripping the way it is when they do this in Sam’s head: still hovering in that awkward, not-quite-erect state. His breathing is irregular and labored, his hands clearly urging Sam to keep going where they’re locked in his hair, but those are really the only signs of arousal Sam’s being offered.

He’s used to it by now, though: used to the way Dean has to approach any kind of physical intimacy, and so he isn’t offended when he shoves both hands beneath his brother’s body, gripping his ass and hauling his body up for a better angle, and Dean’s only response is to let his thighs gape wider apart. For Dean, it’s almost as good as a ‘please’.

“I’ll make it good,” Sam promises, nuzzling against his brother’s cock and balls one last time before licking along the half-limp length.
That gets him a louder noise—half strangled from Dean’s effort to keep it in his throat—and Sam’s chest expands as he does it again, slower, and sees his brother’s cock limp a little closer to fullness. Still tilting Dean’s crotch up with his left hand, Sam grips Dean’s cock with his right and holds it steady as he starts to tease the tip—little licks, breaths softly exhaled over saliva-slick flesh, tantalizing brushes of his lips.

Dean’s even closer to arousal now, almost fully erect, which is leagues further than they’ve gotten before. Sam can’t help smiling triumphantly as he finally wraps his lips around the tip and gives the first, firm suck. Dean’s hips jerk—the first strong response from his brother that Sam has gotten. There’s no accompanying moan, but Dean is panting now, and his cock is definitely full and hard against Sam’s tongue as he moves forward and swallows his brother down.

God, Dean feels even better in his mouth than Sam ever imagined he would. He tastes better too, musky and with the faint, salty tang of precome just beginning to leak from his slit. Fully erect, Dean is big enough that Sam can’t easily take his entire length, and it’s been quite a while since he did this, so he contents himself with sucking on half of Dean’s cock and fisting the rest with his hand. Depending on how long it takes to get Dean off, he might be able to work his way up to deep throating in a little while.

Then, unexpectedly, there’s a perfunctory knock on the door, followed immediately by the sound of it easing open.

“Boys,” Dad says, and then stops.

Dean doesn’t move—probably too horrified by getting caught to do anything but stare—but Sam is scrambling enough for both of them, letting go of Dean and backing off his cock and reaching for the comforter before he’s properly started berating himself for not locking the door to ensure their privacy. He doesn’t want to look, but as he hurries to cover them both, he can’t help glancing over his shoulder.

Dad’s standing there expressionless, still and staring. There’s a bottle of Scotch in the hand holding the door open: three glasses pinched between his fingers in the other. He came up here to have a nightcap with them, maybe make some kind of toast, and Jesus Christ, this isn’t just a train wreck, it’s an accidental missile launch.

“How, he has no fucking clue, but he doesn’t know what else to say.

Dad turns around, just as expressionless as he was when Sam first glanced over to see him, and limps away down the hall. The door gapes open behind him.

Dean is still quiet next to Sam, unmoving, and fuck he must be freaking out inside. He’s going to yell at Sam in a moment, or panic, and Sam has to—Sam has to fix this.

Rolling over, he fights his way out from the tangle of covers and falls onto the floor. He’s up again instantly, rubbing his knee where he hit and grabbing a discarded pair of jeans that are draped over a chair. He hopes they aren’t Dean’s—mostly because that’ll leave them baggy around Sam’s waist and ending midway down Sam’s calves—but he doesn’t have time to check. Hopping on one foot, he gets the other into one of the legs and then repeats the operation with the other side.

“I’ll fix it,” he says, trying to sound reassuring and not panicked. “I’ll talk to him, okay? It’s gonna be fine. Just—give me a couple minutes, alright?”
Dean doesn’t say anything, and Sam doesn’t look at his brother as he hauls the jeans up—they’re his, thank god—and hurries for the door. He can’t look at Dean right now. He can’t bear to see the shattered, lost expression he knows he’ll find on his brother’s face.

Stomach twisted into knots and heart pounding in his chest, Sam runs out of the room and after their father.
Sam finds Dad standing outside in the middle of the salvage yard. There’s snow piled thick on the ground, and Dad isn’t wearing a coat—shoes either, Sam’s pretty sure. He doesn’t have his cane, which Sam knows he needs for anything more than a few, slow steps. He’s still holding the glasses and the Scotch.

Sam shivers as he hurries down the steps to join the man, not pausing to grab a coat or boots himself. His feet burn where he steps on the snow, packed down from traffic in and out of the house—Bobby and Dad, since neither he nor Dean has been outside since they got here—but he’s too panicked and nauseous to notice.

“Dad,” he says as he approaches. “Hey, come back inside. You’re gonna catch cold.” He reaches for his father’s arm and Dad turns before he can actually connect.

Sam guesses he should expect the punch, but it still catches him by surprise. The blow knocks him down and back, sprawling him on the snow, which gets down the back of his pants and burns where his bare skin touches it. He flinches up into a sitting position, swearing, but doesn’t dare get up with Dad standing over him. His jaw and lower lip feel hot and throbbing, and he can taste blood where he bit his tongue when Dad’s punch snapped his teeth together.

At least the man dropped the Scotch before hitting him.

“I trusted you,” Dad says, and Sam felt like shit before, but he feels even worse now. Because Dad doesn’t sound angry. He doesn’t even sound all that surprised. He just sounds sad.

“I know,” Sam breathes. “I know, I promised and I—I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been going behind your back like that.”

Dad stares at him, still expressionless, and says, “That’s it, isn’t it? That’s all you think you have to apologize for. You think I’m upset you lied to me.”

Sam frowns slightly, perplexed in the midst of his fear. He doesn’t know what his father is getting at, although he can tell that there’s something there. Something he’s supposed to be understanding and isn’t.

“Are you fucking him?” Dad asks bluntly. “Have you been fucking him?”

“I—no, never. We haven’t. He’s not ready.”

“So you can still see that well, at least,” Dad says, voice soft and tired, and then glances down at his left hand, at the glasses. From there, his eyes drift further down to the bottle, lying on its side in the snow. With a grimace, he leans down and gets his hand back on it, picks it up.

“Get up and come inside,” he says. He isn’t looking at Sam, eyes fixed instead on the back door of the house as he starts to make his slow, painful way toward it.

Now that he has permission, Sam picks himself up in a hurry, brushing his hands uselessly against his stinging skin, and moves toward his father. “You want to lean on me?”

For a moment, he thinks that Dad’s going to refuse out of spite or disgust, but the man accepts the offered arm wordlessly, even though he still won’t look at Sam. Together, they make their way back up onto the porch—Sam was right: Dad’s as barefoot as he is—and inside the house. Dad waves a
hand at the kitchen table once they’re in and Sam, taking the motion for the command it is, leads him over to a chair and helps him sit down.

As Sam hurries back to shut the door and lock it, he hears the clink of glasses from behind him—Dad setting everything down on the table. He turns back to find his father uncapping the Scotch and tipping it out into two glasses. The third—Dean’s—sits there unused and empty.

Sam is quiet as sits down across from his father, where Dad has pushed the glass undoubtedly meant for him. He’s finally starting to shiver—delayed reaction from the cold outside—and he tips back the alcohol gratefully while Dad empties his own glass and refills it again. When he sees Sam has finished his first as well, Dad slides the bottle across the table and then waits, sitting there with both hands wrapped around his drink.

They sit in silence for several minutes, while Sam’s initial panic quiets into a more resigned, guilty shame and his jaw throbs, and then Dad says, “I’m leaving.”

Sam jerks. Of all the things he expected to hear from his father, that was absolutely last on the list. “What? You’re—where? Why? Because Dean and I—”

“I can’t stay here, Sam,” Dad interrupts. “You. What you’re doing to Dean is part of it, but I can’t. I’m sorry, but I’m not a strong man.”

If anything, that hits Sam even harder than Dad’s initial announcement, and his breath huffs out. He feels like Dad just punched him again: lower this time, sinking a direct hit into Sam’s gut. But as Sam watches, tears leak from his father’s eyes and run down into his beard. He’s staring at his glass, not meeting Sam’s gaze, and the tears make Sam’s stomach flop uneasily.

He isn’t supposed to be seeing this. Dad isn’t supposed to be saying these things. He’s supposed to be fighting with Sam, trying to hurt him. He’s supposed to be furious.

Instead, Dad wipes ineffectually at the tears with one hand and says, “I can’t watch my boy like this anymore, Sam. I tried, but I can’t.”

“He’s getting better,” Sam protests, but Dad laughs sourly and shakes his head.

“He’s wasting away. You think I haven’t noticed? How little he eats? You think I don’t notice my boy shrinking in front of my eyes?” He looks up then, eyes red and wet, and traps Sam with his gaze. “You think I haven’t noticed him flinch away when I get too close?”

Sam flinches himself at that, because Dean ... Dean’s maybe not as good with Dad and Bobby as he could be, but he has been getting better with them. And if Dean flinches around Dad, then it isn’t—it is—because he still thinks Dad’s going to hurt him. He just gets confused sometimes.

“He’s getting better,” Sam repeats. “I know maybe it’s hard to see, but he—with me, he’s.” He hesitates, because Dad doesn’t like that aspect of their relationship, and then forces the words out anyway. “He’s getting better with me. Dad, he. I’m sorry you had to see that upstairs, but you should be relieved! I mean, that was a huge step for him.”

“Relieved,” Dad repeats, rolling the word around in his mouth. “I should be relieved that my sons are fucking? That my youngest boy is—is abusing his brother?”

The barb hits just as Dad intended it to and Sam draws himself up a little, angry. “Dean came to me, Dad. I never would have touched him unless he had.”

Dad meets his gaze, and Sam sees a faint, reflected flare of anger in his father’s eyes. “Dean’s not in
any kind of state to be making that kind of decision right now, and you know that as well as I do. Or you would if you weren’t so far gone.” He shakes his head. “I oughta put you down, Sam. I oughta end you now before you hurt him more.”

Something deep inside of Sam curls in on itself at that proclamation, but he ignores the distant pain in favor of the pulsing anger and challenges, “So why don’t you?”

“I dunno. Maybe I’m an optimist. Maybe I’m just a sentimental fool. I’m not gonna pretend I haven’t thought about it—hell, tried to talk myself into it, even. But I can’t.”

He sounds shamed at the admission, and that more than anything else hits Sam, getting into his throat and choking him to silence.

“But like I said,” Dad continues after a moment. “I can’t watch it happen either.”

Sam forces himself to swallow the lump in his throat at that, blinking back tears that he refuses to let fall, and asks, “When?”


“Are you even going to bother saying goodbye?”

Dad doesn’t even hesitate before shaking his head. “No. He wouldn’t—Dean doesn’t want to see me right now, Sam. Goodbye isn’t changing that, and it isn’t going to fix anything. Best just to go.”

God help him, Sam can’t do anything but agree with that assessment, especially after what Dad walked in on. Dealing with Dean after Dad’s gone is going to be difficult, but dealing with him after a farewell will be worse. Dean doesn’t do well in everyday conversations with the man: he’s going to be a wreck after something so emotional.

“When will you be back?” Sam asks.

Dad just shakes his head again, wordlessly, and Sam isn’t sure whether to read that as an “I don’t know,” or a “never”. He wouldn’t know how to respond to the latter, so he keeps his mouth shut and doesn’t ask for clarification.

After a beat, Dad shifts himself and says, “I want you to think about leaving too.”

Sam stiffens at that, anger flaring over the jumble of emotions, and says, “I’m not abandoning him.”

Dad flinches from the words, which come out as the accusation Sam intended, but his jaw firms with determination and he says, “You’re hurting him. You’re hurting him in ways I can’t even begin to explain to you. I can’t make you leave, Sam, but I’m begging you. Give him—give him some space to get his head on straight.”

“He needs me,” Sam maintains.

Dad shakes his head, but there’s no anger in it. No disgust. Just weariness. “No, he only thinks he does. And unless you give him a chance to figure out otherwise, he’s going to go on thinking it. If you love him, Sam. If you really, truly love him the way you say, then you’ll give him a chance to be his own man for once. You’ll set him free.”

Sam can’t come up with any response to that: he doesn’t know where to begin—with the man’s presumption that he knows best or his disdain for Dean’s obvious strength. For what Sam and Dean mean to each other, and how rare it is to find that kind of connection. But some of what he’s feeling
must show in his eyes, because Dad shakes his head and lets out a heavy breath.

“Had to try,” he mumbles, pushing his glass away. Then, eyes already distant and detached, he asks, “Help an old man pack?”

Sam is itching to get back to Dean, but the thought of having to tell Dean what’s happening while Dad is still in the house isn’t all that appetizing. It doesn’t take long, anyway: Dad doesn’t have much in the way of belongings, and they’re all in the small downstairs room he’s been using. When Sam is done, he tosses on a coat and sticks his feet into a pair of Bobby’s boots and carries the two bags out to his father’s truck.

Dad’s standing there when Sam turns back toward the house, leaning heavily on his cane and bundled up in his oversized winter coat. The keys are dangling in his free hand.

“You say goodbye to Bobby?” Sam asks, already knowing the answer. He’s pretty sure that if Bobby knew what was going on right now, he’d be shouting the house down—or out here slashing holes in Dad’s tires at the very least.

Sure enough, Dad shakes his head. “I’ll call him from the road,” he says, and then limps past Sam and over to the driver’s side door. He pauses there, glancing back over his shoulder, and there’s a boyish part of Sam that perks up hopefully, expecting some kind of hug or at least a handshake.

Instead, Dad says, “Think about what I said,” and gets into the cab. Sam stands there quietly while Dad gets himself situated. He doesn’t raise a hand in farewell as the man finally starts the car and pulls away, but Dad doesn’t look at him again either, so Sam guesses they’re about even.

Dean is waiting for him when he finally gets back to the room. Sam can’t read his brother’s face—mostly because he’s doing his best not to meet Dean’s eyes as he comes inside and shuts the door behind him and strips back down. He isn’t in the mood to go back to what he was doing, but that’s fine because he’s pretty sure Dean isn’t going to ask to pick up where they left off either. But he wants the skin on skin comfort, and he’s worried Dean will read him putting clothes between them as a sign of rejection, so he slides back underneath the covers with his brother still naked.

And immediately gets a lapful of Dean.

“Missed you,” Dean says, wrapping his arms around Sam and kissing his throat. One of his legs comes up, hooking over Sam’s hip and leaving Sam with the broad expanse of his brother’s thigh to rut up against if he wants. As though he caught the stray thought, Dean shifts his leg, rubbing it against Sam encouragingly.

Sam’s insides go cold and his mind stutters to a stop.

“Sam?” Dean says after a moment, pausing in his kisses to look up at him. “You okay?”

Is Sam okay. Nothing about Dad. No questioning the sound of Dad’s truck starting and then fading away, which Dean must have heard.

“Dad left,” Sam says, putting it out there.

“Okay,” Dean agrees. One of his arms unlocks from Sam’s chest and moves down so that he can grip Sam’s limp cock and stroke. Despite his growing unease, Sam feels himself start to harden beneath the attention, and he catches his brother’s hand and returns it to his chest.
“Hey,” he says. “Slow down a sec, okay?”

Dean peers at him, at once so familiar and so opaque, and Sam realizes abruptly that he can’t read his brother’s expression. He doesn’t think he’s been reading Dean’s expressions for a while now, actually: he’s just been taking everything at face value and assuming that Dean would let him know if he was getting anything wrong. Not because he doesn’t care about how Dean is feeling, but just ... he got tired. And he got lazy. And he stopped looking because it was easier to let Dean pretend for them both.

Jesus Christ.

Sam pushes the panic away and makes an effort now, focusing on his brother’s placid, complacent expression as he says, “He isn’t coming back.”

Deep down, so well buried that Sam almost thinks he’s imagining it, there’s a flicker in Dean’s eyes. Sam can’t tell what it means—it could be relief, as far as he knows—and he wonders when he got so out of practice with this. With Dean. Or maybe it’s Dean who has changed. Maybe Dean has finally learned how to shut Sam out.

“He didn’t leave because of you,” Sam says, trying to reassure. He’s too unsettled by his revelations about Dean, though, and he can hear the lie in his own voice. Knows that his brother hears it as well.

Dean confirms as much a moment later, giving Sam a strange smile and sliding his hand down Sam’s chest to his hip, where Ehwaz sits in its circle. Dean traces the rune first, and then the circle surrounding it, before brushing over his own name, etched into Sam’s flesh for everyone to see.

“It’s okay, Sam,” he says. “You and me, right? S’all that matters.”

It should make Sam’s heart sing, but instead he’s uneasier than ever, and when Dean goes back to trying to kiss him, he grips his brother’s shoulder and holds him in place while easing away a little. Another expression flits across Dean’s face—there, not there again with a speed that’s almost too fast to follow. But Sam has seen Dean scared before, any number of times, and even an instant of terror is enough for him to recognize the expression.

“Did I do something wrong?” Dean asks, so earnest.

And this—this isn’t Dean in bed with him. This isn’t the big brother Sam has been seeing in his head. Because Sam’s Dean would never have asked that, not if Sam pushed him away. His Dean would have laughed and called Sam a frigid bitch, or made some kind of “too much for you to handle” joke, or shrugged it off.

Instead of answering, Sam tugs the covers low, baring them both to mid-thigh, and takes another good, long look at his brother. For the first time in a long time, he isn’t looking for his brother’s beauty. Isn’t looking at the body he wants to touch and lick and possess any way he can.

Sam remembers noticing just a few hours ago, in a kind of absent way, how slender Dean has become. He remembers his lazy assumption that Dean just needs to start getting more exercise. But now he has Dad’s voice ringing in his ears, and he looks at Dean not with a lover’s fond eyes, or even a brother’s, but with the assessing gaze of a hunter.

Dean’s face is gaunt—a look not helped at all by the too-short cut of his hair, which Sam realizes with a start should have grown back in at least a little by now. Dean’s been keeping it shaved for some reason and not telling Sam about it. The deception isn’t much in the scheme of things, but it drops another noxious black stone on the anxious side of the scales in Sam’s mind.
And Dean hasn’t just lost a little weight. He’s not slender or even thin. He’s fucking emaciated. Sam can count his brother’s ribs just lying here looking at him, and as he casts his mind back over the past few months, he can’t remember Dean actually putting food in his mouth when Sam was looking at him more than a handful of times. But their shared tray was always empty by the end of lunch, and Dean’s fork was always full when Sam looked over, so Sam kept on assuming his brother was eating his fare share of the meal.

He ate when we were all downstairs, Sam thinks wildly. And he remembers that—Bobby piling Dean’s plate higher than Sam could tell Dean wanted it and then watching like a hawk while Dean dutifully shoveled food into his mouth. Hell, not six hours ago, Dean was downstairs eating his second helping of cake.

And then immediately went into the bathroom and shut the door to shower when they got back to the room.

“You—” Sam chokes out now, thoughtlessly. “Jesus Christ, Dean, have you been puking everything up?”

Dean’s eyes widen for a second—dismayed surprise—and then shutter. “Course not,” he says. “Don’t be stupid.”

“You have,” Sam breathes. “You—Dean, you can’t. You can’t do that!”

“Okay,” Dean agrees immediately. No more protesting that he doesn’t, no pretending it isn’t a problem, just rapid, slightly frantic capitulation. “I can put the weight back on. I know I’m not—this isn’t what you like. I can fix it.”

Sam doesn’t make it to the bathroom. He does make it onto the floor and hunched over the small wastebasket by the bed, where he pukes while Dean crouches next to him and holds back his hair. Dean’s proximity only makes his stomach lurch more—God, what has he been doing?—and it’s a while before Sam finishes and is able to slump against the nightstand.

“Gross, dude,” Dean mutters, which makes him sound almost normal, and then there are the sounds of him getting dressed and leaving the room and taking the trash with him.

Sam takes advantage of the momentary solitude to bury his head in his hands and shakes, wracked with guilt so strong it sends cramping pain through his stomach and bolts of agony through his chest. What the fuck has he been doing with Dean? Dean, who is so much more messed up than Sam ever thought possible; who has been starving himself and, when forced to it, binging and purging like a—fuck, bulimia is supposed to be a chick problem, isn’t it?

He’s a little calmer by the time Dean returns, carrying a cleaned wastebasket with him—or, well, not calm, but controlled. He’s dressed—boxers and sweatpants and a t-shirt—and sitting on the edge of the bed with his hands in his lap. Dean gives him a smile when he comes in, tentative and nervous, and says, “You get a bad piece of chicken at dinner or something?”

But Sam can tell his brother doesn’t actually think his nausea was the result of food poisoning.

“Dean, I need to ask you a question,” he says, ignoring both Dean’s attempt at deflection and the twisting in his own stomach. “And I want you to be honest with me.”

As Dean sets the wastebasket down and straightens, Sam can literally see his brother fortifying his defenses. He’s nearly opaque when he finally faces Sam, with a wide, fake smile on his mouth and blank eyes. “Sure, shoot.”
“Did you ever want me when we were growing up? Before I left for Stanford?”

Before the demon raped Dean in Vegas, Sam means but can’t say. This is close enough, anyway: will get him the same response. It’s the question he hasn’t asked—hasn’t dared to ask because he already knew, deep down, what the answer was going to be.

Dean looks at him, smile slowly fading from his face, and doesn’t answer.

Sam’s stomach curdles. He feels, suddenly, like he’s the one trying to learn to deal with reduced lung capacity instead of his brother, because he can’t get enough air. And his chest—he’s never been in this much pain. Never. He wonders if this is how Dean felt when the demon was using its power to bleed him against the cabin wall.

“Oh God,” he says softly, and he can’t hold the tears back anymore. He does get a hand up, covering his eyes—doesn’t want Dean to have to watch him fall apart like this.

But Dean’s there immediately, sitting down next to him and wrapping an arm around Sam’s shoulders. “Hey, man,” he says. “Sammy, come on. Don’t—lots of times, okay?”

Sam chokes on a laugh in the midst of his tears, because Dean is still lying, like Sam would be willing to ignore reality and accept something so obviously untrue. But then again, Sam could see where his brother might have gotten that idea. It’s what he’s been doing all this time, after all. No reason for Dean to think he’d stop now.

Jesus Christ, Dad was right.

“I’m sorry,” Sam chokes out. “God, Dean, I’m so fucking sorry.”

Dean doesn’t say anything, but he lifts the arm around Sam’s shoulders and cups the side of Sam’s head with his hand instead. With careful pressure, he draws Sam’s face around, until Sam can smell Dean, feels his warmth right in front of him, and it would be so fucking easy to do what Dean is silently urging and bury his face against his brother’s neck and let Dean hold him while he cries it out.

But Sam has been taking the easy way out for months, and he can’t make himself do that any more, so instead he chokes out, “Don’t,” and gets up off the bed.

For whatever reason, Dean doesn’t follow him. He doesn’t speak, either, sitting on the bed while Sam moves slowly around the room and struggles to get himself under control. Eventually, the tears stop and he’s able to glance back at his brother, who is watching him.

Sam meets his brother’s gaze for a moment—the same, beautiful eyes; same ridiculous lips—and then, unconsciously, he finds himself glancing down at Dean’s body. He can’t see the thinness anymore. Dean’s hidden it away with a long-sleeved shirt and baggy sweatpants, same defensive wardrobe he always wears when he leaves the room.

And for a moment, there’s a part of Sam that thinks, let it go. He said he’d start eating again, and you can make sure he sticks to it, so just let it go.

Fuck, he’s tempted. He’s so fucking tempted to give in and take what Dean has been offering, to accept all of Dean’s efforts to be pleasing and give his brother the validation and praise he’s obviously craving. Maybe Dean wasn’t into it at first, and maybe he isn’t really all that into it now, but Sam knows that his brother could learn to love it. Dean already loves him, after all, and once Sam has replaced the memories of the demon’s tainting touch with softer touches of his own, Dean would ...
Dean would what? Dean would be the perfect, faithful guardian and fuck toy the demon wanted to mould him into all along?

Sam turns his head away, grimacing at the sick taste in his mouth. His chest is a mess of disgust and revulsion and self-loathing, but the worst is the fear. The worst is the creeping, nagging suspicion that whatever taint is inside him—from the ‘baptism’ the demon mentioned, maybe, or maybe it was there from the moment he slipped, mewling and bloody, out into the world from between his mother’s legs—is starting to turn him. And he didn’t even notice. If Dad hadn’t sat him down tonight and put the idea in his head, he’d still be blithely strolling along and twisting Dean into new and pleasing shapes.

If Sam’s stomach weren’t already decidedly empty, he thinks he’d be throwing up again right about now.

“What does it matter?” Dean says finally, breaking the silence. “I mean, okay, you caught me. So I didn’t get my jollies thinking of boning my little brother. You were just a kid, Sammy, you weren’t —”

He gestures toward Sam with a hand and doesn’t say anything else, as though that one motion sums up his point. Maybe it does.

“It matters to me, Dean,” Sam says, and it’s the truth, but for how long? How long before he loses even that tiny bit of morality? God, Dad should have shot him before he left. Sam isn’t safe. He can’t be trusted. Certainly not with Dean.

“Well, I don’t know what to say, man. You want me to beg for it? Cause I’m not proud, and I’ll beg if it’ll make you happy.”

And then, to Sam’s horror, his brother slides off the bed and gets on his knees.

“Dean,” he breathes, pleading, but Dean ignores him.

“Please,” Dean says. “Give me a shot, okay? I know I’m not—I’m not what you want, maybe, but I can learn, alright? I can—I can work on the blowjob thing.”

Sam’s stomach gives a lurch.

Dean licks his lips—practiced, but there’s a hair too much desperation in it for it to be at all enticing—and says, “We could try now. I was paying attention; I can make it good for you.”

Sam’s emotions shut down. This is it, he realizes in the dull, stutter-calm of his heart. It’s over.

Because if he was stupid enough and careless enough to give Dean a blowjob for a birthday present—a blowjob Dean obviously thinks was meant as some kind of instruction—then Sam really is too dangerous to be left within a hundred miles of his brother. No matter how much it might tear him in two to leave Dean, he has to do what Dad said. He has to leave so Dean can get his head on straight.

But he can at least leave Dean in a slightly better frame of mind.

“No,” he says, forcing himself to smile. The expression doesn’t feel quite right on his face, but it’s better than nothing. “Not tonight, okay? I’m beat.”

Dean looks up at Sam from his knees, and there’s still too much panic in his eyes as he says, “I can do it.”
Somewhere, deep and distant inside of his chest, Sam keens. But somehow, he manages to make his smile wider and more genuine. Makes himself move forward and touch his brother’s cheek—a caress Dean instantly leans into.

“I know you can, baby,” he says. “But right now I just want to hold you. Maybe make out a little.”

Dean’s eyes search his for a moment, trying to find the lie, and Sam puts all of his limping, battered heart in his own gaze. Every last shred of love he still has for his brother, all of the devotion that isn’t going to leave him until time and death crumble his body to dust. And, gradually, the tension leaves Dean’s body. His eyes soften, fond and adoring, and Sam has seen that look on his brother so many times before, like Dean’s looking at some kind of holy shrine or personal god, and it’s never turned his stomach like this.

Sam doesn’t deserve to be looked at like that. And Dean shouldn’t look at anyone like that. Ever. He’s better than that—he’s more than that. Or he could be, if Sam is only brave enough to let go.

Dean turns his head, kissing the pulse in Sam’s wrist, and then offers a relieved, almost shy smile. Sam hauls his brother to his feet and into a kiss before Dean can notice the tight twinge of pain that smile leaves in Sam’s chest. He lets Dean take the lead after that, doesn’t protest as Dean strips them both down and urges Sam first into the bathroom to brush his teeth and then back into bed.

For the first time, Sam doesn’t close his eyes as Dean kisses him and kisses him and kisses him. He’s stockpiling memories, storing up every freckle and flicker of Dean’s lashes. When Dean eventually falls asleep against him, Sam stays up to study his brother’s face, mapping out all their shared history and running his hand over the soft, shaved fuzz of Dean’s hair.

He still has Dean’s amulet, he realizes as he watches Dean sleep: hasn’t been able to bring himself to return it. He’s been saving that moment, waiting until they’re ready to leave again, getting back on the road. He’s imagined tossing the amulet over the top of the Impala, and Dean catching it, and then they’d be off and running.

Except it isn’t going to happen like that, not now, and Sam finds the amulet after he creeps out from his brother’s arms and puts it on the nightstand for Dean to find in the morning. It looks wrong lying there, though, and it occurs to Sam that Dean might take this the wrong way—whore’s payment for services rendered. In the end, he takes the amulet back and sticks it in his pocket.

Something to remember his brother by.

*B~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

Bobby ambushes him in the kitchen.

The man’s sitting at the table where Dad sat just a few hours before, two filled glasses set up and waiting. Sam is overcome by deja vu for a moment, but then he realizes that the bottle of Scotch has been replaced with tequila. And Bobby’s thundercloud expression bears no resemblance to Dad’s defeated calm.

“Sit,” Bobby orders before Sam can say anything.

“I’m going, Bobby. You aren’t talking me out of it.”

Bobby looks up at him for a moment, mouth tight and eyes narrowed, and then says, “Park your ass in the chair, Sam.”

He doesn’t say anything more, but then again he doesn’t need to. Despite the slippers and the worn
bathrobe and the lack of his usual cap, Bobby’s making the ‘or else’ perfectly clear with nothing but his tone of voice.

Dropping his bag onto the floor, Sam sits.

Bobby releases Sam with his eyes, picking up his glass and taking a swig. Sam waits, not touching his own drink, while Bobby grimaces around the burn and puts the glass back down.

“Your daddy’s been chomping at the bit to cut and run ever since we got here, so I can’t say I’m all that surprised he finally left, but I thought at least one of you had some sticking power.”

“I’m not helping him,” Sam says, which isn’t exactly what he means, but he can’t bring himself to say the other out loud just yet.

“Yeah, cause his whole damn family ditching him in one night is gonna be just what the doctor ordered.”

Sam sighs. “I didn’t tell Dad to leave.”

“Damn it, Sam!” Bobby snaps, although Sam notices that he keeps his voice low, which means he doesn’t want to wake Dean. Which means he isn’t going to resort to force to keep Sam here. Sam didn’t really think he would, but he relaxes slightly at the confirmation anyway.

“Dean’ll manage,” he says softly. “You’ll take care of him.”

“Dean’s gonna be a fucking mess and you know it,” Bobby shoots back.

Sam drops his eyes because, yeah, he knows. He knows better than Bobby does, probably, and he feels guilty as hell leaving his brother to that. But he doesn’t have any other options.

“I’m hurting him, Bobby,” he whispers, making himself say it. “I—I love him so fucking much, but all I ever do is hurt him, and as—as long as I’m here, he isn’t going to get any better. He’s just going to keep trying to twist himself into whatever he thinks I want, and I—Bobby, I don’t know that I’m going to stop him.”

Bobby heaves out a sigh. “Hell, boy.”

“And it’s my fault anyway, that he’s like this. If I hadn’t—if I didn’t want him, the demon never would have—it wouldn’t have touched him. None of this would have happened.”

Bobby is quiet for a long moment, and Sam realizes that they still haven’t discussed this. These past few months, it never seemed to come up. Or maybe neither of them wanted it to come up. Sam glances toward Bobby cautiously, trying to gauge the man’s disgust, but Bobby still looks more disgruntled with the current situation than anything else.

“I’ve known for a while now,” Bobby says finally. “Ever since you were—oh, I dunno, sixteen, I guess. I don’t know whether you knew what you wanted yourself then, but it wasn’t hard for anyone else to spot. Like the sun wasn’t shining whenever he was more than six feet away from you. He took Sarah Feld out to the movies one night and I swear, I damn near throttled you before he got back. Skulking around the house like a ditched prom date.”

“Did you tell Dean?” Sam asks, rubbing his finger against the condensation on the side of his glass.

“No. Tried to talk to your daddy about it, got a sore jaw for my troubles. Guess I got to have the last laugh there.” His mouth twitches into a humorless smile and he takes another sip of tequila.
“Anyway, point I’m trying to make is that you never did anything about it. He got back high as a kite from that date and you were jealous as hell but you didn’t drag him down, and you didn’t bad mouth the girl, either.”

Sam gets where Bobby’s going with this—he’s heard that spiel before, from Dean’s mouth even—and now he says, “I know I didn’t rape him. But I can’t—I can’t keep benefiting from it. And you know that Dean’s too—I can’t be the only thing in his world.”

Bobby just grunts, which means that he agrees with Sam and doesn’t want to admit it.

“Me leaving is the only way he’ll ever try to figure out what he wants for himself and you know it.”

“You leave now and he’s gonna react like a heroin addict who just got jerked off his fix. You can’t just walk out on him without so much as a word, you—”

“No, Bobby. That’s the only way I can leave.” Because it’s difficult enough now, without Dean looking at him. Without having to see the devastation in his brother’s eyes. If he had to talk to Dean first, he’d never make it out the door.

“If you’re so set on doing this, Sam, then fine, but don’t you dare just disappear on him. You call him. You write. Hell, send him a fucking postcard.”

Sam doesn’t say anything. He can’t. Can’t promise what Bobby is asking, because at Dean’s first pleading request he’ll fold. He’ll drive all night and day to get back here, pulled in by Dean’s gravity and then they’ll be stuck like this forever. Dean will be stunted and broken and twisted into Sam’s shadow forever.

And Dean deserves more than that.

“Is that all?” Sam makes himself say. “Can I go now?”

There’s a beat of silence and then Bobby says, darkly, “I oughta beat you til you come to your senses, boy.”

Sam pushes back in his chair, grabs hold of his bag, and stands up. “Tell him I’m sorry, okay? And I know—I know he’s not going to believe it for a while, but tell him it isn’t his fault, and that I didn’t leave because I don’t love him.”

“Fuck you, Sam,” Bobby says, not looking at him.

Somehow, despite the desolate loneliness already sinking into his chest, Sam finds it in himself to be hurt by the dismissal.

“Bye, Bobby,” he whispers back, and then heads out the door.

He keeps expecting Bobby to come after him, or maybe for some sixth sense to wake up his brother and send Dean stumbling out into the snow, barefoot and shivering. But it’s quiet: just Sam with his pluming breath and the dark, snow-covered heaps of cars.

He detours briefly to pause by the lump he knows is the Impala, bent and twisted and likely starting to rust beneath its white blanket. He rests one hand on the roof, burning his palm against the snow, and glances up at the second floor of Bobby’s house, to the darkened window of the room he and Dean have been sharing.

Then, before he can lose his nerve, he hoists his bag onto his shoulder and starts walking.
In the pre-dawn hours, Sam wakes an old man up in a paint-peeling house about five miles from Bobby’s place. He hammers on the screen door until the man, bleary-eyed and hovering between pissed off and frightened, jerks the wooden door behind it open and snarls, “What?” Then he gets a look at Sam—at the height and build of him—and edges back a step.

Sam hooks a thumb over his shoulder and asks, “How much for the truck?”

It’s half-buried by snow in the man’s front yard, with only the windshield kept meticulously clear to display the For Sale sign stuck to the dash. Sam has his doubts that the truck will run at all, but he’s fairly desperate right now. Needs to be miles further on his way by the time Dean wakes up in a few hours.

The man squints at him, and then at the truck, and scowls. “It’s four in the fucking morning,” he grunts, starting to shut the door.

Sam shoots a hand out, gripping the wooden frame, and shoves it open again. The man stumbles deeper into the house, eyes going wide and alarmed and awake as Sam steps up and fills the doorway. Then he turns with a jerky motion, grabs something metal and jangling off the small table by the door, and throws it at Sam’s chest.

Sam catches the object automatically and finds himself holding a key ring with two identical keys on it.

“Just take it and it get out,” the man says. “I don’t want no trouble.”

Sam hesitates, and through the shock numbing him he wonders what he looks like right now. Wonders what expression is on his face. He doesn’t want to scare this man. Doesn’t want to steal from him.

But he needs to be gone before his steadily eroding will breaks down and sends him sprinting back toward Dean, so he palms the keys while digging out his wallet with his other hand. There isn’t a whole lot of cash there, and he’ll need some of it to gas up until he can get to a pool hall or one of their emergency lock boxes, but he counts out three twenties and holds them out. When the man just looks at him, he sets the money down on the table where the keys were and then backs away again.

“You can get the rest from Bobby Singer,” he says, and knows Bobby will do this for him. He’ll probably curse Sam’s name while he’s doing it, but he’ll still pay up.

Sam doesn’t know why he didn’t just take one of the salvage yard’s clunkers. Bobby would have let him if he asked. But he supposes that, in the end, it just didn’t feel right.

Clean break. No ties.

“Sorry I woke you up,” he offers, and shuts the door behind himself on the way out.

“Hey, Sammy. Pick up some beer while you’re out, okay?”

Click.
The truck is a piece of crap, but it’s good enough to get Sam into Devon, where he empties a lock box, helping himself to just under four thousand in cash, three sets of fake IDs, a Beretta, a box of ammo, and two credit cards. He leaves Dad’s IDs where they are and, after a brief internal struggle, Dean’s as well.

It feels like abandoning him all over again.

“Dude, where’d you go for that beer: Canada?”

Pause.

“And answer your phone, douchebag. You got Bobby all riled up over here.”

Click.

Around three o’clock, he pulls over to the side of the road in his half-stolen, coughing truck, and drops his forehead down against the steering wheel and cries. He doesn’t actually feel anything while it’s happening, which is a little scary and only makes him cry harder.

After, emptied out and headachy, he scrunches himself down awkwardly across the front seat and shuts his eyes. If he dreams when he sleeps, then he doesn’t remember.

“Okay, haha. You and Bobby’ve had your laugh, dude, now stop with the silent treatment and pick up the phone. Sammy? No shit, man, I’m getting a little worried.”

Click.

Sam’s chest hurts when he wakes up—worse than his cramped back and legs and neck—and he struggles with his breath as he gets the truck back on the road in the deepening dusk. He isn’t sure where he’s supposed to go now, or what he’s supposed to do, so he just points the truck away from his brother and pushes the pedal flush with the rusting floor. He races onward, praying with every mile that the yearning need to turn around and go back to his brother will fade. That he’ll stop jumping every time the phone rings.

That he’ll have enough courage to answer.

But it doesn’t and he doesn’t and he can’t.

“This isn’t funny, Sam. Get your ass back here.”

Click.
“Well, if it ain’t Sammy Winchester.”

“It’s Sam now,” Sam says, but the words don’t carry any of their normal heat, and he realizes that he doesn’t actually care what people call him anymore.

“You got big,” Paul says, stepping aside to let him through the door.

Paul’s is just as Sam remembers it: cluttered and yet somehow meticulously neat at the same time. There are guns everywhere Sam looks. Knives. Holy symbols. Boxes of ammo piled from floor to ceiling.

“How’s your daddy doing?” Paul asks as he closes the door and reattaches all six chains and bolts locking it shut.

“Busted his leg up some,” Sam answers absently, brushing his fingers against a gun. He remembers coming here for the first time with Dean. Remembers how Dean’s face lit up, just like a little kid in a candy shop. He remembers Paul laughing and ruffling Dean’s hair and loading him up until he looked like a miniature version of Rambo, machine gun too large and unwieldy in Dean’s twelve-year-old hands. Sam wonders now whether there was live ammo in those guns. Maybe. Probably.

“How about Dean? Haven’t heard from him in a coupla years.”

“He’s good.” Sam’s voice doesn’t shake, although it sounds a little tighter than usual and he has to clear his throat before he can say, “I need some supplies.”

“Never were one for the small talk, were you?” Paul observes, moving past him into the house. He doesn’t sound rancorous, though—just as cheerful as ever—and Sam doesn’t bother responding as he follows.

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“Sammy, pick up, okay? Bobby’s been. Bobby’s been saying some pretty fucked up stuff, and I just. I know you wouldn’t do that, right? But just. You gotta pick up, man, cause now I’m—it’s cold outside, and if you went and, y’know, got yourself banged up, I gotta. I gotta know you’re okay. So just gimme a call. Or, uh, get home. That’d be awesome too.”

Click.

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Sam spends two thousand even stocking up the truck. Paul insists on drinking with him before he goes—a toast to fallen soldiers. It’s routine with Paul, part of every transaction, and Sam accepts the shot of bourbon ungrudgingly.

He thinks of Pastor Jim when he tips it back, and Caleb. He thinks of Dad’s broken, limping form and weary eyes.

And, as the liquor burns down his throat, he thinks of Dean.

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“You need a new message, you know. This one blows. I mean, ‘Samuel Winchester’? Really?” Beat. “Also, you sound about twelve.”

Click.
“You know it’s faster to just redial your number than use the speed dial on this thing? I need a new phone.”

Click.

“Dude, I know you’re there, cause I gotta listen to your stupid ring for about an hour before voicemail kicks in. So just answer already. Christ, you’d think I’m trying to get hold of Dad or something.”

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

“Come on, Sam.”

Click.

Click.

Click.

“I’m gonna keep calling until you pick up, you son of a bitch.”

Click.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

The first hunt, which Sam stumbles onto a little over a week after leaving South Dakota, is a disaster.

Sam’s used to hunting with someone at his side, and the routine salt and burn turns into a struggle for his life. Billy Gerard’s ghost ambushes him as he’s about to light the man’s corpse, knocking him on his back in the dirt and wrapping cold hands around his throat.

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Always fucking choking me, Sam thinks absurdly, flailing one hand out toward the lighter lying just out of reach to his right.

The ghost doesn’t say anything—can’t, with his lower jaw missing like that—but Sam can read the laughing, murderous intent in Gerard’s eyes as the ghost tightens his grip.

Dean, Sam’s oxygen-deprived brain stutters. Dean, please. Shoot it.

But Dean isn’t shooting anything, because Dean’s not here. Dean’s Away, he’s Safe, and he isn’t going to have to see Sam choke out his last, few seconds of life on the cold, hard ground.

Sam’s vision grays around the edges, head pounding violently while his hand scrabbles at the dirt.

Oh god, he is. He’s really going to die here.

Then there’s a tiny burst of pain in his head, and the feel of cool metal against his fingers, and he doesn’t question his good luck. He just flicks open the lighter and tosses it into the grave. There’s a
span of a few seconds where Sam thinks it didn’t work, that the lighter went out on the way down, and then Gerard gives a wordless shriek and releases him. Sam manages to get one hand up to protect his eyes from the ash flaking off the ghost’s form as Gerard burns with his body, but he’s too breathless and weak to do anything else.

For a long while after the ghost is gone, Sam lies there with burnt flecks on his face and neck—stings like a bitch, but he’s been too close when a ghost burned before, so it isn’t an unfamiliar sensation. Besides, it distracts him a little from the gaping hole in his chest, where it feels like he’s continuously bleeding out. Staring up at the stars and the rising fog of his breath, he wonders how he’s still alive when the lighter was so clearly out of reach.

In his coat pocket, his phone starts to ring.

"Sammy. Sammy, please. I can’t—did I do something? Cause I can be better, okay? I can—I ate. I ate the rest of the fucking cake and I didn’t."

Shaky, harsh exhale.

"I didn’t, okay? So you can come back, alright? Sammy? I’ll—I’ll let my hair grow out, okay? I can. I can let it get long, and then you can—you’ll have something to—to hold onto when you—look, whatever you want, alright? Just—gimme another shot, man."

Click.

Sometimes, it feels like Dean is dead.

Sam will be driving, the highway wide and open and empty in front of him, and the seat vacant beside him, and between one heartbeat and the next he’ll realize how unbearably alone he is. And then it hits him that Dean is gone, that he’s denied to Sam forever, and Sam’s gut goes cold and his heart starts lurching against his ribcage. When his breathing goes haywire as well, he gives in and pulls off onto the shoulder until he can shove all the grief and the pain and the fear back into the silent, aching corners of himself.

He tries to stave it off once or twice, by turning the radio up, but it doesn’t help. If he listens to his stations, he gets the ghost of Dean’s voice in his ear, bitching out the song selection. If he listens to Dean’s music, then he gets shutter flashes of memory—Dean bobbing his head along to the baseline, or singing at the top of his lungs, or riffling through the box of cassette tapes with nimble fingers. And then the loss will hit him harder than ever, and leave him crouched on the earth on the far side of the truck, face turned away from the wind and entire body shaking as he brings his breakfast up.

After the first few failed attempts to avoid the inevitable, Sam accepts the panic attacks as routine. Anyway, he supposes he deserves them.

It’s been one month.

"Don’t do this, Sammy. Don’t you fucking leave me. You promised. You fucking promised, asshole."

Click.
There’s an angel in Providence, Rhode Island.

That’s what people are claiming, anyway, and maybe Sam might have believed it, a lifetime ago. He half-believes it now, because telling people to murder each other is just about par for the course for a God who let Dean get so fucked up.

When the thing shows up in front of Sam, offering him redemption, he sends a bullet through it. When that doesn’t work, he switches the pistol out for the sawed off and blows what turns out to be just another ghost into salt-torn fragments.

Sam knew the moment it opened its mouth that it wouldn’t be an angel.

An angel would have known better than to bother trying to redeem him.

Two months.

“Sam, pick up the goddamned phone and call your brother. He doesn’t deser—"

Message deleted.

There’s a werewolf in San Francisco.

Dean would have loved this hunt, Sam knows, and he thinks about his brother a lot as he tracks it down—or them, actually. There are two—a guy and a girl—and Sam takes them out in the same night, made even more efficient than usual with the need to get this over with and leave before the choking weight of Dean’s absence can drag him under.

He sees Dean when he pulls the trigger, both times. He sees the dead body of a stranger lying on the pavement with a smoking hole in his temple.

And there’s a tiny, selfless part of him that’s glad his brother isn’t with him for this. Dean has been dragged down enough by this life. He’s done enough.

But that doesn’t stop Sam from dreaming of his brother’s smile that night, or from waking with scratchy eyes and wet cheeks and a chest that feels like it’s been hollowed out and charred black.

Three months.

“Sammy. Sammy, please, you. You can’t. You have to c-come back. I duh-don’t know—I n-need. I’m sorry, okay? I’m so fucking s-sorry, man, please. I’ll be g-good. I’ll be so fuh-fucking good. Please. Please, Sammy, just. Pick up the ph-phone at least. Okay? Just—Need to hear y-your v-voice. I wuh-won’t say anything, man, I’ll juh-just listen. I w-won’t—I know I’m w-weak and a fuck-up and I’m sorry. I’m suh-sorry, but d-don’t. Please don’t d-do this, Sammy, I—I need—n-need you. Y-you can. You can f-fuh-fuck me. Okay? I—I want y-you to f-fuck me. Please. Just—”

Beep.
Sam throws his phone away after that one.

Summer comes, and mid-July the truck breaks down. Sam buys a week’s worth of time at a local garage and a do-it-yourself manual and sets about fixing it. He thinks of Dean nonstop while he works—feels his brother leaning over his shoulder, laughing when he fucks up and mocking his fumbling attempts to get the piece of shit engine up and running again.

On the last day, when he finally turns the key in the ignition and the engine rumbles back to life, Sam can almost feel the weight of Dean’s hand on his shoulder.

‘Good job, Sammy,’ his brother’s voice whispers in his ear, and Sam’s throat goes full and hot and he presses his eyes shut and doesn’t move for a while.

When he thinks he can manage it without falling apart, he pulls the truck out of the garage and drives it to the local bar, where he’s been spending his nights nursing a single beer and trying not to stare too hard at the empty seat across from him. Without thinking about much of anything, this time he buys himself a bottle of vodka and asks for a glass and takes himself over to a corner. He does have one last moment of hesitation then, as he pours out his first drink and catches the scent of hard alcohol on the air.

What are you doing? he asks himself, pausing. Seriously, what the fuck are you doing?

He doesn’t have an answer, but that’s nothing new. Despite the haphazard hunts, he hasn’t had an answer to that question since he left Bobby’s almost six months ago. He’s been drifting, mostly, and hurting, and trying not to admit to himself that Dean is the only thing he ever really thinks about. That Dean’s the only thing he wants.

The alcohol isn’t going to change any of that, but some faint, reckless part of Sam hopes it might dull things. Not—not forever, just for a night. Sam wants a single night of peace. He wants to go to sleep without tears in his eyes—without having to fight with the pain in his chest just to draw in a single breath.

Stupid, he reminds himself as he contemplates the glass. Because he’s tried this before, and it hasn’t ever led anywhere he wanted to go. Alcohol doesn’t subdue his emotions—it destroys his inhibitions, and Sam knows that. And he knows how dangerous his pain is making him: like some kind of provoked, belligerent bear.

But he isn’t a fucking saint, and he’s tired, and hurting, and he hasn’t heard Dean’s voice in almost three months, and he’s so goddamned lonely he’s sick with it, and the first glass of vodka goes down smooth and easy. So do the next five. After that, it’s smooth sailing.

When he washes the blood off his swollen knuckles in the morning, for the first time since he snuck out like a coward in the middle of the night, he isn’t thinking about his brother.

Drinking your troubles away is an art form.

It’s also more difficult to do than most people would expect, and Sam has to be very careful to drink just enough to leave him muzzy headed and careless, but not quite enough to push over into that introspective wasteland where the only thing he can think about is Dean, and how his loneliness has become a physical, ravenous thing inside his chest. Because then he ends up sobbing into his beer, and decking the first person who comments on it, and that leads to emergency rooms and stitches for
the cut from a broken beer bottle he receives on one cheek.

After a while, Sam learns his limits. He figures out how to float almost constantly in a whiskey-wet, empty fog where the pain is a dull throb and Dean’s face is just a vague shadow. Keeps himself in money for drinks by drifting from bar to bar and hustling for it—memory of Dean’s hands on his, Dean’s body pressing up behind his as he taught Sam to aim and shoot and shark the locals.

Occasionally, there are men. Always a few inches shorter than him. Green eyes, dark hair. Once a woman with pouty, full lips.

The sex is never satisfying, even when Sam achieves liftoff, and he always falls apart afterward, which is pretty pathetic and awkward for everyone involved. Each time, he promises himself he won’t do it again, but he always does.

He bets Dean wouldn’t want him back, if he could see Sam now.

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On November second, Sam drinks himself right into the emergency room and wakes up with a tube down his throat and a woman with a pinched, tired face sitting next to him. He thinks, for a moment, that it’s Jill, and then he thinks that it’s that girl from Vegas—the one whose name he can’t remember anymore—and then her features come into view and he realizes that she’s Chinese, and not anyone at all he’s ever seen before. He swallows around the tube, which hurts, and then makes a grunting noise that makes his head pound.

The woman looks at him flatly. “My little brother died of alcohol poisoning,” she says.

Sam blinks.

“If you want to kill yourself, there are easier ways.”

Sam isn’t sure what she’s driving at, and he never gets a chance to ask because she gets up then, and leaves without a backward glance.

As an intervention, it’s kind of a fail.

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Sam doesn’t remember Christmas that first year alone, except in snatches. He sure as hell doesn’t remember throwing rocks through a church window, or shouting for God to ‘come down and face me, you fucker’.

But the police don’t lock people up for no reason, and he has a bump the size of a goose egg on the back of his head where they eventually had to knock him out to subdue him, and he guesses that maybe he’s been drunk long enough.

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Sobering up again sucks.

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Sam starts off small, easing back into hunting with caution and restricting himself to harmful rather than deadly ghosts, and a couple of pranksterish gnomes and pixies. He’s shamefully clumsy at first even so, and woefully out of shape. Getting back into an exercise regimen seems to be the only way
to fix that, and for the first three weeks it’s not much more than daily torture.

But Sam relishes the exertion, which is much better at driving thoughts of Dean from his head than the alcohol ever was—or maybe that’s just time doing its job and dulling the edges of his pain. Either way, when he’s pushing for that last mile, or those final thirty push ups, or straining his way through the tail end of a set of crunches, he’s thinking about his body and not his missing brother. He’s thinking about the burn and pull of muscles, not the endless, hollow ache in his chest.

It’s simpler to focus on the solid reality around him than the complex, tangling web of emotion. After a couple of limping, amateurish months, it gets to be easier as well.

Sam works on shutting himself off the same way he has learned any new skill: with unrelenting determination and practice. He slips up a lot at first, when he doesn’t have the immediacy of the hunt or his exercises to distract him, and then he invariably ends up sitting in a darkened room with Dean’s amulet gripped in his hand hard enough to bruise his skin. But he gets better at distancing himself from the emptiness inside. He gets better at finding a new hunt as soon as the old is finished, and as he ramps himself back up into the normal rotation, he finds that he’s better at hunting than he ever was before.

Hunting is easier when he doesn’t have to worry about his heart, or whether Dean’s okay, or whether this is going to be the job that kills him. Because his heart has been effectively closed, Dean is safer than Sam could ever make him, and Sam doesn’t actually give a shit anymore whether one of the things he’s hunting takes him out. Life isn’t exactly good, but it’s efficient, and Sam guesses that’s good enough for him.

There are still moments of relapse, of course, and it’s during one of those moments that he realizes he’s been hunting with his hands tied behind his back.

It’s a poltergeist this time, and it has Sam pinned against a wall with a desk. The final hex bag he needs to dispel the thing was knocked out of his hand when the desk hit him, and as Sam watches the ornamental sword on the far wall start to quiver, he knows that he isn’t going to make it out of this one. He always thought he’d be calm or relieved when the end finally came, but instead a hot flush of panic takes him.

He can’t die here. If he dies here, he won’t ever see Dean again.

It isn’t a logical thought—Sam knows full well he isn’t going to be seeing Dean again, no matter how long he drags himself along—but apparently he was still clinging to hope because suddenly he’s sweating, and shoving futilely at the desk, and muttering, “No no no no,” under his breath. On the opposite wall, the sword’s rattling increases and he gives up on the desk to stretch toward the hex bag—stupid, the bag’s over six feet out of reach, but he can’t move the desk and he can’t just stand there.

When he feels the give in his head this time, the pain is less: just a dull throb. The hex bag jerks up from the floor and sails over into his outstretched hand, and while Sam’s brain is still playing catch up with what just happened, he twists and shoves the bag into the wall.

The pressure of the desk lets up immediately, as white, purifying light flares through the house, and when his eyes have cleared he watches as it comes away from his body—he’ll have bruises across the top of his thighs tomorrow, if he doesn’t already—and then stares down at his hand, which is shaking. He’s shaking all over, actually—excess adrenaline—and he turns to sit on the edge of the desk before his spinning head makes him lose his balance and drops him on his ass.
He isn’t really thinking about anything as he stares at the hex bag nestled in its hole, but images and sounds keep flickering through his head.

—heavy cabinet, blocking the door and barring him from Dean, from saving Dean, but Sam strains and panics and it skids away—

—make the gun float to you there, psychic boy—

—cold ground, cold ghostly hands around his throat, the lighter was out of reach one moment and there the next—

Still shaking, Sam runs a hand through his hair and mutters, “I’m such a fucking moron.”

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Next to leaving Dean, learning to use his powers consciously is probably the most difficult thing Sam has ever done. He’s flying blind—has no clue how or why he’s able to do these things, or even what the mechanics of it are. He does know that he gets headaches if he pushes too hard—the really splitting ones are also accompanied by nosebleeds.

But like any kind of exercise, the more he practices with the telekinesis the better he gets. His headaches diminish in strength, and then come less frequently, and finally cease altogether. Using the power starts to feel good. The adrenaline rush that follows the exertion isn’t quite as powerful as an orgasm, but it’s as close as Sam is going to get—closer than he ever thought he could.

After a couple of months, it isn’t just the telekinesis anymore. His visions have come back, slightly more controlled than before. He still can’t choose their subject, but he can choose when and for how long. And there’s no longer an accompanying headache to delay reaction time.

In Des Moines, four months into training, Sam electrocutes a rawhead with his bare hands.

In Cincinnati, he finishes off a ghost with nothing more than a canister of salt and the ignition of his own mind.

In Boulder, while hunting a pack of ghouls, he loses his patience with a twitchy source and snaps at the man to just tell him what he saw already. The man’s face goes blank, fear vanishing, and Sam gets the most detailed description he’s ever been given by a witness.

He works hard to master that particular power.

Now, instead of scraping by, Sam can check in at the front desk of motels and inform the clerks he’s already paid. He can order secretaries to give him complete access to files. He can go anywhere, be anyone, and he doesn’t even have to dress the part.

Best of all, it works on demons.

Sam figures that one out accidentally, when he tells a gas station attendant to fill up his car and the man’s eyes don’t just go blank but black as he obeys. Sam talks with the demon after that, telling it to walk into a devil’s trap and then questioning it for hours—a power-backed interrogation to ensure full cooperation and complete honesty.

The revelation that the demon has been tailing him for the past seven months is unsettling at first—worse when the demon explains that it doesn’t know why it was doing so. It wasn’t ordered to: didn’t have any specific plans. Sam was just ... fascinating. Compelling.
The demon sounds frightened by the impulse itself, and Sam is tempted to just get rid of it quickly *(being something a demon fears is making the hair on the back of Sam’s neck stand up)*, but then he has one of those stray thoughts about Dean that strike him about a thousand times a day, and he ends up taking his sweet time. By the time he finally finishes the exorcism, he’s worked his way through about twenty gallons of holy water and about fifteen obscure Catholic variations the demon didn’t seem to appreciate.

After that, Sam finds demons everywhere he turns. None of them are interested in hurting him, oddly enough, and they find it impossible to disobey direct orders, which makes hunting them almost too easy to be enjoyable. Almost.

Sam experiments for a month, trying to see what it is about him that’s attracting them, and when the demons disappear after he stops using his powers for an endless, painful week, he decides that he’s found his answer. Energy bleed, maybe—or maybe just some kind of psychic aura that accompanies the powers the yellow-eyed demon was so interested in. Now that he’s using them regularly, he has become a walking, talking demon lure.

As far as Sam is concerned, it’s just another benefit of his new abilities.

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In January, in between demons, Sam finds himself thinking of Dean more often. Dean is the first thing he thinks about when he gets up in the morning; the last thing he thinks of when he goes to bed at night. Sam dreams about Dean—about fucking him deep and hard and long—and wakes up both spent and yet somehow agonizingly unsatisfied. Dreaming about Dean is good—the sex is wonderful in Sam’s head—but it isn’t any kind of substitute for the real thing.

More and more, as Dean’s birthday approaches—the two-year anniversary of Sam’s departure—Sam wonders why he ever left.

He wants Dean. Dean was starting to want him before he left. And now ... now Sam could just skip through all that extra healing crap and tell Dean to be okay. He could fix his brother with a word, and then they could be happy and safe. Sam could keep them safe.

His drifting, meandering trail starts to take on a pattern even he can’t ignore, looping closer in casual arcs to South Dakota, the one state he’s avoided for the last two years.

Coming to get Dean.

Coming home.
January 20th, Helena, Montana.

Sam’s sitting in the Golden Beam, an untouched beer in front of him. He isn’t here for the alcohol—he hasn’t touched a drop since he sobered up. Hasn’t been tempted since he discovered the depth and extent of his powers. He’s here to find himself a demon to take apart tonight—has gotten good enough to spot the hosts that are already walking corpses so that he can be more creative with the sons of bitches. So that he can teach them not to mess with Dean, not ever again.

He’ll be at Bobby’s in time for Dean's birthday.

Sam doesn’t pay a lot of attention to the men when they first come into the bar—gives them a glance, dismisses them as human, and keeps scanning. It isn’t until they start to make a systematic round of the patrons that Sam takes notice and looks more carefully.

They both seem short, although he admits that he isn’t the best judge of that. Similar dark hair, similar army fatigue jackets. The slightly taller man is clearly in charge, taking point everywhere they stop. He says a few words to the patrons, who smile and take out their wallets and hand wads of cash to the second guy.

If they’re asking for donations for a charity, then they’re the most successful Sam’s ever seen, but some deeper instinct tells him that isn’t what’s going on here.

When they reach his table, Sam looks up with a bland expression and meets the taller man’s eyes.

“Hey, buddy,” the man says. “Take out your wallet and hand over your money to my brother here. You can keep enough to pay for your drink.”

Yahtzee.

Sam’s feeling puckish enough to start reaching for his wallet as he leans back, but then smirks and puts both hands on the table. “Now why would I want to do that?” he asks.

The shorter man jerks in a way that makes Sam think of Dean, but the taller just breaks out in a wide smile. “Well, I’ll be damned. Fellow chosen one, huh?”

He sticks out his hand across the table, and after a moment of deliberation, Sam takes it.

“Ansem,” the taller man introduces himself. “And this is my brother Andy.”

“Sam,” Sam says simply, and then, because he has to admit he’s a little curious, “Can I buy you guys a drink?”

There are more of them.

Sam probably should have pieced that together from the demon’s words, and from his own interactions with Max, but he’s had other things on his mind. He isn’t all that surprised by the news, although Ansem’s hero-worship of the yellow-eyed demon—which he calls Azazel—is a little disturbing.

“How many have you met?”
“Including you?” Ansem checks, and then off of Sam’s nod, answers, “About fifteen. Most of them were okay, but one or two were real morons—right, Andy?”

Andy’s eyes flick toward his brother and then drop down to the table again, where they’ve been glued since he sat down. The glance pings something deep inside of Sam—makes him hesitate and start to frown—but then Ansem’s continued monologue catches his attention.

“Retreat?” Sam says. “What kind of retreat?”

Ansem shrugs dismissively. “Some hippy club up in the mountains somewhere in Canada. Seriously, man, can you imagine? What kind of fucking moron wants to sit around and chant instead of live it up? I mean, Azazel gave us these powers, we might as well use them.”

“Azazel?” Sam says. His stomach has gone cold and hard. “I thought this was—you know, that we were born like this.”

“Naw,” Ansem says easily, although his eyes have gotten a little more reserved. “Didn’t he tell you? Demon blood communion? Pretty powerful stuff, right?”

There’s a roaring in Sam’s ears for a second—demon blood, which means these are demonic powers, and he’s been encouraging them, he’s been indulging in something that came from the son of a bitch that raped Dean, that defiled him—and then his mind slips sideways and quiets again.

“Pretty powerful, yeah,” he agrees. His voice sounds a little soft, but otherwise all right, although Ansem doesn’t seem very reassured.

He’s eyeing Sam consideringly now, frowning, and after a moment he asks, “You’re not headed there, are you? Cause you seem pretty chill, and I’d hate to think you were one of those crybabies who can’t handle it. This isn’t the kind of gift you refuse, you know? Gets you all sorts of things you want.”

He reaches over, casual and easy as breathing, and rests his hand on the back of Andy’s neck. Andy hunches down a little lower in his seat, coloring. His eyes stare fixedly at the tabletop.

Sam looks at the two of them for a moment—looks at Ansem’s hand on his brother’s neck, thumb stroking back and forth through his hair. Looks at the creeping flush on Andy’s skin, the minute trembling of his hands where they rest on the table.

“Are you two—” The start of the question is out of his mouth before he can censor himself, although he catches himself before he can finish.

Ansem’s grin widens, though, and he replies, “We’re pretty close. You got a problem with that, Sam?”

Sam’s mind flicks to Dean, and he starts to shake his head when Andy’s eyes come up. For the first time, Andy looks at him—really looks—and Sam sees his brother there. He sees Dean’s cringing fear, that he always used to try to hide, and a desperate, hopeless pleading expression that Sam hasn’t actually ever seen on his brother’s face, but which he can suddenly imagine there all too well.

It’s a shock, making Sam flush first cold and then hot and then cold again as all of his own dreams and desires and intentions come flooding back to him. He feels exposed sitting there, and filthy, as he realizes that he’s become the monster Dad warned him about. Demon blood in him, which is bad enough, but Sam’s been nursing that contamination—he spent the last year shaving all of his humanity away and turning himself into something the yellow-eyed demon would have been proud of, something that would have been more than willing to take Dean any way he could get him.
Worst of all, Sam can still sense that mentality lurking just out of sight, waiting for him to let his guard down so that it can slip back in.

Oh fuck.

Ansem is still watching him, waiting for some kind of response, and all Sam wants to do is pull his gun and put a bullet right between the sick bastard’s eyes. But he recognizes that Ansem is on guard right now, and he has no idea what other tricks Ansem has up his sleeves, and he isn’t quite stupid enough to jump the gun in a situation this dangerous.

Somehow, Sam makes himself smile.

“No, man. I was just wondering if you’d be willing to share.”

It makes his stomach churn just to say it, and his chest constricts at the wet, panicked look the words leave in Andy’s eyes. But Ansem relaxes again. He strokes Andy’s neck one last time and then takes his hand back.

“Usually the answer’d be no, but for another one of Azazel’s kids? I think we can work something out. You have a place?”

Sam’s grin stretches painfully wide. “Sure. Let me just settle up my tab.”

In the end, it’s easier than Sam expected. Ansem herds Andy into Sam’s motel room first, without any prompting or maneuvering from Sam, and Sam simply steps in behind them, shuts the door, and puts a bullet in the back of Ansem’s skull.

It takes almost an hour to convince Andy that Sam isn’t going to hurt him, that Andy’s safe, and then Sam spends another two waiting for Andy to get himself under control as the guy cries and pukes in the toilet and, three or four times, comes back out into the main room to kick his brother’s body.

Sam can’t find it in himself to feel at all remorseful about pulling the trigger.

“We were separated at birth,” Andy explains later, once he’s calmed down. “Except Ansem found out, and he started—he killed everyone who knew about it, or had anything to do with it. He killed our mom, and he—he killed Tracey. I’m the one who found her, down by the shore of the river.”

His face falls, hands working compulsively against one another in his lap, and he shoots a glance at his brother’s blanket-covered corpse.

“She didn’t do anything. I just. I liked her, and Ansem—Ansem—”

“You don’t have to say it,” Sam offers, but Andy shakes his head.

“That bastard,” he chokes out. “That bastard killed everyone I cared about, and then he.” He shivers, arms wrapping low around his stomach. “He was my brother,” he whispers. “He was supposed to. He wasn’t supposed to.”

Sam’s own guilt flares up again at that—at the thought of everything he did with Dean. Looking back, he doesn’t think he forced Dean into anything, but he can’t be sure. He can’t be sure of anything anymore.
Maybe what he feels isn’t about him and Dean after all. Maybe it’s just the demon blood twisting him the same way it twisted Ansem. Maybe it corrupts everything it touches.

Except then Andy says, “I tried to fight him, but I’m not as good with my powers. Ansem practiced more.”

“You too?” Sam asks, surprised.

Andy nods. “Jedi mind tricks,” he says wanly. “But Ansem, he could do that and other stuff too. He said Azazel showed him how in his dreams. I thought—I thought maybe it was the demon stuff, making him like that.” He glances at Sam with bruised, trusting eyes, and continues, “But you’re not like him.”

Sam laughs.

They leave before daylight, Ansem’s body no more than a pile of cinders and bone fragments in the bathtub.

“Where do you want me to drop you?” Sam asks once they’re out of town.

In the passenger seat, Andy bites his lower lip while shooting Sam one of those anxious, sideways glances. “I thought maybe I could stay with you for a while. It isn’t like I have anywhere else to go.”

Sam grimaces. “I don’t think that’s a great idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not safe,” Sam answers shortly.

Andy’s looking at him directly now, and the scrutiny makes Sam shift in his seat a little. He isn’t used to being around people for such a long period of time. Not people he isn’t in control of, anyway.

“Because of the demon blood?” Andy asks eventually.

“Yeah.”

Maybe. Sam isn’t sure whether to hope that’s the right explanation for his moral decay or not. He doesn’t want his feelings for Dean to be so false and filthy, but it might be easier if they were. It might be easier to let them go so that he can safely see Dean again.

“I know where the retreat is,” Andy announces after another delay. “Lily told me before Ansem killed her. We could go there.”

Sam laughs hoarsely and shakes his head.

“What?” Andy mutters. “I think it’s a good idea.”

“If you think meditation is a cure, then you haven’t really been using,” Sam explains. “I stopped for about a week once. It felt like I was dying.”

“So what else are you going to do?” Andy asks. Despite everything he’s been through, there’s a challenge in his voice. Echoes of Dean that leave Sam yearning and miserable.
He thinks of the guns in the back of the truck for a moment, how quick and final that solution would be, and then admits that he isn’t brave enough for it. He isn’t strong enough to do the right thing and pull the trigger.

“I don’t know. Something.” Sam can research anyway. Now that he knows where the powers are coming from.

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He does research. He spends a full month researching while Andy tags along behind him like a skittish shadow. Sam isn’t thrilled about that development—is even less thrilled by how often Andy feels he needs to suggest they both go up to the retreat—but he doesn’t have the heart to send the kid away either. And, if he wants to be honest with himself, part of Sam is grateful for Andy’s presence. For the reminder.

Andy can be annoying at times, but he keeps Sam human. Keeps him from slipping back onto yet another destructive path. Sam can’t quite keep himself from using, but he is able to restrict himself to small indulgences: little pushes to lower the price of their motel rooms, to help librarians recall obscure editions of books. He knows Andy is doing the same thing—to keep himself in comics and snack food, as far as Sam can tell—but he doesn’t say anything. Andy might not be as hooked as Sam is, or as Ansem was, but he’s in deep enough to need the tastes.

So Sam researches. Andy helps sometimes, but more often he watches movies on his own laptop (Sam isn’t sure where he got it, and he doesn’t want to know) or reads through his comic books. Looking up to see Andy lounging around as though there’s nothing wrong with either of them, as though they aren’t ticking time bombs, is almost as frustrating as his own inability to find anything the least bit helpful.

Sam even contacts Bobby eventually, using Andy as a go-between and a couple of borrowed names from hunters he ran into once or twice over the years. Bobby may or may not realize who he’s really talking to, but either way the man turns up the same nothing that Sam has been knocking his head against, and finally he gives in to the temptation and grabs himself a demon.

No cure, is the answer he gets. No cure and no going back.

“You can stop using,” the demon pants into his face, laughing through the steam even as Sam drenches it in holy water. “But it’ll always be there, waiting.”

After, when Sam has finished the exorcism and is standing there staring at the corpse he’s been left with, Andy shuffles forward and touches him tentatively on the shoulder.

“Sam?”

“Not now.” God, Sam can’t deal with Andy right now. It’s taking all of his concentration not to burst into tears, or maybe rip the building apart with nothing but his mind. Sam isn’t sure which way he’ll go.

But instead of retreating, Andy tugs at his sleeve. “Hey, can we go to the retreat now?”

With a dull, pulsing headache behind his eyes, Sam glances back at him. Andy swallows nervously, but doesn’t back away or flinch. After a few seconds, he clenches his jaw determinedly and lifts his head.

“They might help. And I mean, what’ve you got to lose? This isn’t working.”
Much as Sam hates to admit it, he’s right.

“Yeah,” he breathes, scrubbing a hand over his face. “We can go to the retreat.”

It looks almost like some kind of post-apocalyptic frontier fort from the outside: high, wooden walls and a sturdy main gate for an entrance. But there aren’t any watchtowers, and the gate stands open wide. Sam still stops outside the entrance, sitting in the car and peering through the windshield at the road on the other side of the gate.

It looks exactly like the road on this side of the gate.

“How come you stopped?” Andy pipes up from the passenger seat.

Because there’s a deep, quiet part of Sam that’s certain this is going to work. Because, as dangerous and as dark and as wrong as it is, that part of him doesn’t want to give up the rush that accompanies the power.

Because he’s afraid of how he’s going to feel about Dean on the other side of this.

“Just checking the lay of the land,” he lies, and then puts the truck into drive again and rolls them inside.

It isn’t easy. It isn’t easy for Andy, and he isn’t anywhere near as addicted as Sam.

As the snow melts into spring and then summer, Sam almost gives up more times than he can count. He storms out of training sessions, spends an entire week taking apart everyone he runs into with sharp, cruel words, and only stops after Andy’s been reduced to a sniffling, hunched form on the floor. It’s long weeks after that—begging forgiveness, earning it, backsliding and fighting his way forward again.

Sam isn’t the worst off, though. There are others whose primary powers are so dangerous they’ve confined themselves in the basement of the retreat’s main building, where steel-reinforced concrete will minimize the worst of the accidents. Sam, at least, can wander outside when the pressure feels too much: he can send his body into exhausting, numbing long-distance runs. He can sit on his room’s balcony at night, looking up at brilliant stars and wondering where Dean is, how he’s doing, if he’s thinking about Sam. Sometimes he thinks about Dad instead: where he is, if he’s hunting, if his leg is still slowing him down.

There aren’t many of those quiet, longing moments at first. Sam is too lost in the pressure of the power inside him, and then pain that courses through his body as he resists the temptation to push—just a little, just to take the edge off. But summer passes and the tension in his body begins to ease, allowing him to breathe easier. Letting him slip into that calm, meditative state that the psychics here are teaching Azazel’s children to carry as a protective shield against temptation.

And then fall arrives, where the evergreens shudder under bitter winds, and Sam finds himself increasingly aware of the date: of November 2 hurtling toward him. It rains that night—rain that turns first to slush and then to sleet and, finally, to freezing rain. Sam segregates himself in his room, watching the storm through the window, and doesn’t turn around when he hears the door open behind him. He doesn’t glance to the side when Andy shuffles forward to stand next to him.

“It isn’t your fault,” Andy offers after a moment.
That’s the other side of the coin they deal in here—redemption and absolution. Meditation to keep the power at bay. Pardon for the sins of demons.

Sam is becoming something of an expert when it comes to the former, but he can’t quite wrap his head around the latter. Not when he has so much more to answer for than the others here.

He doesn’t say anything—doesn’t reject the words—but he told Andy once, what happened between him and Dean. He told Andy what the yellow-eyed demon did to Dean, and why, and he didn’t spare himself at all in the telling of what he did himself afterwards because he didn’t say any of it in a bid for forgiveness. He told Andy because he felt Andy needed to hear it: he felt it might help Andy to have another prism through which to examine his own dark memories.

Now, standing by his window looking out at the storm, Sam thinks he that he might regret having done that. It opened paths of communication between them that Sam wishes had been left closed. It gave the guy a little too perfect of an understanding of the restrictive chains around Sam’s heart.

“Do you miss him?” Andy asks.

Sam wants to maintain his silent facade, but he can’t quite manage it in the face of Andy’s quiet earnestness. “Yeah,” he rasps.

Andy fidgets a little—maybe thinking of his own brother—and then offers, with a crinkle of wrapping, “I brought Skittles.”

Sam is startled into a laugh, into looking away from the window, and Andy’s grin is one part sheepish and two parts relieved.

“And cards,” he adds, fumbling for the box in a pocket of the oversized coat he always insists on wearing around the retreat. “You said you’d teach me poker.”

Sam flashes on his brother’s hands: Dean’s nimble fingers flipping through cards and dealing them out. Dean palming aces and stacking the dog-eared deck and walking red plastic chips across the back of his knuckles. The flash of Dean’s grin as he explained to Sam yet again that poker isn’t about your cards but your face. It’s a game for liars—it’s a Winchester’s game.

Poker isn’t one of the skills Dad asked Dean to teach him. It’s something that happened accidentally, in drips and drabs, because cards were transportable and usually close at hand when Dean was bored. Dean was just as thorough with poker as he was with everything else, though—just as meticulous about walking Sam through the game inside and out.

Sam can’t remember ever winning against his brother. Dean read him too well: he saw too much in Sam’s face.

After a moment, Sam turns away from the ghost of Dean’s smile in the window.

“Yeah,” he says. “I guess I did.”

Winter is hard. It’s the darkness, maybe, or the cold, or the near-constant snow that barricades them in from the outside. They lose two members of their little community—one to a power-induced coma, one to a storm—and everyone is relieved when the warmer weather returns, lifting their isolation.

Sam finds himself more affected by the freedom than most, drifting further and further from the
retreat on his hikes. He finds himself taking out his laptop and sitting with it for hours, running his hands over the lid and remembering what it was like to be places he could boot up and zip online. Places he could connect to anywhere in the world in a heartbeat. He remembers looking at obits and newspaper articles, and from there he remembers what it felt like to be out hunting.

He remembers what it felt like to save people.

He remembers it feeling a little bit like redemption.

And he knows, deep in his heart, that it’s time to go.

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“Are you sure?” Andy asks, like Sam might have changed his mind in the five minutes or so since the last time he asked. He trails close behind Sam as he makes his last circuit of the room, checking to make sure he isn’t leaving anything behind.

“Andy, we’ve been over this. It’s time.”

“You don’t know what it’ll be like to hunt without using,” Andy argues. “You should stay a little longer, just to be safe.”

Sam sighs as he hefts his bag and finally turns to face Andy, who’s standing there looking up at him with wide, anxious eyes. “I have to do this,” he says for what has to be the hundredth time since he made the decision.

Andy continues to look at him for a long, pleading moment and then nods. “Then I’m coming with you.”

“No, you’re not.”

“But—”

“This place is good for you,” Sam continues, keeping his voice gentle. “And you’re good for it. You make a great sponsor.”

It’s true, and they both know it. Hell, anyone who’s seen Andy with the newcomers—how easy he is with them, how good at disarming tension and dispelling fear—knows how well he fits. Sam ... even without his powers riding him, he’s too dangerous to belong here. Like a wolf among sheep. And he isn’t ever going to get rid of that ache in his chest, isn’t ever going to stop turning to look for Dean or expecting his big brother to be there when he wakes up. The loss is sharper when he’s stationary. It cuts deeper.

And even if he could somehow learn to adjust to Dean’s absence, now that he’s finally clean and sober he can’t turn his back on his responsibilities. He can’t miss out on the chance to make up, in some small way, for what he did to his brother.

“I don’t want you to go,” Andy admits, in a tiny, honest voice.

Sam gives him a rueful smile. “You’re gonna be fine,” he promises. “And you can call me whenever —Marta says you guys are getting an underground phone line put in this year, right?”

Dropping his eyes, Andy shoves his hands into his pockets. “You don’t have a phone.”

“I’ll get one. And I’ll come visit, okay?” That gets him a hopeful flick of Andy’s eyes, and Sam
adds, “In the meantime, you’ll have plenty of time to work on your poker face.”

Andy frowns at that. “Screw you, my poker face is awesome.”

“Yeah, that’s why you owe me about three million Skittles.”

“You cheat,” Andy grumbles, and Sam laughs and gives him a friendly punch on the shoulder.

“Practice,” he advises, moving for the door. He half expects Andy to come down to see him off, but when he glances back in the doorway of his old room, Andy hasn’t moved. He’s standing there with his hands shoved deep into his coat pockets and an earnest, concerned expression on his face.

“Hey, Sam?”

“Yeah.”

“Take care of yourself, okay?”

Sam feels his smile dim a little, but he shrugs and keeps his voice carefree when he answers, “Always do.”

Andy doesn’t respond to that, and he isn’t among the small crowd gathered out front to offer hugs and goodbyes ten minutes later, but when Sam pulls off down the driveway, he thinks he can see a blurred outline through the glass of his old window. He raises his hand just in case, tapping the truck’s horn, and then turns his attention back to the road before him.

Hunting is harder than ever.

Sam never really feels like he’s in any danger, of course, and he doesn’t have much of a problem figuring out what he’s after or how to kill it—not after he’s had so much experience in those departments.

But the temptation to use is worse than he ever imagined it would be, pushing at him what seems like every second of every day. It’s a little like putting a recovering alcoholic in a bar and asking him not to touch a drop, and Sam realizes two jobs in exactly how monumentally stupid he’s being.

But he doesn’t know what else to do with himself, and the expanding warmth in his chest when he decapitates a snarling ghoul—seconds before it’s going to bite into Janine Cross’s trembling stomach—is too close to salvation to give up.

Nothing is ever going to make up for what happened to Dean, or Dad, or Jess, or Mary. Nothing.

But Sam finds that he sleeps a little easier now, as hard as his waking hours might be. He doesn’t dream so often of the cabin, or of his brother kneeling on the floor of Bobby’s guest room begging to suck Sam off. He doesn’t see Jess on the ceiling when he closes his eyes; doesn’t imagine Mary in Jess’ place. He doesn’t see Dad’s shattered, defeated expression when he meets his own gaze in the mirror.

Life isn’t good, and it isn’t efficient, but it’s clean. Life is clean, and Sam is seeing clearer than he has in a long time—maybe ever.

And he hopes that, eventually, that will be enough.
Autumn comes again, biting and bringing memories and thoughts Sam doesn’t care for. He drives south, where it’s warm.

Mexico has more than enough ghosts to keep him busy.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

It’s the tail end of spring before he drives north again: almost four years and four months since he last saw Dean or Dad. He feels decades older, but his heart is lighter than he deserves, and he’s gotten used to the pang in his chest when he thinks of his brother. He pulls into a diner just north of the border in Laredo, Texas, and parks his battered truck.

Dean’s amulet sways for a moment after he stops, hanging down from the rearview mirror, and Sam gives it a customary brush of his fingertips before getting out of the cab. He dials Andy on his way into the diner—habitual check-in that he makes every week, just to touch base—and then freezes just inside the doors, stomach going cold.

Andy greets him warmly—some inane question about Mexico and topless beaches—but Sam can’t hear much of anything past the rush of blood to his head.

“I’m gonna have to call you back,” he says faintly, hanging up as he lowers the cell and stands there with one hand still holding the door open.

In the booth in the far corner, Dad doesn’t look much better off. His face has gone white above his beard—which is greyer than Sam remembers: more of the same in Dad’s hair—which leaves the hook-shaped scar on his cheek more pronounced. The man’s lost a little weight.

Sam caught him mid-chew, and now Dad swallows with obvious difficulty before giving Sam a slow, cautious nod. Sam’s heart is tripping over itself while his stomach clenches and his skin flushes hot and cold, but he moves just as slowly, releasing the door and making his way carefully over to his father’s table.

“Sammy,” Dad says, and his voice is the same, gruff rumble Sam remembers.

It hits Sam like a physical blow, reminding him of everything he’s been missing during the past four years, and suddenly Sam aches with the force of it: how much he lost. How little he has. Standing in this brightly-lit diner with Dad, Dean’s absence is clearer than it has been for a long time: Sam’s brother almost a solid ghost leaning against the wall next to them.

“What?” Sam manages.

Dad inclines his head at the seat Sam is resting one hand on, cell phone still clenched in his fist. “You want to sit down?” he asks, voice deceptively light. Like they just saw each other yesterday. Like there isn’t so much pain and distrust, or so many harsh words between them.

Sam answers by sitting, pulling out the chair with a scrape and then hitching it back in. He puts both hands on the table in plain sight. Notices Dad doing the same and hates it, hates the caution they’re using with each other. But he doesn’t know how else to do this. Hell, most of his brain is still trying to catch up to the monumental coincidence of this meeting: of Dad here. Now. It doesn’t seem possible.

“You’re tan,” Dad says.

“Yeah, I. I spent the winter in Mexico.”
“I heard,” Dad answers. “Davie Guillermo called me.”

Sam nods without much surprise. Now that Dad brings it up, he remembers running into Dad’s old hunting buddy on a job in Tapachula. He sits there, searching for something else to say, and finally settles on, “How’s your leg?”

Dad glances down at it, moving one hand off the table to rub at his knee. Sam is relieved that he doesn’t feel any alarm at the motion—no sudden rush of fear that the man is going for a gun—and relaxes slightly himself.

“Pretty good,” Dad says. “I’m thinking about taking a job as a weatherman when I retire, though. Aches like a bitch whenever it so much as drizzles.”

“But you’re still hunting?” Sam checks.

“Still hunting. Guess I don’t need to ask you the same.” He nods at Sam’s jacket, and Sam pulls it closed a little more self-consciously, covering the pistol hanging from the shoulder holster inside.

“Yeah. They, uh, they don’t care so much in Mexico.”

Dad nods but doesn’t say anything and a long, awkward silence falls between them. Sam fidgets a little, not sure what to say. Hell, he isn’t sure Dad actually wants him here, or if he felt he had to nod Sam over. But welcome or not, Sam is here now, and he can’t just up and leave without making things between them worse, which he really doesn’t want to do.

Finally, he realizes there’s only one thing he can say.

“I’m sorry.”

Dad’s brow furrows slightly in an expression Sam can’t quite read. He doesn’t say anything, though, so Sam is encouraged enough to continue.

“I’m sorry about everything. I never—I never thought about what I was doing, back then. About who I was hurting. But you were right. About me, I mean.” When Dad still doesn’t respond, Sam adds, “I left. A few hours after you did, I—”

“I know. Bobby told me when I called the next morning.”

Sam licks his lips, heart pounding in his chest, and then forces the question out. “Do you—do you know how he is?”

It isn’t Bobby he’s asking about.

“You haven’t been by to see him?”

Sam hesitates, remembering how close he did come to that. How close he came to turning into a monster like Andy’s brother. “I—I had some stuff to take care of. I didn’t want to risk him.”

Dad’s frown becomes more pronounced, but Sam doesn’t think it’s disapproving. Dad seems more... contemplative than upset.

A moment later, Dad sits back in his seat and says, “I never liked the way things were between you two. Even when you were both kids, I didn’t—” He shakes his head, sighing. “But I didn’t know how to fix it.” His eyes lift to Sam’s. “I’m as much to blame for what happened between you as anyone, and I shouldn’t’ve. The things I said to you the last time we talked, I shouldn’t have said
“You were almost right,” Sam confesses, although all he really wants to do is bask in his father’s apology. “The visions, the power. It didn’t. It wasn’t coming from me. I almost—I came so fucking close to losing myself.” Dad’s eyes sharpen at that, alarmed, and Sam hastens to add, “I took care of it. There’s this place up north, they.”

He stops, at a loss for how to explain the retreat. What goes on there. What they did for him. What it means to him.

Finally, he shakes his head. “I’m clean.”

Dad nods, and if his eyes are a little wet then Sam isn’t going to be the one to mention it. “I’m glad, son. And I’m—I’m sorry I left you to deal with that on your own. You boys—you both needed me, and I left.”

Now Dad is crying, right in the middle of the diner, and Sam shifts awkwardly, stomach twisting with how wrong this is. Uncomfortable, he cuts his eyes to the side and away from his father’s wretched face.

“Sorry,” Dad mutters, wiping at his face with his napkin. “I’ve been a fucking mess. Amy keeps promising it’ll get better, but I—shit. Gimme a minute, would you, Sammy?” Without waiting for an answer, he slides out of the seat and disappears in the direction of the bathroom.

Abandoned, Sam sits at the table and debates running. He doesn’t know what’s going on here—what’s up with Dad—and Sam’s own insides are a perilous mess of emotion. It would be safer to run, not deal with any of the anxiety and sorrow and loss. But, in the end, Sam supposes he’s tired of running. Tired of being alone.

He’s still sitting there when his father returns, composed if a little red around the eyes.

“Sorry,” Dad says as he sits down again.

“It’s okay,” Sam assures him immediately, although he’s pretty sure he never wants to see his father do that again. “Who’s Amy?”

“My therapist,” Dad mumbles with an embarrassed grimace.

“You’re going to a psychiatrist?” Sam blurts, surprised, and then kicks himself. The last thing he wants Dad to think is that he’s being judged.

But Dad doesn’t seem to be taking any offense at Sam’s tone, nodding and answering, “Psychologist, actually. Phone conversations for half an hour once a week.” His expression is defensively wry as he tosses a lopsided grin at Sam. “Apparently, all the cool kids are doing it.”

After taking a moment to process that nugget of information, Sam asks, “Is it helping?”

Dad shrugs with a self-conscious quirk of his mouth. “Far as I can tell, all it’s doing is turning me into a twelve year old girl.”

But he’s still calling the woman—this Amy, whoever she is—and Sam guesses that’s enough of an answer to his question.

They fall silent again, and the atmosphere is less awkward, but still uncomfortable enough to make Sam fiddle with his phone. This time, it’s Dad who breaks the silence.
“Do you still?” He stops when Sam glances up, then clears his throat and continues, “I know you said you got your head on straight, but does that mean—you and Dean.”

He stops again, face red, and Sam takes pity on him, shrugging and answering, “I don’t know. I haven’t—to be honest, I’ve been trying to think about him as little as possible.”

From the rueful twitch of Dad’s mouth, Sam isn’t the only one.

“How’s that working out for you?” Dad asks.

“About as well as it’s probably going for you,” Sam replies without thinking.

There’s a moment of silence where he thinks he overstepped the rules for their tentative conversation and then Dad laughs softly.

“Touché.”

Tilting his head, Sam considers Dad’s question for a few moments and then shrugs helplessly. “I love him. I just—I just love him.”

Dad looks at him, his dark eyes searching, and then shakes his head. “I can’t accept that, Sam. You’re both my boys, and if it’s the other—if you still want him like that—then I’m sorry but I can’t be okay with that.”

“I know,” Sam admits. “And I’m sorry, but I—Dad, I never meant to fall in love with him.”

Dad grimaces, giving his head a shake. “Don’t. I’m trying here, Sam, but I can’t have that conversation with you.”

“Okay,” Sam agrees immediately. His nervous hands slide his phone from the table and into his pocket. His right leg jigs restlessly up and down.

As he frowns down at his half-eaten plate of steak, Dad asks, “Are you going to see him?”

It’s a question Sam has spent the last year not asking himself—consciously, anyway. But now that Dad has dragged the prospect out into the light, Sam realizes that it’s the only thing he’s been thinking of. The only thing he’s been working toward.

He’s been spending these past fourteen months making himself strong enough and stable enough to risk it: to go back and see Dean and kneel at his feet and beg for forgiveness. Sam has been waiting until he has enough balance and peace to understand his heart when he looks into his brother’s eyes. Until he can recognize what sort of emotions will flood him at the sight of Dean’s face, and handle the rejection that might follow.

That probably should follow, if Sam wants to be honest with himself.

He shrugs, dropping his eyes in avoidance, and his father sighs across the table.

“I can’t forbid you to see him,” Dad says, “But I’m begging you, Sammy. Don’t pressure him. If he’s happy where he is, leave him be.”

Sam can’t bring himself to look up or respond at all, so he sits there quietly as Dad tosses a twenty down on the table and heaves himself up. He steps around to Sam’s side and pauses before laying a piece of paper down next to Sam’s right hand.

“My number,” he says. “You call me if you need anything.”
There’s the brief, awkward pressure of Dad’s fingers closing on Sam’s shoulder, making Sam’s eyes water alarmingly, and then the weight is gone and Dad is leaving.

Sam doesn’t turn around as his father walks out, but when he leaves himself half an hour later, the piece of paper is tucked safely inside his wallet.

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There’s no deceiving himself after that meeting. Sam is drifting with a purpose, honing in on South Dakota the way he did once before. Only this time there’s a flock of nervous butterflies in his stomach instead of the iron of lunatic certainty.

He has absolutely no clue what he wants from Dean. He has no way of knowing whether seeing his brother is going to set off the same, hungry heat in his groin it always used to. He still dreams about Dean, yes, but that might just be a memory of how it felt before, and Sam isn’t sure what he’s hoping for. He doesn’t want to have lost that depth of emotion—of connection—but at the same time, he knows it will be easier on both of them if he has.

He touches the tattoo on his hip at night as he lies in bed, and wonders how Dean is—whether Dean’s feelings have changed. Whether Dean’s feelings toward him were ever anything but brotherly in the first place.

He wonders.

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Finally, in late June, Sam dials the number he’s been keeping in his wallet for the past few months.

“Sammy,” Dad says when he answers on the second ring. “You okay?”

“I’m going back,” Sam announces.

There’s silence on the other end of the line.

Sam clears his throat, suddenly feeling awkward, and adds, “I just thought you should know.”

“What are your plans?” Dad asks finally, and then it’s Sam’s turn for silence, because he doesn’t know. He thinks he knows what he’s hoping for—Dean in his arms, Dean willing and missing him and welcoming him home with a kiss—but he can’t even be sure of that, and he has no clue how Dean will react. What Dean will want.

Dad’s sigh is bone weary. “It’s wrong,” he says, although his voice is gentle rather than accusatory. “It’s wrong and I’m never going to be happy about it.”

“I know,” Sam admits. “But if Dean wants it …”

Dad’s silent so long Sam wonders if his phone dropped the call.

“Dad?”

“If Dean wants it, I’m not punishing you for it. He’s been through enough. We all have. But if you’re asking for my blessing, Sam, then the answer’s no. It’s always going to be no.”

He hangs up without saying goodbye. Sam guesses he shouldn’t have expected anything more.

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The next morning, he’s on his way to South Dakota.
Chapter 50

Bobby’s looks the same as always, and the familiarity leaves Sam feeling both comforted and even more rattled than before as he pulls down the driveway and around back. It seems like something should have changed after so long away—feels like decades inside Sam’s head. There are minor changes in the salvage yard, at least: fewer broken hulks of cars, slightly more organization.

Sam wonders if that’s Dean’s doing.

Bobby is outside, working on an engine beneath the midday sun despite the early summer heat. He’s stripped down to his undershirt, cap pulled firmly over his head and shading his eyes. There’s a greasy rag sticking out of his back pocket and an open tool chest at his feet. As Sam pulls up, his truck gets a dismissive glance from the man before he turns back and refocuses on what he’s doing.

The black and tan, shaggy-haired mongrel at Bobby’s feet gets up, though, and takes a few steps toward the truck. From the wagging tail and the lack of a chain, Sam guesses it’s friendlier than its predecessor. He hopes so, anyway.

He turns off the engine and carefully eases the cab door open, ready to slam it shut again at the first sign of a snarl. But the dog just wags its tail harder when it sees the door swinging wide. It dances forward, and then back, and then, as Sam decides it’s safe to emerge, makes up its mind and dashes for the cab.

Sam swears, heart leaping up into his throat, and tries to yank the door shut. The dog is faster than his reflexes, though, and it squirms up into the cab and onto Sam’s lap. He gets his hands in its fur, trying to hold it off, and then snorts out a surprised laugh as the dog strains and gets its face close enough to lap at the tip of his nose.

Looks like he might be in danger of getting licked to death, but other than that the dog seems harmless. Of course, it is barking now, even as it does its best to wash Sam’s face for him, and in the cab the noise is kind of deafening.

As he fights to push the dog’s muzzle away, Sam sees Bobby toss down the wrench with an annoyed gesture.

“Damn it, Bonham,” Bobby shouts, turning away from the engine. “How many times do I have to tell you to leave the customers alone, you dumb mutt!”

Bonham—as in ‘John’? Sam wonders—barks one last time, tongue curling around Sam’s wrist since it can’t reach anything else at the moment, and then squirms out of the truck and runs back to bound eagerly in circles around Bobby.

Sam gives himself a second to wipe his face with his shirt and then climbs out of the cab himself.

Over by the engine, Bobby catches sight of him and goes white.

It’s weird, being stared at like that—like he’s some kind of ghost instead of just the prodigal son returned—and Sam flushes, shuffling his feet where he is and hanging onto the driver’s side door for comfort. After a few minutes where the only thing moving is Bonham—the dog is nosing its way around the yard now, tail still waving jauntily—Sam finally clears his throat.

“Hey, Bobby,” he offers.
Bobby shakes himself at the sound of Sam’s voice, and a moment later he’s striding forward. Sam forces himself to let go of the truck so that he can meet the man, stepping forward himself with a smile that feels *(but hopefully doesn’t look)* awkward on his face. Bobby hauls him into a fierce hug, which feels really strange after so long without human contact—none of Azazel’s kids were really into touching—but also loosens something deep in Sam’s chest. His hands start to come up belatedly to hug back, but Bobby is already pulling away.

Pulling away and punching Sam.

Sam’s head jerks to the side with the force of the blow. His teeth snap together and he’s immediately flooded with the red surge of copper that always comes from being struck that hard. Even when Sam’s vision clears a moment later, he can still taste blood—maybe bit his cheek, maybe his tongue. He probably should have expected this kind of welcome, but somehow he’s still left breathless with shock at the attack.

Lifting one hand to cradle his jaw, he complains, “Ow!”

Bobby moves, abrupt and sharp, and before Sam can start flinching away from another blow, he’s being hugged again. He continues to hold his jaw while staring over Bobby’s shoulder at Bonham, who is running in circles and barking excitedly at all the commotion.

“Damn, boy,” Bobby breathes against Sam’s shoulder. “Ain’t you a sight for sore eyes.”

“It’s, uh, good to see you too?” Sam tries, bewildered by the conflicting messages Bobby’s sending out. Dean must have been giving him lessons.

Bobby immediately pulls away again, smacking Sam on the back of the head as he releases him. Sam grimaces, but the smack isn’t much harder than Dean’s Punch-Buggies-No-Punch-Backs used to be, and he manages to keep the grunt in his chest where it belongs.

“I oughta beat the stupid out of you!” Bobby yells, glaring up at him. “Four years and nothing! Not one damn phone call. Lemme see your hands, boy: all your fingers better be missing or broken.”

“I’m sorry, all right!” Sam blurts.

When Bobby’s eyes just narrow further, Sam moves back with his hands held defensively out in front of him, just in case Bobby ends up deciding that kicking Sam’s ass is the way to go after all. He knows he doesn’t deserve anything else—Bobby’d be within his rights to give Sam the beating of his life for leaving him holding the bag like that—but he can’t force himself to stand still for it.

Bobby continues to stare at him, expression flickering between pissed off and relieved. “You’re sorry,” he repeats scornfully. “Well sorry ain’t gonna cut it this time, kid. Do you have any idea what kind of mess you left me with?”

“I had to go,” Sam maintains, certain that at least in this he’s right. He was right to go: what he became during that second, isolated year proves as much. “I wasn’t safe.”

“You weren’t thinking!” Bobby yells, spit flying from his lips with the vehemence lacing his words. “You asshole. You know how damned close I came to having to bury that boy?”

That one word—bury—gets trapped in Sam’s head and amplifies, reverberating around until he can’t hear anything else. He can’t breathe either—taste of blood and soil in his mouth, the weight of packed earth pressing down on his chest and clogging his throat.

“Is he—” he gasps as the world fades in and out around him and his blood roars in his ears. “Bobby,
“He’s fine,” Bobby mutters, and Sam lets his knees buckle under the relief that floods in.

He splays his hand on the earth and feels the grit of the salvage yard scrape against his fingers and palm. His head drops, hair hanging around his face and curtaining his vision—narrowing it down to the spread of rocks and gravel around his hand. Then a nose intrudes, and a hopeful pair of eyes, and Sam gets his other hand on the scruff of the dog’s neck and hangs on to keep from being knocked over.

Bobby curses under his breath and a second later Bonham is being dragged back away from Sam. Sam unclenches his hand and lets the dog’s warm body slide out from beneath his fingers.

Dean’s okay, he tells himself as he takes several deep, shuddering breaths. He’s okay. Bobby’s just pissed. He didn’t mean that; he was being overdramatic.

Except Sam doesn’t think he can bring himself to believe it.

“Oh, go chase some rats,” he hears Bobby snap, and glances up in time to see the man push Bonham in the direction of the garage. The dog lets itself be moved back several steps and then eels around Bobby’s body to dash straight back toward Sam. Before his numb mind can process what’s happening, Bonham collides heavily with him, knocking him on his ass in the dirt. The dog licks his face twice and is gone again, running in excited circles around Sam’s truck and barking its head off.

“Bonham!” Bobby yells. “Shut up!”

Bonham’s barks take on a new, frenzied pitch as it hurls itself into another circuit, spraying Sam with pebbles and grit as it passes him.

Sighing, Bobby adjusts his cap. “Get off your ass and come on in the house so we can talk.” The look he gives Sam is sour. “Or were you just dropping by to say howdy before running off again?”

Sam shakes his head as he makes his wobbly way to his feet. “No, I. I want to talk.”

“Get moving, then,” Bobby says, “Fore I lose my patience and shoot something.”

There isn’t much difference between the disgusted look he’s giving Sam and the one he shoots toward Bonham, and Sam isn’t sure which of them would be more likely to catch that bullet. The dog’s been here longer, though, and it’s still running around annoying Bobby. Odds are, the man would have gotten rid of it by now if he were going to.

Bobby’s already heading for the kitchen door Sam left through more than four years ago, head lowered and shaking from side to side. “Goddamned idjit.” The words are muttered—barely audible from Sam’s place by the truck—and he wonders whether he was supposed to hear them.

To his left, Bonham has finally stopped running and is standing stock-still, head cocked and ears up. The dog’s eyes are fastened on Bobby’s back with an intensity that makes Sam think he could dangle a piece of steak underneath the dog’s nose right now and it wouldn’t so much as twitch.

Then Bobby reaches for the screen door and Bonham is off and running, tail wagging even faster than before and tongue lolling. The dog is smart enough not to bark, and Bobby is half in and half out of the house when it bowls into his legs.

“No!” Bobby shouts, grabbing the doorframe to keep himself upright. “Bad dog!”
But Bonham is already inside, and Sam can hear the dog’s barking start up again almost immediately.

Bobby pounds his hand one against the side of the house and then, as though remembering he isn’t alone, shoots a glance over his shoulder. The expression on the man’s face is both daring Sam to laugh and threatening bloody retribution if he does.

Luckily, Sam’s nerves are still wound too tight for him to register any of the amusement he might have felt at seeing Bobby Singer outmaneuvered by a dog, and he’s able to meet the man’s gaze with a straight face. After a few moments, Bobby gives a disgruntled snort and steps into his kitchen.

As Sam starts heading inside himself, he hears Bobby roar, “Get out of that, you mangy mutt!” and wonders why in the hell Bobby’s keeping something around that so clearly irritates him. Then again, he supposes that the man’s tenacity has already been proven by how much he’s put up with from the Winchesters over the years.

Bobby’s leaning against the counter when Sam lets himself in, arms folded over his chest as he watches Bonham shake its head wildly from side to side.

“He ain’t supposed to be in here,” Bobby announces as Sam steps inside, letting the door fall shut behind him. “But it’ll take more trouble than it’s worth putting him out again. He’ll settle down in a couple minutes.”

The fact that Bonham is currently trying to disembowel a stuffed monkey—not to mention the food bowls and the teething marks on the molding around the door through to the living room—seems to indicate that the dog is in here more often than Bobby’s trying to claim, but Sam nods anyway as he hesitates by the door.

He isn’t sure what he’s supposed to do now. Isn’t sure just how far he should stretch Bobby’s grudging invitation.

“I ain’t gonna bite, Sam,” Bobby says caustically.

“I was a little more worried about getting shot, actually,” Sam answers.

That brings Bobby’s head up a little more and the man’s eyes narrow. “You trying to be funny, son?” he demands.

Sam sort of was, but he’s getting now that that was a mistake. “No,” he says meekly.

Bobby gives him a look like he doesn’t quite believe it and then shakes his head and pushes away from the counter, walking across the room to the refrigerator. “Sit down, will you? I’m getting a crick in my neck talking to you like this.”

Sam obediently heads over to the kitchen table and sits down in one of the chairs. Now that he’s settled, he glances around the room for signs of Dean—beer cans hidden on top of the fridge, muscle car magazines on the counters, the tell-tale flash of cellophane from the Twinkie stash Dean used to leave behind the microwave at every apartment they ever rented—and comes up blank. Not that that means anything, of course. Bobby might have put his foot down about that sort of thing, or maybe those are habits Dean has outgrown.

“Is he home?” he asks, turning his attention back to Bobby as the man leans into his open refrigerator. “Can I see him?”

“That’s two questions,” Bobby responds, reemerging with two beer bottles held in one hand. He
gestures with them, pointing the wide bottoms at Sam with a meaningful tilt of his head. “You don’t get any right now.”

Sitting down across from Sam, he slides one of the beers over the tabletop while opening the other on the back of a neighboring chair. Sam catches his own bottle and swallows the futile protests bubbling up in his throat. Pushing Bobby isn’t going to get him to Dean any sooner, not when Dean isn’t here—and he can’t be, Sam’s realizing now. If Dean were home, he would have shown up already to see what all the ruckus was about.

Bobby squints across the table at Sam while taking slow pulls on his beer. Sam can tell that the man’s sizing him up and does his best to sit there quietly while he’s evaluated. His hands won’t be still, though: peeling at the damp label on the side of the beer until it comes away in soggy strips.

“You gonna drink that or just play with it all day?” Bobby asks finally, breaking the silence.

“I don’t drink anymore,” Sam answers, which gets him a surprised widening of Bobby’s eyes. He holds the man’s gaze, letting Bobby read his expression and confirm the truth of that statement, and after a moment Bobby grunts and nods.

“Not a bad idea,” he concedes, taking another pull from his own beer.

Encouraged by the approval, Sam leans forward and says, “Please, can you just tell me he’s okay?”

It’s begging, plain and simple. Sam doesn’t care. He’s come to terms with the fact that he doesn’t have any pride left when it comes to Dean.

“I haven’t decided whether I’m discussing him with you yet,” Bobby replies after a brief delay. “Depends on what you’re here for.”

“I don’t know,” Sam answers honestly, and as Bobby’s eyes start to go cold and hostile, he hastens to add, “I mean, I’m not leaving. I’m. Not unless he wants me to. I just—I don’t know how I feel anymore. About Dean. I love him, but I—I just don’t know how.”

He pauses in case Bobby has something to say to that, but Bobby sits there quietly. He isn’t looking at Sam anymore, instead frowning down at his beer while his thumb slides slowly through the condensation.

“And I don’t know what he wants from me,” Sam adds. “But I need to talk to him. I—I need a chance to explain. I have to tell him how sorry I am, about—about everything. The rest is up to him.”

Bobby grunts at that: a disbelieving noise that Bonham finds interesting. Abandoning its stuffed monkey, it comes over and drops its head on Bobby’s leg. Bobby absently scratches behind the dog’s ear for a moment and then lifts his eyes again, pinning Sam with his gaze.

“You really gonna be fine with it if he doesn’t want anything to do with you?”

The way Sam’s throat closes up at the mere suggestion answers that question for him, and much as he knows it would be wiser to lie, he can’t. Especially not when Bobby would see right through him anyway.

With a shake of his head, he whispers, “No, I really wouldn’t. But if it’s what he wants, I’ll leave.”

He doesn’t promise that he won’t look back because he knows he will. He’ll spend the rest of his short, pathetic life looking back.
Not that Sam is planning on suicide. It’s just that he knows himself well enough to recognize that Dean’s loss—for good this time—will gut him like a deer carcass. It will leave him empty and bleeding out inside, too distracted by the pain to focus on anything else.

A distracted hunter is a dead hunter. Dad taught Sam that. He taught them both that.

If Bobby senses any of Sam’s unvoiced thoughts, then his glum expression doesn’t show it. “Guess that’s something, anyway,” he mutters before tilting his beer back again.

Sam endures the silence as long as he’s able, and when he can’t take it any more, he leans forward and puts his elbows on the table. “How bad was it when I left?”

He doesn’t actually want to know—is terrified of the answer—but he has to ask. He has to ask because he has to know how much he needs to answer for. He has to know what to expect from Dean when he sees him again.

“How do you think it was?” Bobby snaps, temper flaring back up immediately. He pushes Bonham’s head out of his lap and gets to his feet, striding over to the sink and slamming his bottle down on the counter beside it. Wrapping his now-empty hands around the edge of the metal basin, he stares out the window at the sunlit world beyond while Bonham whines and rolls its eyes imploringly in Sam’s direction.

“I ain’t having that conversation with you,” Bobby announces after an endless, strained moment. “Dean wants to tell you, that’s fine, but if you weren’t here to see it, then I don’t think you get the five minute recap. I ain’t dredging that shitstorm up again just so you can wallow in self-pity.”

Sam’s chest aches unbearably as he nods. It isn’t hard to read through the lines of Bobby’s turned back, of his vehement avoidance of the question. And it isn’t as though Sam was expecting anything else. He knows it must have been bad.

“Okay,” he agrees, and then waits for some of the tension to ease from Bobby before asking, “When’s he coming home?” His stomach gives a half eager, but mostly terrified twist at the thought of sitting here and waiting for Dean to walk through the door.

Bobby hangs his head for a moment before looking back at Sam from beneath the brim of his cap. “He doesn’t live here anymore,” he says flatly. “Moved out about two years ago. He’s living over in Humboldt Valley.”

Sam blinks, disoriented. Every time he’s imagined his reunion with his brother, he saw it happening here. Whenever he dared to daydream, he’s pictured Dean living in this house and hunting with Bobby—small jobs, nothing too dangerous or physically arduous. Maybe helping Bobby run the salvage yard between hunts.

Now he ... he isn’t sure what to do with the new information, which has wiped all of Sam’s imagined meetings away and left him with a terrifyingly blank slate.

Bobby rips a piece of paper off the notepad stuck to the refrigerator and starts writing. “Here,” he says as he fills the paper with his hasty scrawl. “Dean’s address.” He hands the note to Sam and then, when Sam sits there looking blankly at the number (42) and street name (Madison), sighs. “Guest room’s open, so I guess you can stay here.”

Sam’s eyes sting at the unexpected offer, and he gives himself a shake, tearing his eyes from the paper and looking up. “Thanks, Bobby.”

“Don’t thank me, boy,” Bobby mutters as he pushes Bonham’s curious snout away from his leg. “I
just want you somewhere I can keep an eye on you.”

It should offend Sam, but instead his chest gives a warm pulse and he ends up having to wipe his eyes on his sleeve. Bobby’s clearly uncomfortable with his reaction and turns away, busying himself over by the sink. Bonham abandons him to drop a companionable head on Sam’s knee and gazes up at him adoringly.

Sam rests one hand on the dog’s head while wiping his eyes again with the other.

It’s been a long time since he’s had anyone looking out for him, and if that isn’t exactly the spirit in which Bobby meant his comment, Sam’s grateful enough not to care.

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Sam is sure Bobby got the address wrong.

42 Madison St. is a two-story Gable front house with a picture window and a red-bricked chimney. The house is in perfect repair and, from the vivid Colonial blue color of the siding, recently painted. Sam hasn’t ever lived in a house himself, but he’s been in and out of them a lot over the years, and he can tell from where he’s parked by the curb in his truck that this one is going to be nice inside: gleaming wooden floors, plush couch and loveseat, marble counters in the kitchen, Monet paintings on the walls. Probably a flat screen TV in the living room. Jacuzzi in the upstairs master bath.

The yard has been meticulously maintained, the white walk freshly scrubbed and gleaming and the lawn both lush and well trimmed. There are trees lining the property—small enough that Sam can tell they were probably imported when the house was built not more than three years ago.

A garden lines the walk up to the house, filled with exotic grasses and moss and the popping colors of irises, hydrangea, and peonies. Rose bushes hug the line of the house, stretching up to brush the lower sill of a large picture window. There’s a stone birdbath in the middle of the growth, complete with a trio of tiny sparrows splashing around with their feathers puffed out.

The Dean Sam remembers would have slept on the street before spending a single night underneath that suburban roof. He would have thumbed his nose at the storybook perfection and then checked them both into a Motel Six without a second glance.

Even if Dean could somehow have been manipulated or tricked into accepting this kind of home, the house is just too damned expensive. Sam doesn’t know much about mortgages and property taxes, but he knows enough to recognize that Dean would never be able to afford something like this. Not a rootless drifter without so much as a bank account or social security number to his name.

But there’s a ghost in the driveway.

Transfixed by the sight, Sam gets out of his truck and makes his way over on unsteady feet. Despite the late June heat, he feels chilled and his hands tremble. The ghost seems to recede as he advances, retreating before him and wavering in his vision as though it might vanish at any moment like a mirage. But then, between one step and another, he feels warm metal beneath his fingertips.

Not a ghost after all, then, to be dispelled by rocksalt and matches. No, this is a revenant: should have been buried long ago, pulled apart for scrap metal. Instead it’s sitting outside this piece of suburbia, polished and whole.

Dean left no scars on the Impala’s sleek frame when he was putting it back together, erasing all the traces of violence that he couldn’t scrub from his own body, and as Sam runs his hands over the trunk and up to the roof of the car, it’s like that terrible crash never happened. It seems, for a moment,
like their lives never happened—or at least not the way Sam remembers it, with all the darkness and blood. He walks forward, putting his hand on the driver’s side door handle and giving it a tug.

The door clicks, pulling open, and Sam is overcome by a wave of vertigo at the thought that he could get behind the wheel and close the door behind him, shutting in the heat and what must be his brother’s scent—old burger wrappers and melted chocolate and DeanDeanDean. Heart beating too quickly, he pushes the door shut again instead and rests his forearms on the roof. He doesn’t want his first meeting with Dean to involve his big brother bailing him out of jail for attempted grand theft auto, and this is the type of neighborhood where people probably wouldn’t take kindly to a stranger (especially a stranger like Sam, with his size and his cheap clothes and his unkempt hair) making himself at home in someone else’s classic muscle car.

But damned if Sam can bring himself to step away from the Impala either.

Bowing his head, he looks at his reflection in the roof—tries to find some measure of reassurance that he doesn’t look as frightened as he feels and comes up empty. He’s clearly petrified. It’s all he can do not to bolt back to the truck and peel away in a shriek of leather and exhaust—fuck walking right up to the front door and asking to come in—and it’s painted across his face in stark lines of terror. His eyes are too wide; his lips too thin. He knows without having to see it that the shallow rise and fall of his chest is obvious to even the most casual of glances.

Sam’s field of awareness widens gradually as he stands there, spreading to take in the brightness of the day—oversaturated sunlight and heat pouring down and flooding his senses. Scents come next: the flowers, the freshly cut grass, the warm asphalt. And, somewhere close, the smell of meat cooking on a grill. Nearby, there’s the sound of children laughing—across the street one of the neighbors has their sprinkler going, the thwicker-thwicker-thwick sound of the water spraying out provides a steady counterpoint to the closer birdsong, to the noise of a passing car.

Sam makes himself move at that, recognizing that he’s just begging for someone to phone the cops even if he isn’t actually sitting inside of the Impala, and slowly heads up the gleaming front walk. He feels filthy in comparison to the spotless stone, and wishes suddenly that he’d bought some new clothes for this. The ones he’s wearing are years old: his shoes scuffed, the jeans fraying at the ankles and hopelessly stained—gun oil, mostly, but there’s some blood mixed in there as well. His t-shirt is faded, the collar pulled wide from one too many spins in the wash, or maybe because one of the vamps he was tangling with last month grabbed onto it and used it to spin Sam into a nearby wall.

Just below the front step, he pauses and lifts his hands to his hair, trying to smooth it down. It’s a futile endeavor—his fingers are shaking too badly to manage the trick even if his hair wasn’t already an irredeemable mess. With a short, hard exhalation, he makes himself take the final step up and presses the doorbell.

His hands go directly into his pockets afterwards—if he can’t stop them from shaking, at least he can make his nerves less immediately noticeable. He works at getting a falsely bright smile on his face, which hurts—his face muscles ache with the unaccustomed expression. Sweat trickles down the back of his neck as he stares at the sun glinting off the knocker on the front door, waiting for the wood to pull back and reveal his brother.

Time ticks past, agonizingly slowly, and Sam starts up a count in his head. When he makes it to three hundred Mississippi, he draws one hand from his pockets and pushes the bell again.

The irrational part of him pipes up, insisting that Dean isn’t answering because he knows it’s Sam standing out here—that he could stand here pushing the bell forever and get no response. But there’s no peephole in the door, and the curtains in the windows to either side of him haven’t been twitched aside, and he’s only being paranoid.
Heart beating too quickly, Sam steps down off the front step and eases through the garden until he’s standing by the picture window. Cupping a hand around his eyes to shade them from the glare, he peers inside at the living room.

The house is just as nice as he thought it would be.

The couch is plush and covered in soft, grey suede fabric; the wood on the matching chairs has a highly polished sheen. There’s a flat screen TV taking up half the wall in front of the couch, and an entertainment system beneath it with more electronic equipment than Sam can identify, although the controllers sitting on the top shelf indicate that there’s at least one gaming console.

A black marble fireplace is set into the left-hand wall, with an iron grate across the front and a collection of knick-knacks on top of the mantle. There are picture frames mixed in with the tiny statues and candleholders, but they’re too small and too far away for Sam to make out any details. Paintings line all the walls, just as Sam knew they would, but there’s also, incongruously, a Metallica poster framed and hanging just above the fireplace.

The floors are hardwood and shining, with plush rugs and runners strategically placed around the living room and in the hall leading deeper into the house. Sam thinks he can see what must be part of a dining room set in that direction.

Pulling back from the window, Sam looks over at the Impala. Between the car and the poster and Bobby’s words, he’s certain that Dean lives here—improbable as it might seem, both financially and logically. Sam’s confusion over how this happened, as well as his inability to picture Dean in these surroundings, eases some of the anxiety throbbing through him, so instead of hurrying back to his truck and driving off, he heads around the side of the house.

No one answered the bell, and he didn’t see anyone inside, but the Impala is here and Sam just can’t imagine his brother going anywhere without it. Whatever else has changed, the painstaking manner in which the car has been pieced together indicates that Dean’s attachment to the vehicle is as strong as ever. No, Dean is here. Dean is either here and deliberately avoiding Sam (please no), or he’s somewhere he can’t hear the doorbell.

Which would mean he’s out back.

As Sam rounds the corner, his first thought is that the back yard is huge. It seems to stretch on and on—a full acre at least, bounded by a white fence. There’s another garden back here—this one more utilitarian, with cucumbers and lettuce and a couple of tomato plants—as well as a brick patio with a glass table and some chairs and an immense grill. The grill is closed, but the shimmer of heat around it, as well as the bowl of what looks like homemade barbeque sauce sitting on the attached counter to the side, tells Sam that he’s found the cooking meat he smelled before. The table is set with a couple of beers, two plates, two sets of utensils, and several large, towel-covered bowls.

And there’s Dean.

Dean with his hair grown out—grown a little longer than Sam’s used to, actually—wearing a loose pair of jeans and a black t-shirt and—is that an apron? Sam’s mind refuses to answer the question because he belatedly realizes that his brother is chasing a short, longhaired woman across the lawn.

The woman is looking over her shoulder and laughing as she’s chased, the gap closing quickly because Dean has longer legs and she’s not really trying to get away. As Sam watches, Dean reaches out and grabs the woman around the waist, jerking her back and swinging her up onto his shoulder in one smooth motion. The woman shrieks as she’s spun in a circle almost six feet off the ground, Dean’s hands holding her steady as he turns. Below the shriek, Sam catches the lower tones of his
brother’s laughter—a loud, open noise that Sam is shamed and sickened to realize he isn’t at all familiar with.

“Dean!” the woman yells, beating ineffectually at Dean’s shoulder as he continues to spin them both. “Put me down! Down!” But she’s starting to laugh as well now, and even Sam can tell she doesn’t mean it.

“Nope!” Dean shouts back cheerfully—and God, his voice. It lodges in Sam’s gut, warm and honeyed, and casts an unbearable light on all the hollow, dark spaces inside of him. He didn’t realize just how much he missed hearing it until now.

“You’ve done it now,” Dean continues, calling even louder to be heard over the woman’s laughing curses. “No mercy!”

He starts to spin her faster as Sam stands there watching stupidly, and then, unexpectedly, jerks and stumbles to a stop. His head snaps up, eyes arrowing in on Sam.

Dean is too far away for Sam to make out any details—he can’t tell from here whether Dean’s eyes are still that same, unbelievable shade of green; can’t tell if his brother’s scars have faded at all. He doesn’t know whether there are more crow’s feet around Dean’s eyes, can’t begin to read his brother’s expression.

But he can see that Dean has put on weight again—maybe he isn’t as bulky as he used to be, but he’s hale and hearty: strong enough to be standing there with that woman draped over his shoulder as though she doesn’t weigh more than a sack of flour. Same broad shoulders, tapered waist, slightly bowed legs. There’s a glint of metal from something around Dean’s neck—not the amulet, because that’s still hanging from the rearview mirror in Sam’s truck, but some other necklace or medallion Dean has picked up since then—and Sam feels a faint stab of hurt at having been replaced.

Dean is wearing an apron, Sam notes numbly: a blue novelty item with the words ‘Don’t Fuck With the Cook” printed across the chest in bold letters. He’s barefoot out in the grass, bottom cuffs of his jeans rolled up to reveal his ankles. Thick, leather bands circle both of Dean’s wrists, and Dean has always liked his jewelry, but he has never worn anything that thick or bulky: they’re more like cuffs than bracelets, really.

Sam takes everything in over the space of a single heartbeat, and then it hits him—Dean is standing there, looking at him—and his breath catches. There’s a roaring sound in his ears—blood rushing through his body faster than it should as his heart races—and his head spins as a wave of dizziness crashes over him. His skin is tingling everywhere, pins and needles like he’s coming awake again after four years of numbing sleep.

Then the woman on Dean’s shoulder squirms around and says, “Dean? Hey, sugar, something wrong?”

Those words blast through the uncomprehending blockage in Sam’s head, and he finally understands that he’s standing here looking at Dean and his—his what? Fuck, his wife? His fiancé?

She’s something, anyway: this woman whom Dean was laughing with, and whom he’s still touching with an ease Sam hasn’t ever seen him offer anyone besides himself or Dad. Dean is touching her almost the same way he touched Cassie so many years ago—in that absent, fond way that reeks of shared emotion and intimacy.

He isn’t broken anymore—that much Sam understood at first glance—but Sam took too long to get his own shit together, and now Dean hasn’t just healed but Moved On. Dean has a house and a girl
and a life in this bright, suburban place, and none of it has anything to do with Sam. There’s no place for him here.

As Sam meets his brother’s poleaxed stare, he also understands that nothing has changed on his end. The demon blood is quiet, tamed by the calming routine of meditation he learned up north, and Sam is more in love with his brother than ever.

Which means that it wasn’t the demon making Sam feel this way. Wasn’t the taint in his blood. It was just him, loving Dean more than he probably should and helpless to disengage.

It’s always been him. And it’s always been just him.

Sam’s chest constricts, making his head pulse with disorienting heat, and his eyes sting. The woman —Dean’s girl—is still talking, and now she’s lifting her head to try to see what Dean’s staring at, and Sam can’t—fuck, he can’t be here anymore. He’s going to fall apart, that much is inevitable, but he isn’t—he isn’t falling apart here: some unwanted, filthy stranger who doesn’t belong in Dean’s yard. Who doesn’t belong within fifty miles of this sunlit world.

Turning, Sam stumbles back around the side of the house and toward his truck. He picks up speed as he goes, and by the time he reaches the curb he’s sprinting, throat hot and aching with the sobs he refuses to let spill out. His head comes up as he fumbles the keys into the ignition, chest messy and too full with the stupid certainty that Dean is going to come running around the corner after him. That Dean is going to run across the lawn toward him, yelling his name and asking him to wait.

But the front yard is still shatteringly, irrefutably empty when he finally gets the truck going three minutes later and pulls away from the curb.
Chapter 51

Sam spends the next two hours driving around aimlessly. When he finally realizes he’s going nowhere fast, he turns the truck around and, hands shaking on the wheel, drives back down Dean’s street. He doesn’t know what he’s expecting—Dean isn’t going to be standing by the curb waiting for him, and he sure as hell doesn’t have the courage to go back up to the house—but the empty driveway catches him completely off guard.

Panic floods him, icy and suffocating. He doesn’t know which possibility he’s more frightened of: that Dean is out roaming the roads looking for him, or that Dean has taken off and gone to ground somewhere far, far away.

Mouth dry and heart racing, Sam digs his phone out of his pocket and debates calling Bobby to ask if he’s heard from Dean. Except he doesn’t think he can talk to Bobby without yelling right now—Christ, why didn’t the man warn him? Sam could have prepared himself, he could have shored his fragile insides up against the sight of Dean happy and vital and taken.

Even as he lets the phone drop on the seat beside him, though, Sam knows he didn’t deserve a warning. He deserves to be slapped in the face with what he let slip through his fingers: deserves the crushed, broken feeling in his chest.

He left. The one promise he made to Dean—never to leave again, never to abandon him—and he broke it. It doesn’t matter whether it was the right choice or not. It doesn’t matter that it was the hardest thing he’s ever done: that he’s spent the last four years bleeding internally because of that loss.

What he did is inexcusable, and he knows it.

And really, how fucked up is it for him to be feeling so shitty about seeing Dean happy? This is what he wanted, isn’t it? This is why he left—so that Dean could find this for himself. Sam has been hoping for just this for years—he’s been praying when he could manage it, when he didn’t hate God too much to talk to Him. He should be thrilled to find Dean healed and whole and standing on his own two feet.

It’s just that Sam always imagined that there would still be a place in Dean’s life for him.

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Despite Bobby’s earlier offer, Sam doesn’t drive back to the salvage yard. He can’t face the man right now—can’t even meet his own eyes in the rearview mirror. The Motel 6 where he rents a room for the night three towns over is rundown and filthy, with what looks like pizza stains on the walls and a crusty, orange rug on the floor. It's nothing worse than he’s used to, but it seems pathetic and depressing after peering into Dean’s bright, perfect world.

Sam sits down on the bed—mattress broken and sagging, sheets musty—and looks down at his hands. He wonders where Dean is now, whether he’s sitting down to dinner with his girl. But Sam can’t envision Dean sitting at the dining room table he glimpsed through the picture window, and so that thought quickly shifts to another—Dean’s hands on the woman’s face, Dean leaning down and kissing her with his fingers tangled in her hair. Dean laughing as he pulls back and hoists her into his arms and carries her to their bed, which will be firm and large and covered with clean, soft sheets.

“I lost him,” Sam says. He chokes a little on the words, which don’t do anything but increase the
ache in his chest, but for some reason he can’t help saying them again. “I lost Dean,” he breathes for a second time, and then he’s crying.

His tears come slowly at first—grudgingly—and then faster and faster until he’s curled into a ball on the bed with his arms wrapped around his stomach as though he can somehow hold himself together that way. As though there’s anything left worth salvaging, now that Dean is gone.

“Dean,” he moans. “Oh, God, Dean.”

The motel room is dark around him—silent and unpitying—and Sam has never been so alone.

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Sam doesn’t feel any better the next morning, and his head aches from all the sobbing he did last night, but he’s thinking a little more clearly. Clearly enough to recognize that he was maybe a little hasty in running off yesterday.

So Dean is taken. So what? That doesn’t mean he doesn’t want Sam around. It doesn’t mean that Dean doesn’t want his brother back, even if he has moved past viewing Sam as a potential lover.

Sam just didn’t give him enough time to react yesterday. He showed up out of the blue, with no advance notification or warning to let Dean brace himself for Sam’s arrival. Even if Dean has spent every day of the last four years waiting for Sam to return, that sort of thing is bound to be a bit of a shock.

The Impala is still missing from the driveway when Sam pulls up in front of the house again, which doesn’t do anything to quell his doubts, but he makes himself park and gets out of the truck anyway. The house has a garage, after all, and it looks like it might rain. Dean could have moved the car inside to protect it from any possible downpours.

Sam is just as uncertain about his reception as he was yesterday, but his steps are smoother as he approaches the front door. His hands aren’t shaking. The new khakis and button-down shirt he bought this morning at Wal-mart before coming over are doing their job and soothing his nerves—not a lot, but enough for him to push the doorbell and stand where he is instead of sprinting for the truck again. He scuffs his new shoes on the ground as he waits; runs a hand through the hair he slicked back with mousse in the Wal-mart parking lot.

Then the door is actually opening and Sam’s nervous smile freezes on his face.

It isn’t Dean. It’s a woman—the one from yesterday, Sam thinks from her general build and stature. Up close, she’s more adorable than beautiful, with masses of auburn curls framing a heart-shaped face. There are a couple of extra pounds on her tiny frame (she can’t be much more than 5’3”, if that), and she looks up at him with narrowed, suspicious eyes as she hugs the door.

“You’re that guy from yesterday,” she says. The words come out like an accusation, and Sam suddenly wishes he hadn’t bought new clothing for this visit. He feels like an imposter standing here in his brand new pants and shirt, with his shoes that don’t fit quite right and his slicked down hair. He isn’t even sure who he’s trying to be—what role he’s using to gain audience with the single most important person in his life.

“I, uh. Yeah,” he says, flushing. He licks his lips nervously, glancing past her into the house as though Dean will materialize if Sam wills him to. “Is Dean here?”

The woman frowns, pulling herself up as tall as she can manage and glaring at him. “No,” she says simply.
Sam was already pretty sure from the way she looked at him when she opened the door that she knows who he is—Dean would have had to explain after yesterday, of course—but now he’s wondering whether his brother gave his girl the entire, sordid story. The way she’s acting, it seems likely that she has most of the pieces, even if Dean played the incest card close to his chest.

Sam’s fingers drum against the side of his thigh and his gut tightens with the need to flee. For a moment, he’s perilously close to doing it: to turning tail and sprinting to the truck and just gunning the gas until he’s four states away.

But in the end, he wants this too much. He needs Dean too much to let him go without at least making sure that’s what Dean wants from him.

“Well, when’s he coming home?” he asks, shoving his nervous hands into his pockets. “I need to talk to him.”

“I don’t know that he wants to talk to you,” Dean’s girl replies mistrustfully.

Sam doesn’t know that Dean wants to talk either, but hearing the words spoken aloud by his replacement makes his chest give a violent, aching pulse. “Look, I just. Can you tell him Sam stopped by?”

Something flickers in her eyes—dawning understanding and recognition—and her frown deepens. “Sam?” she demands. “You’re Sam?”

“Yeah, I—” Sam falters, confused. Maybe Dean didn’t explain as much as Sam thought. “He didn’t say?”

“No.” Dean’s girlfriend (fiancé wife) purses her mouth in a considering expression, and then, after a brief delay, announces, “He’s at work. You want to see him, try there.”

The door is already swinging shut on him before Sam realizes that he’s being thrown a bone. He sticks an arm out hurriedly to stop the door from closing in his face and the flash of brown eyes he receives in return is heated and hostile, with just enough of a fearful undercurrent for Sam to feel ashamed.

“Sorry,” he apologizes, taking his hand back and backing up a step. “I just. Uh.”

“I need you to get off my porch now,” Dean’s girl says. “No offense, but if you don’t I’m calling the police.”

Sam has dealt with enough civilians to recognize the genuine quiver of fear beneath the steel in her voice, and he—Christ, what did Dean tell her about him?

“I’m leaving,” he assures her, hands held up in supplication. “I just wanted to ask you a question.

She doesn’t relax at all, eyes flitting from his hands over his chest and then up to his face and back again. Her knuckles are white where they’re gripping the door. “So ask it.”

“Where, uh. Where’s work?”

Sam really should have guessed. If Dean isn’t hunting and he isn’t working at Bobby’s, then he still has to be doing something, and he’s always liked cooking. He’s always been good at it. Still, it’s a little odd to poke his head through the swinging ‘Staff Only’ door of the Humboldt Municipal Bar
(which apparently also serves as the town’s single restaurant) and see his brother sliding a tray of what looks like chicken pot pies into an oven.

At the sound of the door opening, Dean glances over his shoulder and, while he doesn’t exactly freeze, his motions stutter slightly. Then he’s turning away from Sam again, reaching for the handle of a saucepan on the stove and giving it a quick shake. He’s wearing another apron—white this time—and a grey t-shirt. Worn, comfortable-looking jeans. Sneakers. Those broad, leather cuffs are still spanning his wrists, and Sam wonders if they’re strictly ornamental or if they’re supposed to represent something.

It’s a little surreal, standing so close to his brother—in the same room, almost within touching distance—and Sam feels lightheaded as he says, “De—”

“In case you didn’t notice, I’m kind of busy here,” Dean interrupts, and the rest of his name dies in Sam’s throat.

He didn’t exactly expect to be welcomed back with open arms, but he wasn’t expecting this either: didn’t think Dean would be tossing words at him like bullets, his voice clipped and cold.

Stupid of him, really.

“No, yeah, I.” He shuts his mouth on the confusion, giving himself a moment to collect his thoughts before offering, “You want me to come back later?”

Dean laughs without pausing in his preparations. “Yeah, sure. Try me in another four years.”

Sam stiffens, stung by the attack. “That isn’t fa—”

The clang of Dean slamming a pan down against the stovetop is loud enough and unexpected enough that Sam jumps.

“Yeah well, life isn’t fucking fair,” Dean announces, finally turning around to face him.

It’s the first good look Sam has gotten of his brother, and Dean is as beautiful as ever. Dean’s eyes are still that same, impossible vivid green—evergreen dark right now, and flashing with hostility. His mouth is still distractingly sensuous, even curled into a sneer. There’s a shocking, short line of white above his left ear, which Sam looks at uncomprehendingly for a few seconds before realizing that it must be from the bullet groove. His hair must have grown back in that way.

Sam’s eyes fly to his brother’s temple, and the hooked scar has faded enough that he has to strain to locate it. The crash left a deeper mark on Dean’s skin, still creasing his forehead in a slight, raised line. Whatever necklace he was wearing yesterday is still around his neck as well—the chain visible above the collar of his shirt, amulet or charm hidden beneath the worn cotton.

The need to step forward and pull Dean into a tight hug shivers through Sam, but he knows better. Dean’s furious eyes and thundercloud expression are telling him to keep his distance if he wants to be able to walk out of here.

“I just want to talk,” he says finally.

Dean stares at him for a long moment, fury draining from his face until he’s regarding Sam like they’re nothing but strangers; like Sam doesn’t mean anything to him at all. Sam is almost ready to chance his brother’s wrath by moving closer—anything to get Dean to look at him like he matters again—when Dean turns away with an abrupt, dismissive motion.
“I can’t deal with you right now.”

Sam’s stomach pitches violently and his ribcage tightens. “Can I—can I talk to you later? When you get off?” At Dean’s humorless snort, he grimaces and corrects, “Off work, I mean.”

“I don’t think so.” No hesitation. No color to the words. Sam might as well be a traveling salesman trying to get Dean to buy a new set of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

“Tomorrow?” he offers desperately. “Or, y’know, whenever’s good?”

Dean pulls a bowl down from the shelves above him and cracks a couple eggs into it. Sam watches him whip them for a moment, breathlessly praying he isn’t going to be turned away completely empty handed, and then Dean says, “I’m going over to Bobby’s next Tuesday. We can talk then.”

Sam’s entire body flushes cold with relief and shamed, cringing gratitude. He opens his mouth to thank his brother and is beat to it by Dean’s parting, emotionless sally.

“If you can manage to stick around that long.”

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“Why the hell didn’t you warn me?”

They’re the first words out of Sam’s mouth when Bobby opens the front door. He pushes past the man as he says them, trying not to step on Bonham, who is barking and getting between Sam’s legs and generally doing its best to trip him.

“Hi, Sam,” Bobby replies acerbically. “Nice to see you too. How about you come on in and make yourself at home.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Sam demands again, louder this time.

Bonham immediately stops trying to get his attention and slinks over to lie on the floor and make sad eyes in his direction. But Sam’s spent enough of the last twenty four hours feeling like crap, so he ignores the guilty flare in his chest to focus on the anger tightening his stomach.

“Tell you what?” Bobby asks as he shuts the front door again.

“About Dean’s—” Sam stops, tripped up by the realization that he still doesn’t know exactly what she is to his brother. “The woman he’s living with.”

“Oh,” Bobby says, the word heavy with realization. “Erica.”

That isn’t the name Sam would have picked for the over-protective pixie living in Dean’s house, but he grabs onto it immediately now that it’s been offered. “Yes, ‘Erica’!” he repeats, gesturing wildly. “You let me walk right into that, Bobby!”

The look Bobby gives him is dour. “You say that like I have some kind of responsibility to fill you in on what you missed over the last four years.”

Sam flushes slightly at the reminder, but he’s too determined to get some answers to worry about it now. He didn’t see a ring on his brother’s hand at the bar—or on the woman’s, for that matter. Then again, he couldn’t see her left hand, hidden behind the door like it was. And Dean was cooking. Not the best environment for someone to be wearing their wedding ring.

“Are they married?” he demands, making himself throw the worst-case scenario out there first.
“Engaged? What?”

Bobby lets out a snort at that. The sound is thick with disgust, and he shakes his head as he turns away. “Well, I guess you figured out what you wanted pretty quick.”

“Bobby,” Sam growls, shooting out a hand and grabbing the man’s arm.

Bobby shakes Sam off and spins around to face him directly. “Why, Sam?” he challenges, glaring up at Sam from beneath the brow of his cap. “You gonna try to break them up?”

You’re goddamned right I am.

The words are close enough to coming out of Sam’s mouth that he can taste them, but then he registers the measuring look in Bobby’s eyes, and he actually thinks about what he’s contemplating, and he stops. He thinks about how Dean looked running across the lawn; how carefree he was when he was spinning the woman—Erica—above his head. The open sound of his laughter.

“No,” he whispers. The fresh, deepening ache in his chest tells him that he’s telling the truth. “I wouldn’t do that to him.”

Bobby studies him for a moment longer and then grunts dismissively, letting the matter drop. “So,” he says, tugging at his cap. “I’m guessing from this little inquisition of yours that you didn’t actually talk to Dean?”

Sam shakes his head while running a distressed hand through his hair. “No, I. He said he was coming here on Tuesday. We’re gonna talk then. Look, can you just. Can you at least tell me how long they’ve been together?”

“That’s Dean’s business,” Bobby answers immediately. “If he wants you to know, he can tell you himself.”

The way he walks out of the room and leaves Sam standing there ends the conversation pretty damn thoroughly before Sam can come up with an argument to get the information he wants—that he needs for his peace of mind. At this rate, he’s going to be a nervous wreck by the time Tuesday rolls around.

As he turns in an aimless circle, looking around the room, his eyes fall on Bonham. The dog wags his tail slowly without lifting his head, eyes fastened on Sam, and he lets out a soft sigh. Walking over to the couch, he drops down and snaps his fingers.

“C’mere, boy.”

Bonham is in his lap in a heartbeat, licking Sam’s face and wagging its tail with approval.

At least someone around here is happy to see him.

Sam was right about waiting for Tuesday. The grudge that Bobby’s obviously still holding against him for leaving only makes it worse, and for the first time in a year he has to work at maintaining the meditative calm he mastered in Canada. Once or twice he retreates to his room—the same one he was sharing with Dean all those years ago, and if Bobby didn’t mean that as an underhanded blow to the gut, then he probably shouldn’t have stood in the doorway watching Sam with that cold, bitter expression on his face when he showed him in.
Meals are unpleasant affairs—and not just because Bobby’s cooking hasn’t improved much while he was gone. Bobby sits across from him, grunting monosyllabically in response to all of Sam’s attempts at conversation. When Sam tries direct questions—or, god forbid, mentions Dean—he gets a sharp glance and a tightening of Bobby’s mouth. If he pushes, Bobby’s expression tells him, he’s going to get the ass whupping Bobby clearly wants to give him.

Sometimes, Sam thinks it would be better if he and Bobby did have it out. Maybe on the other side of all the pain and the blood, Bobby would be able to forgive him. And there’s a part of Sam that doesn’t care about Bobby’s forgiveness but still wants the man to snap. There’s a part of him that knows he deserves it, he deserves everything that Bobby and Dean together can dish out.

He left for all the right reasons, but he managed to fuck even that up, and Bobby’s right, he should have called. He should have—a postcard, something. But he was afraid, and behind the fear there was a dark, sullen place—located beneath his ribcage just below his heart—that wanted Dean to hate him. That self-destructive pulse was maybe connected to the demon blood he’s been carrying around, maybe not, but Sam is done excusing himself.

He fucked up. He fucked up, and now he’s trying to put it to rights, and if he can’t then he has only himself to blame.

Bonham is the only thing that makes the slow passage of time bearable. The dog harbors no resentment toward him, and although it clearly adores Bobby, Sam is a new, interesting companion. Also, Bonham is excited to discover that Sam will sit on the front porch and play fetch for hours—nothing better to do with his time when he’s stuck in a holding pattern.

It’s probably the first time the dog has ever tired of this game first, finally bringing the stick back and flopping to the ground to lie on Sam’s feet, eyes rolled back in its head so that it can watch him while it pants and lazily wags its tail.

Sam leans down to scratch at the dog’s jaw and it tilts its head helpfully, tail thumping harder. When Bonham rolls over into his legs, front paws raised and clearly aiming for a belly rub, Sam gets his first good look at its collar and freezes.

It’s a homemade number with a backing of stiff, cured leather and suppler, darker leather sewn onto the front. There’s really no way for Sam to be sure, but he knows in his gut that the darker fronting for the collar came from Dad’s old leather jacket. The one Dad gave to Dean when Dean turned sixteen.

Bonham gives a bark and a wiggle, and Sam makes his fingers start up again, scratching the dog’s belly with one hand while tracing along the collar with the other. There are markings scratched into the leather—deep gouges that seem nonsensical until Sam catches the pattern with the pad of his thumb and recognizes them for protective symbols.

This isn’t Bobby’s dog.

“Dean,” Sam says softly, testing. It’s the first time he’s paid attention to Bonham when saying his brother’s name, and so it’s the first time he notices the dog going attentive and still despite the belly rubbing it’s receiving.

“What’s Dean?” he asks, keeping his voice low so Bobby won’t overhear if he’s peering out the window to check whether Sam has disappeared again yet. “Where is he, boy?”

Bonham makes an eager little whine and scrambles to its feet, staring down the driveway toward the road with a hopeful wag of its tail. After a few seconds, when Dean isn’t magically forthcoming, the
dog glances back at Sam and gives an expectant bark.

Sam flushes, suddenly guilty again. Christ, now he’s even fucking with the dog’s emotions.

“Soon,” he says, holding his hand out and coaxing Bonham back over. “He’ll be here soon.”

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On Monday night, he calls Andy.

“Gallagher’s Freak Show, Andy speaking, how may I help you?”

Sam relaxes minutely at the sound of that familiar, light-hearted voice and says, “You haven’t been smoking again, have you? That shit rots your brain.”

“This coming from a guy who thought ‘blunt’ was slang for ‘unsharpened pencil’.”

“It was four in the morning,” Sam protests. “I wasn’t awake!”

“Suuuure, Sam,” Andy replies. “We all believe you. Just like we all believe you never shrieked like a little girl when Tamara dumped that clump of snow down your shirt.”

Sam can’t help but crack a grin at that, and more of the unhappy tension that has been building in his chest ever since he first saw Dean eases. “Bite me, Gallagher,” he says, knowing that Andy will be able to hear the laugh in his voice.


That hits a little closer to home than Sam would like—he is a chicken, he’s a fucking coward—and instead of continuing the round of insults he drops the humorous mask to say, “Seriously, man, it’s good to hear your voice.”

“Yeah, you too,” Andy answers, switching gears immediately to follow him. “I was actually just going to call.”

“What about?” Nothing bad, at least: not with Andy’s voice as bright and eager as it is.

“Heather asked me out. We’re gonna—like, the movies, and dinner, out in the real world, and like, a date. Me. With a girl.”

“Hey, man, that’s great.”

“And she—she knows about Ansem already, and she still wants to go out with me. Can you believe it?”

Sam’s chest clenches at the mention of Andy’s brother, but he manages to keep his voice light when he answers, “I told you, Andy. No one’s going to blame you for that. It wasn’t your fault.”

“No, I know that. But just. A girl. And she’s hot, man. Dude, you should see her.”

Sam thinks he’s been hearing about Heather on and off for the past seven months, could probably write an ode to her in his sleep based on Andy’s descriptions, but he likes hearing Andy so unabashedly excited about starting a relationship so he says, “Tell me about her.”

He spends the next hour listening to Andy describe what amounts to a goddess in geek’s clothing, and giving Andy advice for his upcoming date—he’s a little out of practice himself, but he’s pretty
sure girls still like having the door held for them—and has actually forgotten why he called in the first place when Andy finally says, “Oh man, I can’t believe I’ve been talking at you this long. You should’ve said something.”

“If I minded, I would have. But I’m glad for you, man. Seriously. She sounds like a great girl.”

“Yeah,” Andy agrees happily. “You should swing by and meet her—y’know, when you finish up with your hunt.”

“I’d love to, but I’m not, uh. I’m not actually on a hunt right now.”

Something in Sam’s voice must tip Andy off to the severity of the situation, because he goes silent for a long moment. When he speaks again, his voice is cautious. “Okay. Are you taking a break?”

Sam laughs, rubbing his eyes. “Something like that. I’m in South Dakota.”

“South—wait, South Dakota? Isn’t that where—shit, Sam.”

“I know. I’m sorry, I didn’t—I didn’t know about you and Heather. I shouldn’t have called.”

“Fuck that,” Andy snaps immediately, and there’s enough bark in his normally easy-going voice to snap Sam out of what probably would have been a pretty pathetic guilt spiral. “I would’ve kicked your ass if you hadn’t called.”

“You would’ve tried,” Sam jokes, but his voice is hoarse and the attempted levity falls flat.

There’s a moment of silence and then Andy asks, “Have you seen him yet?”

“Briefly. He. He’s changed.”

“Four years, dude,” Andy says pragmatically. “What’d you expect?”

“I don’t know. Not this, I. He’s married, I think. He has a girl, anyway, and a house, and it’s fucking ridiculous because he—he’s not that guy.”

The beat before Andy speaks is enough to let Sam know that he isn’t going to like what his friend has to say.

“No offense, Sam, but I thought the whole point of you leaving was for him to figure out for himself who he is.”

“It was,” Sam agrees, ignoring the pulse of pain coming from beneath his ribcage. “I just ... This is hard.”

“What, you thought it’d be easy?”

Sam sighs. “I don’t know what I thought.”

Silence stretches out between them again—not awkward, exactly, but pensive: both of them thinking their own thoughts. Then Andy asks, “You want me to come out there?”

“No,” Sam answers immediately. “Thanks, man, but I think this is something I have to do on my own, you know?”

“Well, at least call if you need to. You’ve got my number.”
“Yeah. Thanks, Andy.”

Tuesday is just as hellish as Sam knew it would be. He spends the morning pretending to read one of Bobby’s texts on demon lore while staring intently out the window. Every so often, when he can’t sit still any longer, he gets up, goes to stand on the front porch for a few minutes, and then comes back in and goes back to keeping watch. Bonham quickly picks up on his anxiety, walking around the room in tight circles and whining, and around noon Bobby gets fed up with the whole situation and puts both of them outside.

Sam gets enlisted to haul scrap metal from one end of the yard to other. As far as he can tell, Bonham’s only job is to chase birds and snap at any insects that wander too close. Or to try and trip Sam when he isn’t looking. Bobby’s probably laughing his ass off from the house.

The metal is hot on his bare skin, and it’s difficult to get a good grip when he can’t keep his hands dry. It feels like it’s over ninety-five degrees in the shade, of which there’s precious little in the salvage yard. And none of the scrap metal is at all light, so Sam really has to work at moving it, and the end result is that he’s soaked and disgusting by the time he's finished with the first piece.

And there are about thirty more to go. Fuck.

He perseveres, though—partly out of stubbornness, but mostly because it’s actually a good distraction from his anxiety about seeing Dean again. If he’s focusing on the backbreaking labor, he isn’t worrying about whether Dean’s going to meet his eyes, or accept his apology, or if this is the last time he’ll ever get to talk to his brother.

By the time Sam finally drops the last piece, though—almost three yards long and as broad as a picture window: must have come off some kind of truck—he’s pretty sure this is one of those ‘kill the patient to cure the disease’ tactics. He leans over next to the pile of scrap metal he just created, hands braced on his knees and sweat dripping down his back and off his nose and hair. At the crunch of gravel behind him, he huffs out a laugh and shakes his head weakly.

“No ... more ... promise I ... I’ll sit ... quietly ...”

“Might make it a little hard to talk, but okay.”

Sam whips around so quickly he almost loses his balance and goes over. He expects Dean to laugh at him—for the near-fall, if not for being such a pathetic mess—but Dean has his distant, defensive walls firmly in place. He’s wearing a leather jacket—not the one that used to be Dad’s (course not, he ripped that heirloom up to make a fucking dog collar), but a different one, a new one—and a pair of wrap-around shades that hide those beautiful, changeable eyes of his.

The shades are understandable in the bright sunlight, but the jacket is nothing more than armor, pure and simple. Sam can see the sweat running down his brother’s throat and damping his shirt, making it stick to his chest and stomach in tantalizing dark patches. If Dean notices Sam looking, he doesn’t comment on it; doesn’t offer so much as a twitch of his lips.

From behind him, Sam hears a single, happy bark, and the next thing he knows Bonham is barreling past him and jumping up at Dean’s chest. Dean dodges the leap, and then skids to the side again when Bonham tries once more with a happy, excited yip. It takes Sam a couple of moments to realize that Dean’s movements have the feel of routine to them, and that this is how his brother usually greets the dog. Dean is ignoring him in favor of the mutt, which stings, but Sam’s also grateful for the opportunity to observe his brother.
Dean’s movements are fluid as he and Bonham (Dean’s dog, whether it’s living at Bobby’s or no: watching them together now cements that suspicion for sure) play tag around the yard. Dean isn’t breathing hard as he moves in short dashes around, kicking up dust whenever he changes directions to avoid another of Bonham’s lunges. Watching his brother now, Sam wouldn’t ever have guessed one of Dean’s lungs wasn’t working so hot.

Then again, the doctors did say it might heal. Or there’s always the chance that Bobby found some kind of mystical cure for him.

When Dean finally crouches and lets Bonham tackle him, Sam moves closer. Dean must sense him approaching, but he doesn’t look up from where he’s petting the dog.

“Your lung healed?” Sam asks.

But Dean shakes his head. “Still running on one cylinder.”

“But you just—”

“I got used to it,” Dean says, rising and wiping his palms on his jeans. He pauses, head tilted down and to one side, and then adds, “I got used to a lot of things.”

It’s a dig, but subtle as far as Dean is concerned, and far less than Sam deserves. He accepts it without protest, and then stands there and waits for Dean to take the lead, just like he always has whenever it’s really mattered.

Finally, his brother seems to get that the ball is in his court and jerks his head toward the house. “Come on. I’ve got to get started.”

He starts walking before he finishes speaking, hands shoved defensively in his jacket pockets. Bonham frisks after him, tongue lolling out the side of its mouth and eyes locked on Dean’s face.

“Get started with what?” Sam asks as he follows them both.

“Cooking,” comes the grunted response. “You still like steak?”

“I, uh. Yeah.”

Dean nods casually, in a way that makes Sam feel he would have gotten that response even if he’d told Dean he was deathly allergic to the stuff. Like Dean is talking just for the sake of filling up the silence and not actually listening to anything coming out of Sam’s mouth.

There are better times for this, and Sam could sure as hell look better when he does it, but suddenly he can’t wait any longer. He just can’t.

“Hey,” he says, jogging a little to close the distance between them. “Dean, I’m sor—”

“Save it for after dinner.” Dean cuts in. He still isn’t looking at Sam: is still using that empty, dispassionate voice. “I’m not talking to you on an empty stomach. And you better shower before you sit down at my table. You smell like a fucking gym bag.”

Sam stops, breath driven from his lungs by the words—stupid, really, to be hurt by such a juvenile insult.

Dean must know that Sam isn’t following him anymore, but he doesn’t look back, and he doesn’t slow, and within moments Sam is watching his brother disappear into the house. Dean holds the
screen door open long enough for Bonham to frisk inside and then lets go.

The sound of it banging shut is loud, and echoing, and final.
Dinner is a stilted, awkward affair, with the three of them sitting around the kitchen table and staring at their plates. Bonham has been glued to Dean’s side since he arrived, and now sits just as quietly as everyone else—head resting on Dean’s thigh while it stares up at him with a mixture of pure adoration and pathetic begging. Sam doesn’t bother trying to break the silence because he already knows he won’t be allowed. Having all his attempts at conversation over the past three hours shot down sends a pretty strong message.

He tries to follow his brother’s lead and keep his attention focused on the safe terrain of his plate, but he can’t quite manage it. Dean’s draw is too alluring—stronger than magnetism, more like gravity. Sam just can’t help looking over, taking in Dean’s presence. Taking in the differences—minute or otherwise.

The white streak in Dean’s hair doesn’t just look like it’s grown out with a different color, but a different texture, too. Sam can’t know for sure, of course, but he thinks that if he brushed his fingers over the streak, he’d find the strands coarser than the rest of Dean’s hair: bristling instead of soft.

Now that he’s close enough to really look, he finds a new scar, as well: tiny and curved, high on Dean’s cheekbone. Dad has a similar scar, Sam remembers—from a bar fight gone wrong, where he took a beer bottle to the face—and he has to wonder if Dean got his the same way. He hopes not, because the thought of Dean being subjected to any more violence after everything he’s already been through hurts.

He’s still wearing the cuffs, and the necklace, and this time it’s above his shirt so Sam can see it. It’s a saint’s medallion, and even though there’s no name etched into the silver metal, Sam has no trouble figuring out which one. Not when St. George’s battle with the dragon is so perfectly depicted: the soldier-saint on horseback, spear in hand and thrust into the dragon’s gaping mouth.

It makes Sam uncomfortable for some reason, and it takes him a while to locate the source of his unease in what the medallion implies about Dean’s attitude toward religion. The Dean he remembers used to scoff at God. The Dean he remembers used to brazenly clump into churches during the middle of Mass, all grins and rough edges, to fill up his flask at the font. But this Dean wears the medallion like it belongs around his neck, and suddenly Sam has to wonder whether he goes to church, whether he finally figured out how to pray.

Those are uncomfortable questions, though—they suggest a degree of change that’s too staggering to wrap his head around—and Sam drops his eyes from the medallion to get a better look at the cuffs. He half expects to see Dad’s old jacket here too, but the leather is too light for that—rich and warm, with cherry undertones. Dean might have bought these at a store, but he did a little work on them afterwards because there are more protective designs here, etched into the leather with painstaking care.

Sam tries to read the runes and symbols, but they’re too intertwined for him to make out anything but fragments—Nauthiz, he sees, and Algiz, and a Sheiah Dog, and the hamsa, and of course the pentagram. There are others as well, though—mystical shapes he isn’t familiar with—and everything is woven through with ancient scripts. Greek, he thinks, and maybe some Hebrew. Chinese. Sanskrit. And, if Sam isn’t mistaken, Aramaic.

Christ, it must have taken him months just to work out how to put all that together and keep the spell from overloading on him.
Dean’s hands move suddenly, drawing back and disappearing under the table. Sam lifts his eyes to his brother's face, and Dean still isn’t looking at him, but his jaw is tight in a way that says the hiding of his hands was deliberate.

Sam should stop looking now—Dean’s sending out some pretty strong, crystal clear vibes that he doesn’t appreciate the scrutiny—but now that he’s looking at his brother’s face, Sam can’t bring himself to look away. All he can do is trace the sweep of Dean’s ridiculously long eyelashes, track the brief dart of his tongue across his lips.

And freckles. How could Sam possibly have forgotten his brother’s freckles?

“Stop it, Sam,” Dean says finally. It’s more a rasp than anything else—the words rough with the emotion Sam has been longing for. Now that he has it, of course, he’s wishing that Dean would go back to treating him like a stranger, because it hurts to hear that hostility, the threat of violence lashing just below the surface.

He drops his eyes, moving his own hands down into his lap in an unconscious mirror of his brother. They sit there quietly, only Bobby making the barest pretense of eating—and when Sam chances a glance across the table, he sees that all the man is really doing is pushing the vegetable casserole around on his plate. The sound of Bobby’s fork scraping against ceramic is the only noise in the room, and it sounds deafeningly loud in Sam’s ears.

When the man unexpectedly shoves his chair back and gets up, Sam jumps, startled. Bobby mutters something under his breath—a curse, probably—and then gathers up his plate and beer without looking at either of them and makes his way out front onto the porch. Dean doesn’t even hesitate before following, Bonham at his side.

Abandoned, Sam clenches and unclenches his fists. His entire body feels numb except for his hands, which are prickling and tingling uncomfortably. After a few minutes, he makes himself pick up his fork so he can poke at his steak, which is still lukewarm in the summer heat. He should eat. Just so that Dean isn’t offended by having his cooking rejected.

Except he’s pretty sure he won’t be able to keep anything down.

There’s a creaking sound from the front of the house—Bobby or Dean moving around on the porch—and then the muted sound of voices. Sam is sure they’re talking about him—what the fuck else would they be discussing?—and there’s no delay between the moment his eyes start to water and the crumpled sobs that burst from his chest. He cries as silently as he can, one elbow on the table so that he can shade his face with his hand—just in case they happen to peer in to check on him.

When he’s done, he wipes his face with his napkin and picks up his fork. His chest doesn’t feel any better, but his stomach is a little quieter, and he thinks that having some food in it might help settle it completely.

His steak is wet and tastes of salt, but Sam chokes it down anyway.

By the time Dean comes back in, carrying both his and Bobby’s plates and with Bonham at his heels, Sam’s own plate is empty. Dean actually tosses him a glance as he walks by and something about Dean’s expression tells Sam that his brother knows he was crying. Jury’s still out on whether he cares.

Dean puts the dishes in the sink with a clatter and then turns around, leaning back with both hands
gripping the metal basin. “Okay. Talk.”

He isn’t looking at Sam, eyes locked somewhere in the vicinity of the refrigerator. His expression isn’t closed: it’s empty. Almost bored. Like he could give a shit what Sam wants to say. All of the words Sam spent the last five days preparing suddenly seem worthless in the face of his brother’s indifference.

“I’m sorry,” he manages after a moment. “I left for all the right reasons, but I know I hurt you, and I’m sorry.”

A muscle jumps in Dean’s jaw, but otherwise he might as well be carved of stone. “That it?”

“I—” Sam starts, and then stops again. He didn’t expect Dean to be like this during their discussion, so passive and uncaring. He doesn’t know how to have a monologue with his brother’s apathy. “I don’t know what else to say,” he admits finally. “Can you just—Dean, tell me what I need to do to make this up to you.”

Dean’s eyes go vague and distant for a moment, and then refocus. “Nothing,” he says, turning around.

Sam watches while his brother turns on the water and starts to do the dishes. It feels like Dean just shoved a blade between his ribs. It feels like a dismissal.

“Dean, there must. C’mon, man, I’m begging here. I just—give me a chance to explain.”

Dean doesn’t pause in scrubbing at the steak pan. “So explain.”

But Sam can’t talk to his brother’s back—he needs Dean’s eyes for this, needs to be able to read him, or at least try—so he gets up and moves around the table toward him. “Hey, can you—Dean, can you look at me for a sec?”

Sam really should have known better than to try to touch him.

What was meant to be a light brush of Dean’s arm, just to get his attention, turns into Dean whirling around and sending his fist crashing into the side of Sam’s face. It’s almost the same place Bobby punched him a week ago—just higher enough to make the entire left side of Sam’s face explode with white heat and his eye blur with tears. Sucker punch right on Sam’s cheekbone.

Dean hits harder than Bobby, too.

“You don’t get to touch me,” he spits as Sam backs away, one hand cradling the side of his face. “Hell, you’re lucky I’m letting you run your mouth, you son of a bitch.”

“Dean—”

“You left!” Dean shouts, rolling right over Sam’s attempt to speak. His facade of disinterest has cracked wide open, and the depth of rage that Sam finds staring out at him from his brother’s eyes is terrifying. “You fucking promised me—you stenciled your motherfucking name in my goddamned skin, and then you just walked away. Not so much as a goddamned note. Like I didn’t even matter.”

“No, not—not like that. God, Dean, of course you matter.”

“Shut up.” The expression on Dean’s face—all that terrible anger and the hurt beneath—isn’t anywhere near as painful as the disgusted scorn clogging his voice. “You had your shot. Now it’s my turn.”
For a moment, though, he’s silent—maybe gathering his words, maybe just to see if Sam can take direction. Then he opens his mouth and says, “I trusted you. You have no fucking clue how hard that was for me to do, but you’re my brother and I was just stupid enough to buy into your bullshit.” He shakes his head, mouth twisting bitterly. “Man, you must’ve been laughing your ass off at how goddamn gullible I was.”

“No,” Sam protests. “I wasn’t. It wasn’t like that.”

Unthinkingly, he reaches out again, meaning to get his hands on Dean as though he’ll be able to convince him then. This time, he sees the punch coming—Dean is pissed enough that he’s telegraphing everything, or maybe he’s just out of practice. Sam thinks about moving out of the way, or blocking, and then just stands there and lets Dean hit him a second time.

“I said, don’t touch me!” Dean snarls as pain explodes through the left side of Sam’s face again. “Fuck toy’s off-limits. Your privileges have been fucking revoked.”

Sam’s face might be burning from the blows, but it doesn’t hurt nearly as much as his chest, which he’s pretty sure is cracking open at having to hear Dean talk about himself like that—talk about them like that. Dean doesn’t mean it, is the only consolation. Dean might think that’s what Sam sees him as, but he doesn’t believe it of himself. That much is clear from the snapping, righteous fury in his eyes, which have darkened to stormy evergreen.

“Was anything you said real?” Dean demands, still glaring at Sam. “Or was it—what, some kind of game? You think it was funny, stringing me along until you decided you’d had enough?”

Dean’s head is rocked to the side with the force of the punch, and Sam is startled to find his own knuckles stinging. But he can’t deny the hot, vicious pulse of fury in his chest, and before he even knows he’s going to speak he says, “Don’t you dare, Dean. You want to be pissed at me, then fine. But don’t you ever accuse me of not caring.”

“What else am I supposed to think, Sam?” Dean yells, gesturing wildly. The punch doesn’t even seem to have fazed him. “Huh? I would have done anything for you, man, and you just—”

“That was the problem! Damn it, Dean, you think I wanted that? You think I wanted you to just—turn yourself into some kind of life-size blowup doll?”

The words stand between them for a moment, too stark and harsh and true, and Sam can see Dean trying to swallow them and failing.

“I’m sorry,” he says in a softer voice. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

Dean blinks, giving his head a shake and refocusing on the present. Any of the uncertainty he might have felt a moment ago is gone, and his voice is just as venomous as ever as he says, “No. go ahead. Tell me how you really feel.”

“I couldn’t let you do that to yourself, man,” Sam replies, keeping his voice gentle. If he refuses to rise to the bait, maybe Dean will calm down a bit. “You had to—you had to figure out who you were without me around to complicate things, so I left.”

“So that’s your story,” Dean says, the words syrupy with disbelief. “You left because you cared so much.”

“I left because I loved you,” Sam corrects, and Dean scoffs and turns away, scrubbing at his face with one hand. Sam takes the opportunity—as close to a lull as they’ve come in this conversation—to finish damning himself by confessing, “I—I still do.”
Dean turns around sharply at that, hand dropping to his side. Sam looks back at him, meeting his brother’s flat, hostile eyes and trying to project everything he felt for Dean then. Everything he still feels for him now.

Finally, Dean’s brow furrows and he says, “How exactly did you picture this going, Sam? You come back here and you waltz on up and say, ‘Hey, man, sorry about ditching you to get my Carradine on,’ and then I say, ‘Oh, no worries’, and what? We pick up right where we left off?”

Sam shakes his head, eyes watering because yeah, part of him was stupidly hoping that it might be that easy.

“Well guess what, Sam,” Dean continues, relentless. “I have a life now. I have friends, and a job, and—and, fuck, a mortgage.”

“I know,” Sam says, pushing one hand through his hair to get it out of his eyes. His face still aches where Dean hit him—twice. “I—I didn’t come here to mess that up, I swear. I just. I miss you.”

“You miss me,” Dean repeats scathingly.

“I—you’re my brother. Even if you don’t—if you don’t want me anymore, that’s okay.” Oh, god, he’s such a liar. “But fuck, Dean, please. Don’t—don’t cut me off.”

“I don’t think we ever actually got around to you getting anything,” Dean points out, and Sam winces.

“You know what I mean. Don’t—we’re still family. Give me another shot. Please.”

“Why should I?” Dean demands. “You give me one good reason why I should do anything but walk out that door and not look back.”

Sam searches wildly for one—for anything that isn’t going to come out weak and self-serving—and can’t find one. Because Dean is right. No matter how much he wants one, Sam doesn’t deserve a second chance.

“I can’t,” he confesses. His voice breaks on the words, but somehow he manages to keep from crying. “Dean, you—by all rights, you should tell me to go to hell. I fucked up. I fucked up so badly with you, I don’t even—I can’t ever begin to make up for it.”

“No,” Dean says flatly. “You can’t.”

But he isn’t leaving, and his eyes actually seem a little warmer.

Taking a chance, Sam continues, “I know you don’t need me anymore, but I—I still need you. And I’m begging you, Dean. I’m begging you to let me try.”

He stops there, waiting for an answer, and finally Dean grudgingly asks, “Try what?”

“To be your brother. I promise I won’t—I’m not going to push for anything else.” Sam sucks in a deep breath and then makes himself say it. “Erica seems real nice. I’m happy for you.”

Dean looks at him for a long moment, expressionless. There’s no telling what’s going on behind his eyes, no knowing if he wants to kick Sam’s ass for daring to bring his girl into the conversation. Sam’s palms are just starting to sweat when his brother finally says, “Yeah, she’s a real peach. She’s also not dating me.”
Relief shouldn’t be this painful, but Sam really wasn’t expecting his chest to expand as suddenly and violently as it just did. He struggles with his lungs for few seconds and then manages to ask, “She’s not?”

“Which doesn’t mean you are,” Dean adds, warning clear in his voice and the defensive tilt of his body.

“No, I. I know that.”

Dean regards him steadily, eyes hard and uncompromising and distrustful enough that Sam feels stripped naked and bare in front of him. He can’t shake the feeling that his brother is sizing him up—that this is both trial and sentencing wrapped up in one neat package. It isn’t fair—Sam hasn’t had nearly enough time to make his case, to prove himself—but he knows better than to argue.

Finally, Dean says, “I don’t trust you. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do that again. And I’m not letting you off the hook, either. You left, Sam. You promised you’d stay and then you left. There aren’t any get out of jail free passes on that one. Just so we’re clear.”

Dean’s lack of faith in him hurts just as much as Sam knew it would, but he works through the pain far enough to catch the bone his brother just tossed him.

“But you won’t—I can stay?” he checks.

Dean shrugs and turns away, studied disinterest firmly back in place. “Until you decide to leave again, sure.”


Dean glances over his shoulder, not quite looking in Sam’s direction. “Dude, word of advice. Don’t make any more promises you can’t keep, okay?”

“I’m not,” Sam says softly.

That gets him a laugh—Dean’s first for him in years, and it’s nothing like the laughter Sam overheard in his brother’s backyard. This is a jagged, broken-winged noise, caustic and jaded.

“Yeah, okay,” Dean snorts, reaching for the sponge.

It feels like a slap—was meant as one, Sam’s sure—and he rouses himself enough to protest, “I—can you just try? I don’t expect us to be best friends overnight, but if you aren’t even going to try, then this isn’t going to wo—”

“This is me trying,” Dean interrupts.

Sam sort of wants to point out that it doesn’t look like Dean is trying all that hard, but he manages to bite his tongue instead. He knows how lucky he is to have any kind of chance at all.

“Not to be a dick, Sam,” Dean says as he picks up a pot. “But we’re done here.”

“I—yeah, sure. Can I just. Do you mind if I sit here?” Sam asks, already moving toward the kitchen table.

“Yeah, I mind.”

The words lodge in Sam’s chest and steal his breath. He looks over toward the sink, but Dean isn’t looking back. Dean is up to his elbows in soapy water, and he really shouldn’t be doing that with
those leather cuffs on his wrists.

“I’ll be quiet,” Sam tries, desperate not to be sent away just yet.

“I don’t want you fucking staring at me.”

Sam is saved from having to respond to that by Bonham’s abrupt arrival, the dog skidding across the linoleum in its haste to get to Dean. The front door shuts behind them and Sam looks over to see Bobby coming toward him through the living room.

“You boys have a nice talk?” he asks, voice wary as he looks back and forth between them. His eyes catch on Sam’s cheek, and Sam can tell from the way the man purses his lips that there’s already a bruise forming there.

“Oh, it was fantastic,” Dean says sarcastically, and then pulls his hand out of the water to snap his fingers at the dog jumping up on the side of his leg. “Bonham, down.”

Obedient for the first time Sam has seen, Bonham settles on its haunches and continues to stare worshipfully in Dean’s direction.

“Everything settled, then?” Bobby prods. He isn’t looking at Sam, but past him to Dean. When Sam turns his attention on his brother, Dean’s shoulders are tense. “Dean?”

“Fuck off, Bobby.”

“Good to see you’re taking the moral highroad, then.”

Dean moves suddenly, throwing the pot and the sponge down in the sink and making water overflow and slosh onto the floor. Bonham dives for cover, tail between its legs, as Dean turns around to glare past Sam at Bobby. He’s looked at things he’s killed with more warmth.

Sam wonders if either one of them would notice if he snuck out the back door for a few minutes. Probably, since he’s standing between them in the middle of the kitchen.

There’s a long, strained moment of silence where Dean and Bobby just stare at each other, and then Dean’s jaw tightens as he shifts his gaze to Sam. And Sam ... Sam would really prefer it if Dean didn’t look at him with that expression. Ever.

“Humboldt’s having a picnic on Saturday,” Dean announces, which is nice and all, even if Sam doesn’t see what it has to do with him. Then Bobby clears his throat and, scowling, Dean mutters, “So you coming or what?”

Sam isn’t sure whether he’s more embarrassed at being invited as though he’s an unwanted tag-a-long—Dean was never this grudging with invitations, not even when he was doing his best to be a cool teenager—or thankful that Bobby is such an interfering busybody. Surprised, maybe. After the week he had, he didn’t expect the man to go to bat for him.

“Anyway, it’s gonna be lame,” Dean says when Sam doesn’t respond. Starting to turn away again, he continues, “And you probably have places to go, things to kill, so—”

“What time?”

“What?” Dean stills, half-turned toward the sink.

“I’ll be there. What time?”
There’s a moment where Sam thinks Dean is going to try to take the invite back and then his brother says, “Picnic starts at two.”

“Can I—you think maybe I could come by your place before? We could drive over together. You can, uh, show me what you’ve done with the Impala.”

Another beat of silence and then Dean is moving again, rolling his shoulders in a shrug and plunging his hands back into the soapy water filling the sink. More suds overflow and slosh on the floor, wetting Dean’s sneakers and jeans as well.

“Yeah, whatever,” he mutters.

“You’re mopping up that floor, Dean,” Bobby notes, and then shuffles out of the kitchen.

Dean waits until Bobby is gone before kicking the cabinets below the sink with a swear. Then, perhaps remembering he isn’t alone, he tosses a glare over his shoulder at Sam.

“What?” he bites out.

“Nothing,” Sam says quickly. “I just, uh. Thanks for the invite.”

Dean’s mouth twists into an insincere smile. “Pleasure’s all mine.” Like they don’t both know that Bobby somehow twisted Dean’s arm into extending the invitation in the first place.

Suddenly, the saliva in Sam’s mouth sours. If Dean ... if he really doesn’t want Sam at this picnic, then he shouldn’t go. He can’t impose himself on his brother like this, no matter how much he might want to.

“If you don’t want me there,” he says softly, “Just tell me and I won’t go. I don’t—I didn’t come here to force you into anything, Dean.”

Dean continues to stare at him for a moment and then, shaking his head, lets out a deep breath. When he turns back to the sink, all of the violence seems to have bled out of him, replaced by a bone-deep weariness that Sam doesn’t like seeing.

“Fuck, Sam, I don’t care,” Dean says. “Come, don’t come, whatever.”

“Dean—”

“No. I’m done talking for today.”

“Please, I just—”

“Sam.”

It’s both warning and plea, and Sam makes himself stop. For a moment he stands there—they both do, still and silent. Then Sam remembers his brother’s earlier words, about not wanting Sam staring at him, and turns his face away.

“Thanks for—” he starts, and then stops, unsure of what to say. Finally, he settles for, “Thanks for hearing me out.”

“Out being the operative word,” Dean says. “As in ‘get’.”

“I’m going,” Sam assures him. “I just—I wanted to say that I missed you, and I. It’s good seeing you again.”
Dean doesn’t say anything, doesn’t glance back again, and this time Sam leaves him there. He wants it to feel different from the last time—it’s at Dean’s request now, Dean is asking for this—but it doesn’t.

It doesn’t feel any different at all.

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When Dean leaves without saying goodbye thirty minutes later, Sam can’t say that he feels surprised. He makes his way down from his room and into the kitchen, where Bobby is standing by the back door with one hand on Bonham’s head. The dog looks as dejected as Sam has ever seen it, and the question pops out of his mouth before he can censor himself.

“If it’s Dean’s dog, how come he left it here with you?”

The look Bobby gives him—mouth turned up wryly at one side, eyebrow lifted—makes Sam stick his hands in his pockets awkwardly and glance away.

“Gee, I dunno, Sam. What do’ya think? What in the world might make someone do a damn fool thing like that?”

“I told you, Bobby. I—”

“Yeah, you told me. I’m still waiting for a good reason. C’mon, Bonham. Let’s go watch some TV.”

The dog whines but eventually comes away from the backdoor with Bobby, still casting glances behind itself like it expects Dean to reappear at any moment.

As he passes Sam, Bobby says, “Boy left him here because Erica’s allergic. Besides, he’s supposed to be my dog. I’m the one who paid for the mangy mutt.”

Bonham nudges Sam’s hand as it trots by and Sam figures it’s as close to an invitation as he’s going to get. Throwing a glance of his own at the kitchen door, he follows Bobby and the dog into the study, where a small TV is set up on a pile of books. He hovers by the doorway, watching Bobby sink down into an armchair. Bonham is in the man’s lap immediately, scrambling around for a good position. It’s really too big of an animal to be a lap dog, but Bobby just rolls his eyes and waits for Bonham to settle in.

“I wanted to thank you,” Sam says after a moment. “I didn’t. I guess I didn’t expect you to have my back like that.”

“Yeah, well, I ain’t forgiven you. And I don’t trust you. But Dean needs some closure on the damn mess you made of whatever there was between you, and I intend to see that he gets it.” Bobby twists his head around and tilts the brim of his cap up so Sam can see his eyes. “I could give a rat’s ass if you sleep well at night, Sam. In fact, the less sleep you get, the happier I’ll be. Are we clear?”

Sam has to try a few times before he can get his throat to work right, but finally he manages to swallow and nod.

“Yeah, we’re clear.”
Chapter 53

On Saturday morning, Sam weeldes Dean’s new cell number from Bobby and then uses one of the many phones Bobby has lined up in the kitchen to call his brother.

Dean answers on the second ring, sounding distracted but mostly cheerful as he says, “Morning, sunshine.”

Sam has been amping himself up for this conversation all morning, and he thought he was ready to face Dean again, but suddenly all of his carefully planned words are withering in his throat. He swallows a couple of times in an effort to recover while silence stretches out on his end of the line.

“Bobby?” Dean says now, sounding less cheerful and more focused. “You there?”

Sam tries again, opening his mouth, and then wordlessly drops his forehead against the wall. Bobby isn’t actually looking at Sam as he moves around the kitchen putting his breakfast together, but Sam can feel the man’s attention on him as he tightens his grip uselessly on the phone.

After another, longer pause, Dean’s voice comes again: “Sam.”

It isn’t a guess.

As though the sound of his own name has unlocked Sam’s voice, he immediately parts his lips and breathes, “Hey, Dean.”

On the other end of the phone, Dean grunts—a humorless, dull sound. “You know what, dude? Next time you get the urge to call me up and breathe at me, don’t.”

Sam can hear the intent to hang up clearly in his brother’s voice, and he hastens to say, “Wait! Look, I didn’t. I just wanted to check about today.”

“Today?” Dean echoes.

“The, uh, picnic? If I’m still invited?”

“Oh,” Dean says flatly. Nothing else, just that, and Sam’s palms start to sweat.

After a long moment, he shuts his eyes and makes himself say, “If you don’t want me to come, I won’t—”

“I told you I didn’t care,” Dean cuts in. “So if you want to bail, bail. But that’s your call, Sam. You don’t get to blame me for you being too chickenshit to show.”

Sam wants to protest—to say that Dean’s putting words into his mouth, that he isn’t trying to worm his way out of anything—and then lifts his head with a rueful clench of his jaw instead. Dean isn’t going to believe any of that, and besides, Sam didn’t call him up to fight.

“If it’s okay with you, then I’m coming,” he says, trying to keep his voice calm and confident.

“Okay, then,” Dean comes back immediately, his voice curt and dismissive. “Was that it?”

His brother’s attitude is kind of making Sam want to crawl under a rock and come out sometime next year, but he pushes the feeling aside to say, “No, I wanted to ask about meeting you at your place.”
Dean is silent on the other end of the line.

After almost a minute of waiting, Sam clears his throat and continues, “When you were here on Tuesday, I mentioned maybe I could head over there early. We could drive over together?”

There’s a beat of hesitation, during which Sam is certain Dean still isn’t going to answer, and then his brother says, “Be here by one or I’m leaving your ass behind.” He’s gone before Sam can confirm or thank him, Bobby’s phone immediately registering the disconnect with a click and a long, jarring tone.

As Sam hangs up the phone with a grimace, Bobby looks up from the counter where he’s been standing and shoveling cereal into his mouth and says, “So?”

Sam offers the man a weak grin as he runs his hand through his hair. “Guess I’m going to a picnic.”

The Impala isn’t anywhere to be seen when Sam pulls up in front of Dean’s house at half past noon. He was planning on just driving around the block a couple (dozen) times until one o’clock rolled around, but he pulls over immediately now, heart beating more quickly than before and stomach twisting nervously.

As he puts the truck in park, Dean’s garage door rolls up to reveal a black Hyundai Tucson and a wall lined with tools. Sam turns off the engine, slightly cheered by the sign of life (even if the Dean he remembers would have had a fit at the prospect of housing his baby so close to an SUV), and starts to unfold himself from the truck.

And then freezes with one foot on the pavement and the other on the running board when the front door opens and Erica bustles out with a stack of red Tupperware in her arms.

She spots him almost immediately—he’s hard to miss parked out in front like he is—and her steps falter. She recovers in the next instant, though, looking away from him and moving toward the garage a little more quickly than before.

Knowing that Dean isn’t dating her should probably make Sam more comfortable about interacting with the woman, but he doesn’t actually feel any more confident than he did last week. Maybe the situation would sit easier with him if he knew what she is to Dean. Still, he can’t hide out here forever, so after taking a couple of calming, deep breaths, Sam gets out of the truck and shuts the door behind him.

He didn’t take all that long deciding what to do, but Erica wasn’t dawdling herself and by the time Sam slowly begins to advance up the driveway, she has the Tucson loaded up and is already hurrying back toward the house.

“Hey,” he calls, lifting one hand in greeting. “Erica, right?”

Erica flicks her eyes at him and then disappears inside without responding. The door shuts behind her—not violently, but with a firmness that’s almost as good as a slam—and Sam drops his hand back to his side. After a moment, he shoves both hands into his pockets—he doesn’t know what else to do with them—and scuffs his foot against the driveway while glancing indecisively up and down the street.

Dean’s car is missing, which seems to indicate that he isn’t home. But Dean told Sam to meet him here, and anyway Sam has no clue where this picnic thing is. Bobby probably knows, but Bobby got called out on a hunt about half an hour before Sam left, and Sam knows better than to bother the man...
about something as trivial as directions right now.

And Dean said one o’clock. He said one, so he ... if he isn’t here now, then he must be coming back. Maybe he had to pick something up at the store?

When Erica reemerges from the house, this time carrying two oversized paper bags bulging with what seems to be chips, Sam is still standing at the foot of the driveway. She doesn’t look at him with a deliberate air that tells him she’s avoiding him, and in his uncertain state the snub hits harder than it should. He hasn’t felt like this much of an asshole since ... well, since he faced Dean down in Bobby’s kitchen on Tuesday.

Actually, he’s starting to get used to the feeling.

“So, uh,” Sam calls, making himself move further up the driveway toward the garage. “I’m supposed to be meeting Dean here for this picnic thing. Is he home?”

Erica tosses the bags into the backseat of the SUV and then turns to face him, one hand resting on the open door. “He got a call from Bob Brighton over at Park and Rec,” she announces. “Had to go over early.” While Sam frowns, wondering why Dean didn’t call Bobby’s to let him know, Erica adds, “He said that if you showed up I was supposed to give you directions.”

If Sam showed up.

Off the sudden, burning suspicion in his stomach, Sam asks, “When exactly did Bob call?”

Something in the way Erica is looking at Sam tells him she knows why he’s asking, but she meets his gaze unabashedly as she answers, “Around seven.”

Sam called his brother a quarter after nine. Which means that Dean already knew damned well that he wasn’t going to be here when he told Sam to come over.

Sam isn’t sure what his face looks like as he struggles to digest that nugget of information, but it must be pretty pitiful because Erica’s expression thaws slightly and she offers, “I’m heading over now. You can follow me if you want.”

“Uh, sure. That’d be great.”

Only ‘great’ isn’t the word for it. Seriously, what’s the point of trying if Dean’s going to fuck with him like this?

“Are you going to follow me over?”

Sam refocuses his attention outward again to find Erica watching him doubtfully. There’s more knowledge in her eyes than he wants there, and more uneasiness, and as Sam’s stomach pulls tight with shame, he wonders again how much Dean told her. How much she knows about him. About them.

Then Erica lifts her chin and says, “If you’re just jerking him around again, you better leave now.”

The shame in his stomach immediately chars into righteous anger—this woman doesn’t know him, no matter what Dean might have said—and Sam feels his jaw muscle twitching as he repeats, “I’ll follow you.”

He turns away without waiting for a response and walks back to his truck. He’s unable to keep his anger out of his stride as he goes, which leaves his gait choppy and stiff. When he climbs back into
the cab, he slams the door behind him before shooting a glance up the drive. Erica was watching him, but she gives a little flinch as he turns his head to look at her, then drops her chin and hurries back into the house.

Three trips out to the car later, she’s ready to leave and Sam is just as angry as ever—angrier, actually. But the target of his fury has shifted—first from Erica to Dean, but it has finally settled where it belongs, on himself. Everything that’s happening now, as maddening and frustrating and hurtful as it is, is his own fault.

Sam’s clearly the one at fault here. He took advantage of Dean, fucked him up worse than the demon ever did, and then he just—he bailed. He had reasons for going—good ones—but he knows how it must have looked to his brother. He knows that it must have felt like being rejected and discarded. And Sam probably could have fixed that—or at least alleviated it—with the phone call he never managed to make.

He had reasons for that as well, of course—too frightened of being drawn back at first, and then too full of self-loathing, and then too far gone beneath the alluring thrum of power, and then back to being afraid again. None of those reasons are good enough to justify what he put Dean through, though, and as he follows Erica’s Tucson across town, Sam reminds himself again that he deserves this.

He deserves everything Dean and those close to Dean can dish out, and he’s going to stay here and take it if it kills him.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Humboldt Park is bigger than Sam expected it to be—large enough to contain a baseball diamond, a small wading pool for kids, a pond with a wooden diving float, and a picnicking area dotted with picnic tables, barbeque pits, and towering evergreens for shade. The parking lot is already jammed full of cars, and Sam looks around for the Impala as he pulls in but can’t find her familiar lines anywhere.

That doesn’t mean anything, though: the local vehicles tend toward the tall and hulking—SUVs and pick-up trucks that make Sam’s own ride seem like a go-kart—and the Impala, distinctive as she is, is also short enough to get lost in the shuffle.

There are people everywhere as Sam searches for a space—a great number of them wearing patriot-themed t-shirts or carrying miniature American flags—and Sam realizes with a start that it must be July 4th, or close enough for town planning purposes. He glances down at himself quickly—jeans, scuffed shoes—and thanks whoever was looking out for him this morning for making him choose the white t-shirt instead of the grey. At least now he has a chance of blending in with the crowd—and crowd is the only word for it. Humboldt’s entire population must be here right now, and some of the surrounding farmers as well.

Sam eventually finds a space just a few spots down from where Erica is parking and steps out onto the pavement in time to duck a low-flying Frisbee. The kids playing with it—high schoolers, Sam guesses—shout out an apology as they sprint past in pursuit. Sam watches as the kids narrowly avoid the Dodge Caravan edging down the aisle and then waits for it to finish nosing past his space before stepping out himself.

He doesn’t actually need Erica’s guidance anymore now that he’s here, but after a brief hesitation he heads over to her Tucson anyway. Dean might not be dating the woman, but he’s still living with her. And it’s obvious, from seeing them together last week, that Dean cares about her.
If there’s going to be room in Dean’s life for Sam, then Sam is going to have to at least get along with Erica. He hasn’t made a great start in that department, but there’s no time like the present to try and fix things.

“Can I help?” he asks, coming up alongside her just as she’s pulling the back door open.

Erica gives him a quick, searching glance, but after a moment of consideration—he can practically see her calculating how long it would take her to unload on her own—she nods curtly. “Hold out your hands,” she orders, and then starts piling him high with Tupperware and plastic bags.

As Sam obediently juggles his load, he clears his throat and offers, “So, where’d you meet Dean?”

“Hospital,” Erica answers, reaching deeper into the backseat for another container. Her voice is casual, the word thrown away like it doesn’t mean anything, but Sam’s skin goes cold despite the heat. He was sweating a moment ago, but the air feels frozen now, and his insides are a hard, congealed mess.

“When was he in the hospital?”

The question comes out as a croaked whisper, almost too soft to be heard, but Sam can’t manage more than that. He’s too busy riffling through possibilities in his head, and craning his neck around in search of Dean.

Whatever Erica is talking about is long in the past, Sam knows that, but it doesn’t feel like history to him. It feels like the immediate present, like Dean is in trouble and needs him—like he needs to get to Dean now and make sure he’s okay. Sam is pretty sure his brother won’t look too kindly on being patted down and felt up in the middle of a Fourth of July picnic, which means they have a problem because right now he doesn’t know that he’ll be able to help himself.

A hospital. What the fuck could have been bad enough to drive Dean back to one of those?

The sound of the door shutting snaps Sam’s attention back down and he finds Erica looking up at him. Her expression isn’t any warmer than it was back at the house, despite his attempts to be helpful. When she sees she has his attention, she sniffs and pushes past him, holding tight to her own load. The answer she throws over her shoulder as she goes is as much an accusation as anything else, and it drives the breath from Sam’s lungs, the strength from his hands.

“When you weren’t here.”

Sam is still shaken half an hour later as he winds his way through the crowds in search of his brother. Everyone here seems to know everyone else, which is way too Leave It To Beaver for Sam’s comfort, and all the bright colors and smiles are giving the day a surreal tint. This kind of small town Americana shouldn’t exist, Sam thinks. Not in the same world where Dean could have been so thoroughly broken. Not in the same world where there are demons and ghosts and bloody, mauled corpses.

This isn’t the world Sam knows, isn’t one he’s at all familiar with. And yet as he searches for his brother, he’s shaken by the increasingly vivid sensation that it’s his own life that doesn’t belong. This is real, here and now, and everything that came before—everything Sam is and knows—is nothing more than a bad dream.

Worse, Sam is sure that everyone can see it on him, as though all of the blood and gunpowder is staining his face and hands. It feels like everyone's staring at the switchblade in his back pocket and
the larger hunting knife strapped to the inside of his ankle—should have left them at home, or at least in the truck, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to do so. And then there are the more ephemeral taints he knows he carries, the demon blood and the blind, all-consuming hunger for Dean, and they see that as well, they know, and Sam has never felt his size so conspicuously before.

It’s almost enough to make him wish he’d stuck close to Erica, despite the hostility she was radiating toward him as he helped her set the food up on one of the picnic tables. He considers turning back to find her, considers turning tail and fleeing. Or at least closing himself back up in his truck until he’s calmed down again.

For the first time in years, the meditative calm he’s held deep within himself is slipping, and he’s sure that he’s going to do something stupid. He’s going to slip up, fall off the wagon and—

And then, unexpectedly, a clump of people shift in front of him and there’s Dean.

Dean may be sitting on a rock, but now that Sam has caught sight of him, he doesn’t understand how it took him this long to locate his brother. Dean’s the only person Sam has seen all day not wearing anything patriotic—no flags; no red, white or blue; no plastic star necklace that a couple of older ladies are passing out to everyone with a pulse.

Instead, Dean is dressed in jeans and a plain black t-shirt. He’s wearing his sunglasses again, and there’s that glint of silver around his neck—the St. George medal, Sam guesses. His shoes are the clunky half-boots Sam remembers his brother preferring when they were hunting together, and when you add in the leather cuffs, Dean looks a little too rough and dangerous to fit comfortably with this gathering.

Except Dean is grinning in that disarming way he has, and casually gesturing with a can of beer as an older man with a potbelly and a receding hairline pokes at some meat cooking in a grill pit at their feet. It’s clear at once that Dean is offering advice, because Pot Belly is nodding and when Dean leans to one side and comes up with what looks like a vinegar bottle, Pot Belly accepts it without hesitation and upends it over the grill.

There’s a whooshing sound as the flames shoot up and Dean leans away from the fire, laughing and waving a hand to shoo away the smoke. His gaze moves casually over the crowd as he relaxes again. Sam can’t see his brother’s eyes behind the shades, but he knows exactly when they land on him because Dean goes still. The smile on his brother’s face first stiffens and then fades. All of the easy-going exuberance he was radiating a moment ago is gone, locked away behind high, protective walls.

Sam’s insides go cold and hard as he realizes that this is what Dad warned him about. This is him being here and taking away Dean’s stability and happiness, and he should go. He should just leave and not come back—for real, this time. If he stays, he’s just going to fuck this up for his brother.

But he can’t move with Dean’s gaze pinning him like that, and after a few shallow, painful breaths, he comes face to face with the uncomfortable realization that he can’t run anymore. Dean can send him away if he wants—and if Dean gives him a direct order, Sam will leave without any argument or hesitation—but when it comes to taking the initiative, Sam is done. If things fail between them, it won’t be because he gave up too soon.

Still looking in Sam’s direction, Dean murmurs something to Pot Belly and then pushes to his feet. Beer in hand, he heads toward Sam with measured, careful steps. It can’t be more than five or six yards, but it takes a while for Dean to make the trip because people keep stopping him. Sam can’t make out any of those conversations past the roaring in his ears—can’t tear his eyes from the slight, private smile his brother wears as he responds.
He wonders if he’ll ever get used to seeing Dean. If being in his brother’s presence is ever going to stop hitting him like a train wreck. He wonders if the wretched, sore hole in his chest is ever going to fill when Dean looks at him, instead of emptying further.

Finally, Dean is standing in front of him. He’s a foot away from Sam now, eyes still concealed behind his sunglasses, but Sam can feel his brother’s gaze darting up and down his body—Dean looking for something out of place, for some reason to tell Sam to leave, that he doesn’t belong.

Or maybe it’s Sam searching for the reason, because he knows he should leave. But he won’t. He can’t.

“So,” Dean says after too long of a pause. “You decided to show.”

The faint pulse of anger that flickers to life in Sam’s stomach surprises him—after a week of putting up with Bobby’s needling, as well as his own dark thoughts, Sam’s not used to feeling anything but guilt. But he’s also getting pretty tired of people thinking every word out of his mouth is a lie.

And Dean deliberately set him up today, telling Sam to meet him at the house when he knew full well he wouldn’t be there. When he had to know Sam would feel awkward and uncomfortable talking with Erica. Plus, Dean knows how Sam feels about being around so many strangers at once—he reassured Sam often enough when they were about to start classes at a new school.

It’s almost enough to make him think Dean’s setting him up to fail.

But Dean wants Sam to lose his cool—Sam can tell from the expectant tilt of his brother’s head—so he clenches his jaw shut on the frustrated recriminations that want to come tumbling out. After a few seconds of struggle, he manages a nod and then goes back to waiting.

Dean turns away—no welcome, no instruction given. There’s no telling whether he wants Sam to follow or not, but Sam isn’t about to let his brother ditch him here—and besides, Dean hasn’t told him to get lost—so he lurches forward, taking a couple of hurried steps to catch up.

Without glancing over, Dean lifts the can of beer to his mouth and tips it back. Sam can’t help but watch the way his brother’s lower lip catches on the edge of the can, the way Dean’s throat works as he swallows. There’s sweat in his hair, and this close Sam can smell him—still achingly familiar, even without the usual hints of leather and gun oil.

“You want a beer?” Dean asks as he lowers the can again.

Sam shakes his head, realizes that he doesn’t know whether Dean’s paying enough attention to have caught the motion in his peripheral vision (the old Dean would have, but Sam’s on shaky ground with this new version of his brother), and says, “I don’t drink anymore.”

“Yeah, I heard that.”

It’s said just as coolly and impersonally as everything else, Dean’s defenses running at full speed and strength, and Sam wonders whether his brother is lying now or if his earlier question was some kind of test. He doesn’t get a chance to ask, though, because a middle-aged woman with a bad perm and about fifty extra pounds on her hurries over. She’s wearing a blue t-shirt and red shorts, with one of those plastic star necklaces around her throat, and she doesn’t hesitate before putting a hand on Dean’s arm.

Sam tenses, alarmed on his brother’s behalf, but Dean doesn’t look frightened. He does stop, halted by the touch, but there isn’t anything but casual curiosity on his face as he looks down at the woman.
“Dean,” she says, sounding out of breath and panicked. “Randy can’t find the list.”

Dean’s brow furrows. “What, for the show?” When the woman nods quickly, he eases his arm from her grasp so he can pat his back jeans pocket. “Got it covered. After last year, I kept a spare. Tell him to find me after dinner. I’m not giving it to him before then.”

“Oh, bless you,” the woman replies with a sigh of relief. Crisis averted, she finally turns her attention to Sam. An appreciative smile curves her lips as she looks over his chest and up to his face. “Who’s your friend?”

“Don’t get any ideas, Frannie,” Dean says dryly. “He’s just passing through.” Taking another sip from his beer, he slants a glance sideways at Sam. The smile glinting around the edges of the can is aluminum sharp.

This time, the burn of anger in Sam’s gut is stronger and he forces a wide grin on his own face while stepping forward and sticking out his hand.

“Actually, I just moved here,” he corrects. “Bobby Singer’s renting me a room.” He hesitates, struck by the realization that he doesn’t know what alias Dean is using (or whether he wants to link their surnames together), and then simply says, “I’m Sam.”

“Frannie Rusch,” the woman replies, taking his hand and giving it three or four enthusiastic pumps. “I must say, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

The familiar, knowing look that she shoots in Dean’s direction strikes Sam as odd until he recognizes it from the time Jess introduced him to her family. They were just friends then, nothing official yet, but Jess’ mom spent most of the evening looking back and forth between them with the same pleased smile Frannie’s wearing now. Finding that smile here is disorienting—more because Frannie clearly thinks Dean is gay than because she’s assuming they’re together.

Sam glances sideways, wondering how his brother is taking this new development and hoping, with a nervous flutter, that there’ll be some faint indication of warmth in his response. Dean’s expression is impossible to read behind the sunglasses, but his caustic snort isn’t.

“Sam and I used to hunt together,” he says, his voice deceptively light. “And that’s it.” He gestures at Frannie with the beer, pointer finger wagging a reprimand. “So keep your dirty thoughts to yourself.”

Frannie laughs. “Can’t blame me for trying, love. You know everyone would love to see you settled down. You and Erica both.”

“Erica and I are doing pretty good as we are,” Dean replies. His voice is sharp suddenly, the light-hearted mask from a moment before discarded, and Frannie’s eyebrows start to draw together in concern. Dean ducks his head, mouth pursing in a way that tells Sam he’s annoyed with himself for the slip, and then shifts the beer to his other hand so that he can grab Sam’s elbow.

“Anyway,” he says. “I’ve got to introduce Sam to the guys. Don’t forget to tell Randy to come see me when he’s ready to set up.”

Frannie opens her mouth to respond, but Dean is already steering Sam away through the crowd. Sam can tell that his brother’s on edge—a muscle in Dean’s jaw is jumping and the stiff lines of his shoulders are radiating tension—and he casts his mind around for a way to pull Dean back. Something trivial that he can say to diffuse at least a little of the awkwardness.

After a few seconds, he comes up with, “Sorry—I didn’t think about how I should introduce myself. What name are you using?”
It seems like a harmless enough question, but Dean’s grip tightens on Sam’s arm, and he jerks him harshly to one side. They’re pushing out of the crowd now, Dean ignoring all the friendly greetings directed his way, and Sam stumbles a little as he’s dragged toward an isolated stand of trees. Dean tosses his beer into a trash barrel as they pass it, and then they’re on the other side of the trees and Dean turns, shoving Sam up against one of the trunks.

Sam grunts at the impact—Dean wasn’t exactly being gentle—but doesn’t move away as Dean steps in close and growls, “I don’t give a shit what name you use. You’re not gonna be around long enough for anyone to worry about it.”

“I am—Dean, I told you, I—”

“Dean Dean Dean!” Something waist-high and brightly dressed—a kid, Sam understands belatedly—barrels into Dean suddenly from the side. Dean lets the impact drive him a couple of steps back, putting some distance between himself and Sam, and then grunts as a second boy collides with his legs from the other direction. The new boy doesn’t hesitate before trying to climb up Dean’s body, and as Sam watches with wide eyes, Dean crouches and lets the boy scramble up onto his back.

“Dean!” the first boy says again, tugging at Dean’s cuff-clad wrist. “Mommy said we could go swim if someone watches us, and you said you’d show us how to cannonball.”

“You sure I said that?” Dean asks, contorting a hand behind him to steady the boy clambering up onto his shoulders. “Cause I seem to remember saying I’d use you as a cannonball. Fire you right up over the treeline—kapow!”

“Please?” the second boy begs as Dean straightens again. He has his hands twisted in Dean’s hair, hanging on, and Sam knows they’re just kids, can’t be registering as any kind of threat, but it still makes his eyes tear to see Dean clearly having no problem whatsoever with so much contact.

Dean doesn’t look back at Sam, all of his focus on the boys as he says, “Isn’t Hank on lifeguard duty? Why don’t you ask him?”

“Hank’s a son of a bitch,” the boy on Dean’s shoulders replies, and even before his brother’s flush registers, Sam knows they’re just kids, can’t be registering as any kind of threat, but it still makes his eyes tear to see Dean clearly having no problem whatsoever with so much contact.

“Jacob! Kyle!” That’s a woman’s voice, and Sam turns to see a younger woman with long ginger hair running toward them. The boy on Dean’s back hunches over, clearly doing his best to be inconspicuous, but boy hanging onto Dean’s hand just offers the woman a huge smile and waves.

“Hi, mom!” he calls. “We found him!”

“I can see that,” the woman replies, and then lifts her gaze to Dean with an apologetic smile. “Sorry. They were off before I could tell them not to bother you.”

“Don’t worry about it, Susan,” Dean says, but he crouches and reaches up to give the boy on his shoulders a tap on one hip. The boy makes a disappointed noise, but climbs off without any further protest.

The woman—Susan—shoots Sam a quick look while gathering her kids up. “Frannie told me you
had company,” she says, and that—that was fast.

Dean’s smile has gone stiff again. “He’s just a hunting buddy.”

But Susan is already moving toward Sam, one hand extended and the other holding onto her boys, and she has the same pleased, knowing look on her face that Frannie did. “I’m Susan McAffry. We live down the street from Dean.”

“Sam,” Sam says, giving her hand a quick shake. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Susan answers, and then gives Dean a poorly concealed thumbs up and a wink. Turning back to Sam and regaining her grip on her boys, she smiles and says, “Well, we’re going to get going. Enjoy the picnic!”

Sam watches Susan head back toward the crowd for a minute before chancing a glance back at his brother. Dean is standing stiffly, both hands clenched into fists. Sam isn’t sure what’s keeping him from hauling off and punching something (Sam, probably).

“So,” Sam says after a few moments. “They seem nice.”

Dean gives his head a shake and snorts, pushing two fingers up beneath his glasses to rub at the bridge of his nose. His mouth is twisted into an expression that makes Sam’s stomach contort unhappily.

“Do you—” Sam hesitates—this offer didn’t go over well when he made it this morning—and then finishes, “I can go.”

“Yeah, cause that’s going to convince everyone we’re not fucking,” Dean says bitterly, and then shakes his head again when Sam tries to apologize. “Come on. Said I’d introduce you to the guys, didn’t I?”

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‘The guys’ turn out to be the group of men around the grill. Dean trots out the old ‘hunting buddies’ line as soon as they get there and then, when the men start quizzing Sam about what kind of ammunition he prefers, Dean slips away and disappears into the crowd.

Sam sees his brother maybe twice over the next four hours, and always at a distance. He isn’t given time to fret about that, though, because as soon as Dean is out of sight, it turns into open season on Sam. Everyone seems desperate to pick Sam’s brain about Dean’s sketchy past and, as far as the women are concerned, their supposed love life.

Sam spends the first few hours doing everything he can to convince Dean’s friends and neighbors that he isn’t dating Dean (although the temptation to let that assumption ride is almost overwhelming), and eventually people seem to get the picture and stop hinting. Once that problem has been addressed, it’s easy enough for Sam to turn the locals’ clumsy interrogations around and compile some of his own information on his brother’s new life.

By the time they’re all sitting down to eat—Dean next to Erica at the picnic table furthest from where Sam ends up sitting—Sam has a thumbnail sketch of Dean Singer, Bobby’s nephew. He’s a military brat, which isn’t too far from the truth. He’s an excellent cook and has a reputation for being able to fix just about anything mechanical that isn’t working right. He has quite a few friends in town, is generally well-liked, but there’s no one he’s particularly close to, except for Erica. More than a few of the women are carrying a torch for him, despite the fact that everyone is convinced he’s playing for the other team.
The day Dean Singer turned eighteen, or so the story runs, he joined the Rangers for a tour in the Middle East. He was a couple weeks away from coming home when his unit came under heavy fire and he ended up as a POW for seven months. The story has Bobby written all over it, and Sam has to hand it to the man—it’s the perfect cover to explain away Dean’s scars and behavioral quirks.

The gay thing is ... odd. Not just because Dean hasn’t ever shown any interest in any males who weren’t Sam. It’s the level of acceptance that really throws him—in such a small, conservative town, Sam expects hatred and disgust, but instead the worst he finds is mild discomfort. He guesses that some of that acceptance stems from Dean’s apparent celibacy—it’s easier to be tolerant when the object of your prejudice is kept out of sight—but a lot of it has to do with last year’s flood, and the way Dean risked his own life to save a group of local children from drowning. It’s hard to be disgusted by a local hero.

That particular act of heroism landed Dean in the hospital for a few days—hypothermia, pneumonia and, as if that weren’t already enough, a pretty bad concussion—and Sam wonders if that’s when he met Erica.

He tries to ask Dean about it after dinner, but before he can get close enough to do more than say his brother’s name, Dean is moving away with a group of men for an impromptu baseball game. Seeing Dean with a bat in his hands brings back unpleasant memories of that night in Alexandria—scent of the demon in Sam’s mouth, heat of flames on his face—but Sam is able to push them away with a little bit of effort.

Dean was never into sports when they were growing up, but it turns out he’s as good at this as he is at everything he tries his hand at. Sam watches his brother from the sidelines and tries to find any signs of lingering weakness from the crash or the demon’s attacks, and he can’t. Dean is moving just as easily as he always has, sprinting halfway across the field to get to a fly ball just in time and stealing third base when the opposing team’s pitcher isn’t looking.

The sun has set by the time the game ends (Sam isn’t sure who won, or whether anyone was even bothering to keep score), and then there are fireworks—the show Dean mentioned earlier, probably—and Sam stands in the middle of the crowd and tries to enjoy it. But he feels too alone in the quiet sea of shadowy figures, and he can’t help scanning the upturned faces for his brother.

When he finally locates Dean, he wishes he hadn’t.

Dean is sitting on top of a picnic table with Erica leaning back between his legs and resting against his chest. Dean has his arms around her, holding her loosely around her waist. His mouth is near her ear as he murmurs something while red and blue flowers appear in the sky above. The colors catch in Dean’s hair, painting it with surreal, flickering color, and Sam’s hands clench reflexively with the desire to rip Erica away from his brother and pull Dean into his arms instead. Where he belongs, damn it.

As though he can feel Sam’s gaze, Dean’s head comes up and his face turns in Sam’s direction. The sunglasses are gone—have been for some time—but the muted illumination from the fireworks isn’t enough for Sam to read any emotion in his brother’s expression, and besides, Dean’s too far away to make out any details. The moment drags out, Dean’s gaze remaining steady and unwavering—challenging, Sam thinks—and finally Sam can’t take it anymore. Eyes stinging and too wet, he turns his face away and crosses one arm over his stomach, as though that will calm the unhappy, anxious fluttering in his gut.

For what has to be the hundredth time today, he tells himself that he shouldn’t be here. Dean very obviously doesn’t want him around. Sam can’t even figure out why his brother invited him, unless this is Dean’s way of getting back at him—of hurting Sam by rubbing his nose in just how much
Dean has moved on, how little he needs Sam.

“Enjoying the fireworks?”

Sam jerks his head to the side, too startled by the nearness of his brother’s voice to even consider hiding the tear tracks on his cheeks. Dean notices, of course, his gaze flicking quickly across Sam’s face before returning to his eyes. But there’s no hint of emotion in his expression—nothing to indicate whether the effect he’s having is making him happy or if it still bothers him to see Sam upset.

It’s yet another indication of the distance between them, and Sam sucks in a shaky breath and looks away, up toward the sky. Dean can probably see the fresh moisture on his face even more clearly like this, but Sam feels less conspicuous with his own eyes fixed on the vivid blooms of color exploding above the pond. His body is shaking—minute tremors running through his muscles that he hopes it’s too dark for Dean to catch.

Thoughts of running return, but they’re nothing but wistful daydreams. Sam just doesn’t have the strength to escape his brother’s orbit again, no matter how much it hurts to stay close. No matter how quickly he’s being burnt by Dean’s newfound light.

“They’re nice,” he rasps as another blossom—this one gold mingled with green—flares to life. “You designed them?”

It’s less of a guess than a request for confirmation. There have been too many hints in that direction today—the phone call this morning, Dean’s conversation with Frannie, stray snatches of speculation he overheard about Singer’s Show. And it might just be wishful thinking, but Sam thinks he can catch a glimpse of the brother he knew in the pyrotechnics above—Dean putting Dad’s explosives training to use.

“Bobby helped,” Dean replies, which means that, yes, he did. Bobby maybe sat with Dean and helped package the rockets, measured out the powders and cut the fuses to the right lengths, but Bobby just doesn’t have the creative reach for the impossible streaks of color exploding overhead.

There’s a moment of silence where Sam is hyper aware of how close Dean is standing, of how little he’d have to move to brush their shoulders together, and then Dean says, “I thought you’d have left by now.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.” Sam doesn’t say it with any bitterness—it isn’t an attack, isn’t even a complaint. It’s just an attempt to get some kind of response from Dean—some clue as to what his brother is thinking. What he wants.

But Dean’s quiet again.

Sam chances a glance, and Dean isn’t watching the fireworks. He’s staring at Sam, his own face still and unreadable. Sam shifts under the scrutiny, wiping at his eyes and cheeks with one arm. When he looks back over, Dean is walking away, heading for the parking lot.

Pain shoots through Sam’s chest—fresh wounds from yet another rejection—but before he can finish processing what just happened, Dean tosses a glance over his shoulder. There’s more of the brother Sam remembers there than Sam has seen since he came back, and he’s moving before he knows he means to, easing his way through the crowd in Dean’s wake. He catches up to his brother at the edge of the parking lot and cautiously falls into step beside him. When Dean doesn’t snap at him to back off, some of the nervous tension in Sam’s muscles eases, letting him straighten for the first time in hours.
He isn’t surprised when Dean’s trajectory takes them to the Impala.

The car is hidden between two oversized pick-ups, just as Sam suspected it might be, and Dean eels his way between his baby and one of the trucks without slowing. Sam follows, surreptitiously letting his fingers brush the Impala’s smooth side, and comes to a stop next to his brother. Dean sits on the hood, his back turned on the show behind them, and trains his eyes on the flat, dark roll of land to the east.

They’ve had so many conversations like this—just the two of them and the car, which has heard so many secrets over the years—and Sam, standing with one hand shoved into his pocket, feels comforted enough by the familiarity of the moment to offer, “I’m glad you asked me to come.”

The look Dean gives him in return is incredulous, like he knows exactly how much fun Sam had at the Humboldt Fourth of July Picnic. Sam guesses that he probably does. Dean was always good at tailing people. He could have been keeping tabs on Sam the whole time without Sam realizing. It both hurts and reassures, the thought of Dean watching him from a distance throughout the day. Evaluating his performance. Judging him.

Waiting for him to fuck up.

“What do you want here, Sam?” Dean asks now. He asked the same question at Bobby’s last Tuesday, but it sounds different tonight, and Sam understands that this time his brother actually wants an answer.

“I want us to be brothers again,” he answers softly. It’s half the truth, anyway.

But Dean narrows his eyes, distrustful, and presses, “That’s it? Just brothers?”

Sam drops his own gaze, knowing that he won’t be able to manage the lie and meet his brother’s eyes at the same time. He opens his mouth to agree—just brothers, that’s all he wants from Dean—and the words stick in his throat. He thinks about trying to force them out anyway—they’d sound funny, but Dean might be willing to buy it—and then realizes that he doesn’t want to. He’s through dwelling in the deceitful shades of grey that have always clung to both their lives. He’s done trying to fool himself and everyone around him about his heart and intentions.

There have been more than enough lies and half-truths between him and Dean. It’s time to clear the air.

“No,” Sam says, and now that he’s confessing, the words come out easy and clean. “I still want you. I’m still in love with you.”

“You don’t even know me, Sam.”

It hurts worse than anything that’s come before, that statement, and Sam’s head comes up with a jerk.

“Of course I know—”

“I’m not that guy anymore,” Dean interrupts.

His face is as empty as ever, but for the first time, Sam can hear something other than anger or apathy in his brother’s voice. For the first time, there’s a husk of some deeper, rawer emotion. Something like pain.

“That guy you ditched?” Dean continues bitterly. “The one who was too pathetic and broken for you to deal with? He’s dead. I salted and burned the fucker’s corpse.”
Sam can’t deny that his brother has changed, but he doesn’t think Dean has it right either. Sam has seen glimpses of his brother in the man beside him—heard about him in some of the stories the townspeople told him today. No, Dean is still here. The brother Sam fell in love with is still here.

But if it makes Dean feel better to think that other man is gone, then Sam isn’t going to upset him by arguing the point. Instead he says, “That’s not why I left.”

Dean turns his head further away, lifting one hand in a half-hearted waving gesture to dismiss the protest. “Whatever you’re looking for,” he says. “Whatever you want. You’re not gonna find it here.”

Sam studies the line of his brother’s jaw in the final, vivid plume of color overhead, and as the last of the fireworks fades amidst the clapping and cheering from the gathered crowd, he whispers, “I’m just looking for you, Dean. And you can—you can punish me all you want, man, but if you want me to leave then you’re going to have to say it, because otherwise I’m staying.”

Dean’s quiet for a long moment, watching over his shoulder as his friends and neighbors begin to filter back toward the cars. Finally, when the sounds of shouting kids and slamming doors come to them, he gives himself a little shake and straightens.

“We’ll see,” he rasps, pushing off the hood and moving around to the driver’s side. He jerks the driver’s side door open, not looking at Sam, and slides behind the wheel.

Sam wants to run around and put himself in the shotgun seat where he belongs, but he resists the impulse. As Dean starts the engine, he steps back instead, going up onto the grassy margin and giving his brother space.

The knowledge that it’s the right thing to do doesn’t help the broken ache in his chest as he watches Dean back out and drive away.
Sam prays things will change after the picnic. He thinks they might—caught a glimmer of hope in the way Dean actually deigned to speak with him. In the way Dean seemed to be listening, even if he might not have believed everything he heard. But Dean is back to his sullen, uncommunicative self when he shows up at Bobby’s on the following Tuesday—barely acknowledging Sam’s presence as he cooks dinner and chats with Bobby and plays with the dog.

Throughout the meal, he sits with his body tilted away from Sam and his eyes locked on Bobby, talking about people and events Sam doesn’t know or recognize. Dean monopolizes Bobby’s attention easily, and he won’t even let Bonham offer Sam his own brand of comfort—the scraps Sam tries to offer the dog under the table aren’t any competition for Dean’s talented fingers scratching the tricky, blissful spot behind Bonham’s ear.

It doesn’t take long for Sam to figure out that he’s being deliberately excluded—not just from the conversation and the dinner, but from his brother’s life. He left the picnic thinking he’d accomplished something—that he had made the critical first steps to rebuilding some bridges—but now he realizes that he was only fooling himself. Dean’s parting words, when he plays them over in his head, start to sound more like a rejection than a challenge. He begins to remember that Dean didn’t want him at the picnic in the first place: that Dean set him up to fail.

And he’s clearly mad as hell that Sam managed to avoid that particular trap.

Sam doesn’t get why his brother doesn’t just tell him to get out. He doesn’t understand why Dean keeps coming back week after week, if he’s only going to spend the time rubbing Sam’s nose in how much he isn’t forgiven and doesn’t belong. Dean is doing everything in his power to make Sam give up and leave—short only of saying the words, and Sam doesn’t know whether that’s because Dean doesn’t understand that they’re necessary.

Or maybe this isn’t about making Sam leave at all.

Maybe this is about punishment.

Agonizing as they are, though, Sam lives for Tuesdays. He accepts his ostracism in silence, sitting at the kitchen table and soaking up his brother’s voice, the cadence of Dean’s words. He learns names slowly, recognizing those that come up again and again, and begins to piece together a fragmented image of his brother’s life—friends, coworkers, the repetition of routine. Erica’s name comes up most often, followed by ‘Winston’—Potbelly from the Fourth of July Picnic, if Sam is remembering right—and then ‘Bull’ and ‘Tex’, which Sam really hopes are nicknames.

After dinner, Dean always does the dishes before heading out into the salvage yard with Bonham. Sam watches from the backdoor as his brother plays tag with the dog, or fetch, or some frenetic, canine version of hide and seek. Whatever the game, he knows better than to try joining in; when he reminds Dean of his presence, his brother always stiffens up and leaves, no matter how pitifully Bonham dogs his steps on the way to the car.

But even when Sam stays out of the way, the time inevitably comes when Dean gets into the Impala and drives away, leaving Bonham whimpering sadly and snuffling at the faint tracks left in the gravel drive by the Impala’s wheels. Sam stands beside him and does his best to take his brother’s departures with a stoic, calm expression.

From the way that Bobby always snorts and says he isn’t sure which of them is a sorrier sight, he
isn’t succeeding.

The rest of the week is spent in a holding pattern. Sam trudges around the salvage yard, pitching in a hand here or there but mostly just waiting for his brother to come back. He plays with Bonham, reads Bobby’s books, and thinks about Dean. He calls Andy at least once a day, and then finds some excuse to hang up whenever his friend tries to ask how things are going on Sam’s end.

Sometimes, Sam thinks about heading into town and going to the Municipal Bar for lunch. It wouldn’t technically be stalking Dean, since he has no idea what his brother’s work schedule is.

Still, the intent would be there, and Sam knows exactly how Dean would feel if they did run into each other. He doesn’t want to do that to his brother. He wants to give Dean his space—let Dean come to grips with the fact that Sam is here, and that he isn’t going to leave.

When Dean is ready, he’ll invite Sam over on his own.

Except the weeks turn into months, and although Dean is gradually relaxing into their Tuesday night dinners, he hasn’t shown any signs of warming toward Sam.

Dealing with Bobby is easier than dealing with his brother—mostly because Sam is used to the man’s gruff demeanor. Bobby is only occasionally sharper than usual with Sam—most often on Tuesday afternoon, just before Dean’s arrival. Sam is heartened by the slow, steady thaw between them—helped on its way, he’s sure, by the fact that they’re living in such close quarters.

It’s harder to maintain any kind of strong, negative emotion when you have to live with someone day in and day out.

Even so, it’s mid September before Bobby finally waves an olive branch—on a day dry enough and hot enough that the air itself seems parched. It’s late afternoon, and Sam’s mouth feels covered with dust as he sits on the couch with Bonham’s head on one thigh and a book to his right. He’s paging through the old text for Bobby—both of them pitching in on a hunt for one of Bobby’s old hunting buddies. The man—Graham something-or-other—called earlier this morning, looking for information on a four-legged critter with a sweet tooth and a taste for blood, and Bobby didn’t waste any time putting Sam to work.

This is a first for Sam: researching without having to worry about his own ass being on the line, or about Dean’s safety. He never really liked the task before—did it without grumbling, but only because someone had to. Because Dad and Dean were both too eager to run in with guns blazing, and if he didn’t slow them down, then no one would.

He’s surprised to realize he enjoys it now. He actually likes crosschecking and browsing through musty, yellowed pages. He likes piecing the puzzle together, now that he doesn’t have to worry about the bloody, frantic finish.

He’s thoroughly engrossed in a passage about barghests when Bobby clears his throat and says, “I still ain’t happy with what you did.”

Sam glances up to find the man looking at him—Bobby might have been watching for some time now, for all Sam knows. He purses his lips uncertainly, fingers smoothing over the open pages of the book lying on the couch to his right. Bonham gives a muffled snort and resettles his head.

“‘Well?’” Bobby demands after a few moments of silence.

“What do you want me to say?” Sam asks, bewildered. “I mean, I’m not happy with what I did either, but I can’t take it back.”
“You could start with, ‘Thanks for forgiving me, even though I’m just a pea-brained chucklehead with no more sense than a damned dog.’”

But the words carry a fondness that hasn’t been directed toward Sam in a long time, and a warm, achy glow spreads through his chest. It hurts too much to grin the way he wants to, but he manages a soft smile as he says, “Thanks, Bobby.”

Bobby grunts and drops his eyes with an uncomfortable scowl. “Yeah, well. Figure your brother’s punishing you enough for the both of us.”

He has a point. Dean’s been doing an excellent job reminding Sam just how thoroughly he fucked up. Just excluding Sam from the conversation isn’t enough anymore—hasn’t been for weeks now. As though infuriated by the lack of response his initial attempts were getting, Dean has started digging around in the open, aching wounds in Sam’s chest. He keeps talking about desertions and betrayals and retelling old hunting stories with Sam’s role completely erased—like it was always just Dean and Dad, and Sam never existed at all.

While he cooks, Dean has also taken to offering off-key renderings of songs like *Leaving on A Jet Plane*, and *You Ain’t the First*, and *Runaway*. The songs are sung just loudly enough for Sam to catch every one of the applicable lyrics from his place out in the living room. It’s maddening—Dean doesn’t even *like* Bon Jovi, damn it. Then again, he doesn’t seem to be too particular about what sort of ammunition he’s firing in Sam’s direction these days.

He’d probably be singing Rihanna’s *Take A Bow* if he knew the song existed.

Worst of all, though, is the way Dean greets Sam every Tuesday without fail—getting out of the car and walking past him without slowing. Without any more than a quick, disinterested glance and a caustic, “You’re still here, huh?”

Like Sam is some freeloading distant relative who won’t go away.

Bobby keeps watching it all without comment, but a little over a month after his heart-to-heart with Sam—on a Tuesday night in late October—he finally decides to step in.

Sam is watching his brother play with Bonham through the screen door, and he’s distracted enough by the movement of Dean’s muscles underneath his Henley that it takes him several minutes to realize that the skin on the back of his neck is prickling. He turns around reluctantly—Bonham’s happy barks ringing through the salvage yard—and finds Bobby leaning against the kitchen counter and watching him.

“What?” Sam asks. Because it’s clearly something substantial, from the assessing weight in the man’s eyes.

“You making any progress with Dean?” Bobby counters.

Sam casts his mind back over tonight’s dinner conversation and then, with a bitter laugh, turns back around to watch his brother chase Bonham around a rusting Buick. “Yeah, sure. Progress. He only worked Johnny Rotten and Tom Fogerty into the conversation twice tonight, does that count?”

“You ready for some advice, then?”

“I’m not giving up,” Sam declares immediately, bristling.

Outside, Dean has reversed direction with a sudden skid, and a moment later he gives a triumphant, “Gotcha!” as Bonham, looking back over his shoulder, runs smack into Dean’s legs.
“I’m not telling you to,” Bobby answers. “But Sam, you’ve gotta think about how it looks from where he’s sitting.”

Sam frowns, glancing back over his shoulder again. “How what looks?”

“You.” Bobby nods around the kitchen. “This.”

Sam looks around in the wake of Bobby’s nod. He’s not sure what Bobby means, and says so: “I don’t follow.”

“No shit, kid,” Bobby mutters before tugging his cap back so that he can fix Sam more firmly with his eyes. “You keep saying you’re not going anywhere, but so far you haven’t done anything to show him that. Spend all your time moping around here, waiting for Tuesday to roll around again.”

“You want me to help out more?” Sam asks, confused. “Because I keep offering—”

“Get a job, Sam,” Bobby interrupts impatiently. “Put down some goddamned roots. Right now, it looks like you’re waiting for him to come around and hit the road with you again.”

Sam blinks, startled by the observation and even more surprised to find that Bobby’s right. That is what he’s been expecting—what he’s been thinking at the back of his mind. Dean will come around, Dean will warm up to him again, and then it’ll be him and Dean on the road, moving across the country, just like always.

Except Dean’s different now. Dean has a house, and friends, and a job. Four years here and Dean’s put down roots like a goddamned oak tree.

“Oh,” Sam says faintly. Out in the yard, he can hear his brother’s shouts mingling with Bonham’s enthusiastic barks.

Bobby’s gaze softens with understanding. “You idjit,” he mutters, voice compassionate.

“I don’t.” Sam stops, frowning, and then glances out into the yard again.

It’s getting dark, and he can’t make out his brother’s face anymore. Dean and Bonham have become nothing more than two shadows, chasing each other around the bulkier hulks of rundown cars and trucks. Won’t be long now before Dean gets into the Impala and drives away.

“What kind of job?” Sam says after a moment, lifting one hand and resting his forearm against the doorframe.

Sympathetic or not, Bobby snorts at that, and Sam can hear the man shuffling away toward the living room. “What do I look like, an unemployment agency?” he mutters as he goes. “Find your own damn job, genius.”

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Working at Edgar’s Hardware isn’t the most glamorous career, but Sam feels a difference almost immediately. The restless, rattling sensation in his chest shifts and settles. The low, babbling voice at the back of his head—the one that he never really noticed until Bobby brought it to his attention—stops telling him to grab Dean and get in the Impala and go. And, surprisingly enough, after his first few weeks on the job, Sam finds himself getting invited over to his coworker’s house for Thursday night poker.

He’s even more surprised when he finds himself accepting.
But Edgar and Leroy turn out to be good guys, and if Mack’s sense of humor is mostly limited to bodily functions and breasts, then that’s also true of some of Sam’s friends from Stanford. And Dean, for that matter.

Sam plays carefully, making sure he loses as often as he wins because he’s here to make friends, not money. Talk is easy around the table—work, and plans for the coming holidays, and women (boasts and speculative gossip that quiet whenever Shirley, Leroy’s wife, pops her head into the garage to check on them). Despite the initial reservations he had when he got here and found himself ushered into this chilly, oil-scented space, Sam finds himself enjoying the evening. He even unbends enough to laugh a little.

For the first time since he crossed back into South Dakota, the hole in his chest where Dean belongs isn’t foremost in his mind. It still hurts, of course—it always will—but he thinks ... he thinks maybe he can learn to live with the pain, if he has to. If this is as close to his brother as he can ever come.

At the end of the night, when Leroy gives Sam’s hand a pump on his way out the door and asks if he wants in on Saturday’s game, Sam grins and says, “Sure. It’ll give me a chance to win back some of my money.”

Leroy snorts. “Good luck. Singer’s a fucking shark.”

Sam stiffens at the familiar name, caught off guard. Leroy could mean Bobby, but he doesn’t. Sam knows he doesn’t.

“Singer?” he echoes hoarsely.

“Yeah,” Leroy agrees. From his cheerful expression and easy nod, he hasn’t noticed the tension lacing Sam’s voice. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, he spends everything he wins on beer and pizza for game nights, but you gotta be pretty damned sharp to take a hand when he’s after the pot.”

Or more truthfully, Sam guesses, Dean has to be in the mood to let someone else win, which probably isn’t often. His brother has never really been the ‘downplay his own skills to make someone else feel better about themselves’ kind of guy. Unless the ‘someone else’ is under the age of thirteen, a girl, or Sam.

Used to be, Dean would accuse him of being all three. Back when they talked. Before Sam touched what he shouldn’t have and polluted the waters between them.

Sam thinks about showing up on his brother’s doorstep now—he thinks about what Dean’s face would look like when he opens the door and found Sam there—and then says, “I, uh. I don’t think I should.”

“Why not?” Leroy asks, brow creasing. “What I’ve seen, you’d be the closest thing he’ll have had to a challenge since he moved here.”

Which means that Sam hasn’t been as clever about losing as he thought he was being.

Rubbing at the back of his neck, he mumbles, “It’s kind of complicated.”

“He ain’t gonna mind,” Leroy insists. “He’s a real good guy, once you get to know him. Maybe a bit close-mouthed, but he was in the war, y’know.”

“Leroy!” That’s Shirley, stepping out from the house, and her sharp reprimand is accompanied by a balled up dishrag that smacks Leroy in the back of his head.
“Ow!” Leroy complains, although Sam’s pretty sure the dishrag didn’t hurt. “What the hell, Shirl?”

“Stop pushing,” Shirley insists. “Maybe Sam’s got perfectly good reasons not to want to barge in.”

The look she gives Sam—sympathetic and knowing—tells him that even if Leroy has forgotten Sam being introduced as ‘Dean Singer’s old hunting buddy’ at the Fourth of July Picnic, Shirley hasn’t. It doesn’t look like she’s let go of the initial, widespread belief that Dean and Sam were dating, either.

“He wouldn’t be barging in,” Leroy insists, looking confused, and Sam hastens to step in before Shirley gets any more worked up on his behalf.

“Dean and I, uh. We aren’t on the best of terms right now.”

“Oh,” Leroy says after a beat, coloring. He might have forgotten about the picnic, but it looks like he isn’t having any trouble reading into Sam’s words now. He laughs—tremor of unease in his voice—and then says with a shrug, “Normally I’d ask if you were talking about a girl, but, uh. I reckon that ain’t the case, is it?”

Sam considers trying to deny it—thinks about saying that they weren’t ever together, that Sam isn’t gay—but for some reason what comes out is, “Is this going to be a problem?”

Leroy still looks flushed and uncomfortable, but he shakes his head almost immediately. “Aw, hell. Singer’s queer and he’s not so bad.” His mouth quirks as he glances up at Sam. “Just remember that I’m happily married and we’re good.”

“Leroy,” Shirley hisses, stepping forward to smack Leroy on the arm. “You shouldn’t talk like that!”

But Sam laughs. “Don’t worry, Shirley. I’ve heard worse. And you’re not my type, dude,” he adds, nodding at Leroy.

“Too short?” Shirley asks with a speculative glint in her eyes, and Sam knows exactly whom she’s thinking of.

Oh crap. This is not where Sam wanted this conversation to go.

Grimacing, he hastens to say, “I’m not—Dean and I, that was a long time ago, and it didn’t end well. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention it to him. Or mention me at all, actually.”

Shirley opens her mouth, and the determined expression on her face tells Sam she wants to play matchmaker, but this time Leroy beats her to it. “No problem, Sam,” he says, nodding. “Like I said, Singer’s a good guy. I ain’t gonna be the one to upset him, and neither is Shirl.”

Sam isn’t so sure Shirley is on board with that plan, so he gives her his most earnest, pleading expression—the one Dean always used to fold for. When she continues to gnaw at her bottom lip, he worries that it isn’t going to work on her—that he’s lost his touch—but then the stubbornness in her eyes fades and she sighs.

“Okay, okay,” she mutters. “I promise. But it’s a small town, Sam. You’re going to have to face him at some point.”

She’s right, but Sam would rather it be on Dean’s terms, when Dean is ready. And it shouldn’t be because some well-meaning neighborhood woman has decided they’d make a cute couple.

He wonders, for what must be the hundredth time, if he should have made it clear they were brothers when he was first introduced. He wonders why Dean didn’t immediately jump in and make the
correction himself. And then, as usual, turns his mind away from the question before his brain tries to offer too optimistic of an answer.

Dean won’t talk to him. Dean doesn’t trust him. Dean can’t even stand the sight of him.

And one of these days, Sam’s going to have to learn to live with that.

Sam watches his brother more sharply than usual that Tuesday, looking for a hint that Leroy mentioned him over Saturday night poker—for any indication that Dean is aware of Sam’s recent foray into small town life. Dean’s a little grouchier than usual during dinner, but from the annoyed looks he keeps shooting Sam, it’s more because Sam is staring at him than anything else. Bobby’s watching Sam as well—waiting for him to spill the beans about Edgar’s just like he has for the past two weeks.

But Sam doesn’t want to tell Dean about the job just yet—partially because he’s still a little embarrassed about the position, but mostly because he doesn’t want it to sound like a bribe. If he tells Dean about Edgar’s now, then it’s going to come across like something he’s doing with the express purpose of squirming back into his brother’s good graces.

And while Sam is doing this because of Dean, he isn’t doing it for him.

The thing is, Sam wants to be part of his brother’s life, but he doesn’t want to do anything to jeopardize Dean’s happiness. If that means staying here, then Sam’s prepared to make the necessary adjustments, and one of those adjustments is securing some kind of honest income. He can’t keep on living off of credit card fraud, after all: can’t shark at pool or cards for money.

If Sam is going to stay here—if he’s going to have any chance at being able to share in his brother’s life again—then he needs this. But he isn’t going to use it to manipulate Dean’s emotions—isn’t going to announce his newfound employment in such a way that Dean assumes he’s looking for anything in return but a bi-weekly paycheck.

So he keeps his mouth shut, and drops his eyes to his own plate, and lets Dean’s casual, biting attacks wash over him.

Later that evening, Sam stands with Bonham by the front door. As they watch the Impala’s taillights fade into the distance, Bobby steps up behind Sam and demands, “Okay, what the hell was that?”

“What was what?”

“You’ve been gainfully employed for going on three weeks now,” Bobby answers. “And not so much as a peep out of you about it at dinner. You were planning on letting Dean in on that bit of news sometime before you start pulling pension, weren’t you?”

“If I tell him,” Sam says softly without turning around. “He’s just going to think I did it so he’d take me back.”

“Newsflash, idjit: that is why you did it.”

Sam gets what Bobby is saying, and in a way he’s right, but ...

“It’s not that simple,” he says, crouching down to scratch underneath Bonham’s chin. The dog tilts into the touch, tail thumping against Sam’s leg.
“Make it that simple,” Bobby mutters as he stomps away. “I’m sick and tired of you two mincing around each other.”

“He’ll find out when he finds out,” Sam replies, sure that it won’t take much longer. Not in a town this size.

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But November slips into December, and Humboldt turns into a white, light-festooned snow globe. Sam gets a couple of invitations to Christmas parties, but the one he’s waiting for doesn’t come. He doesn’t even get to hear about Dean’s plans around Bobby’s table: as far as Dean’s conversation reveals, he isn’t even aware there’s a holiday approaching.

Sam knows that’s a lie, though, because he hears things when he’s in town, and he knows that Dean is as deeply enmeshed in this celebration as he was in the Forth of July. His brother is down at the park every weekend running a food stand at the edge of the frozen-over pond while the local kids have skating parties. He knows that Dean’s been invited to damn near every celebration in town—Dean and Erica both, their names paired on everyone’s lips like they’re two halves of the same coin.

Sometimes, Sam wants to grab one of his gossiping customers and shake them. He wants to yell, “That should be my name! He’s my brother! He’s mine!” But then he remembers that Dean isn’t his anymore—that Dean never should have been his at all. He remembers and he flushes with shame, lowering his head so that he can hide the sudden, moist burn in his eyes behind the fringe of his hair.

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Sam celebrates Christmas alone, sitting outside beneath the moon with a cup of eggnog (no rum in it, much as he’d like a stiff drink right now) held loosely in one hand. Bobby is at Dean’s and Erica’s—left earlier this afternoon with an apologetic grimace and a promise to celebrate with Sam tomorrow. Not that it matters. Not that Sam has ever really been able to celebrate this holiday with his family before.

Only that isn’t precisely true, and he finds himself cupping the amulet he gave to his brother all those years ago, and remembering the uncomfortable, sad flicker in Dean’s eyes when he realized he swiped the wrong presents from that family’s living room. He remembers how happy Dean was when he opened the present Sam initially meant for Dad, and how Dean couldn’t seem to stop touching it for the first few months he wore it. He remembers how Dean never took the amulet off, was never parted from it for more than a few seconds. He remembers how that show of devotion used to make him feel.

A lifetime ago, that seems, or maybe two, and Sam isn’t sure where this new, maudlin mood of his has come from. He never missed Christmas after that year—it just wasn’t something Winchesters did, and that was that. He’s sure he wouldn’t care now, except he knows that somewhere Bobby is sitting with Dean.

It’s warm where they are, and bright, and maybe there’s even a tree. There’s a tree, and presents that are actually going to be opened by the intended recipients, and eggnog laced with rum because neither Bobby nor Dean has anything to fear from the alcohol. In that bright, shining place where Sam envisions them in his head, Dean is laughing. Dean has laughter lines crinkling the skin around his eyes, and glittering light from the tree caught in his hair, and he’s happy. He’s happy and beautiful and free without Sam.

“Merry Christmas to me,” Sam murmurs, lowering his eyes from the moon.
Inside the house, he can hear Bonham whining—the dog doesn’t like being left alone, and Sam’s pretty sure Bonham can sense him out here. So close, and yet so far out of reach.

And, because Sam knows how he feels, he drains the eggnog in one swallow and heads back inside.

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The Tuesday before his birthday, Dean shows up whistling. He’s in a far better mood than he usually is—cheerful in a way he hasn’t been since Sam showed up. It’s disorienting, and Sam finds himself tenser than usual while he waits for the other shoe to drop—because this is some new torture his brother thought up to torment him with, it must be. But Dean keeps on grinning, and tapping his fingers against his thigh, and bobbing his head to some song only he can hear, and Bonham’s tail couldn’t be going any faster than it is right now.

Bobby’s as thrown off by Dean’s mood as Sam is, and eventually—after Dean has given that private, happy little smile and chuckled for about the tenth time in as many minutes—he drops his fork and blurts, “That’s it. Fess up.”

“What?” Dean asks, that sugar-warm smile still playing about his lips.

“Are you stoned, or did someone spike your coffee with Prozac?”

Dean snorts, leaning back in his chair, and then flashes his teeth Bobby’s way. For once, Sam is glad that his brother isn’t looking at him because even the accidental, cast-off glow is enough to make his heart skip a beat. Having the full force of that lazy happiness turned on him would probably land him in the hospital with heart failure.

Then Dean says, “Shirley’s pregnant.”

“Figures,” Bobby mutters, relaxing and shaking his head. “I swear, you’ve got baby fever worse than most females I know.”

“Oh, come on, dude,” Dean protests, spearing a carrot with his fork. “You’re happy for them too. Admit it.”

“I’m happy, but I ain’t grinning like a damned Cheshire Cat about it.”

The Dean Sam remembers would have been embarrassed by Bobby’s practiced scorn—would have covered and backpedaled—but by now Sam knows better than to expect his brother’s old patterns from the man sitting to his left. He watches as casually as possible as Dean chuckles again and shakes his head. “Two years, man. That’s a hell of a long time to be feeding the kitty every night.”

“Oh yeah, poor guy,” Bobby replies sardonically. “Remind me to send him a condolence card.” As he picks up his fork, he adds more seriously, “When’s she due?”

“Sometime in the fall, I think,” Dean answers, moving on from his carrots to the scalloped potatoes.

“October 16th,” Sam supplies, and then freezes with his fork halfway to his mouth.

Across the table, Bobby has seemingly become absorbed by his food, head lowered far enough that his face is hidden. Dean, on the other hand, is staring at Sam like he just sprouted a second head.

Still, there’s no reason not to play this cool.

“What?” Sam says, hoping that his voice isn’t giving away the rapid-fire pounding of his heart.
Dean’s eyes narrow. “How’d you know that?”

Sam could lie. He could think up some wild story and avoid the moment he’s been awaiting for the last three months. Except his mind has gone horribly, shatteringly blank, and instead he finds his mouth opening and the truth tumbling out.

“Leroy told me.”

“How do you know Leroy?” Dean demands immediately. All of the carefree mirth has left him, replaced by belligerent suspicion. Sam’s stomach feels cold as he puts down his fork and hides his hands beneath the table.

This is it. Moment of truth.

“There’s a beat of stony silence and then Dean repeats, “From work.”

“He’s been working at Edgar’s since October,” Bobby puts in, lifting his head with a sigh.

Dean shoots the man a quick, hot look, and then turns his attention back to Sam. “And you were planning on telling me this when, exactly?”

Sam sort of wants to curl up and hide in the face of his brother’s anger—or at least slouch in his seat—but instead he steels himself and asks, “Why, does it change anything?”

The question catches Dean up short. He scowls, mouth working, and then clenches his jaw. After a long, tense moment, he shoves back from the table and stands there, looking down at Sam with eyes that have gone electric, lime green—snapping and enraged.

Swallowing thickly, Sam shifts his gaze over to meet Bobby’s.

“‘Well?’” Bobby says. He’s looking at Sam as though Sam is being particularly stupid, but something must be wrong with Sam’s brain, because he’s having trouble figuring out what he’s doing wrong now. Probably because most of his thoughts are suddenly taken up with understanding that Dean just left.

Dean just left and Sam’s pretty sure that his brother doesn’t intend to come back.

“Well what?” he asks numbly.

“Go after him, you moron!” Bobby barks.

Go after Dean. That’s ... not actually a bad idea.

Somehow, Sam gets to his feet, and then he gets his legs moving. He crosses the kitchen in a kind of haze, moving faster now, and then bursts out the back door into the salvage yard. Dean is already at the Impala, jerking open the door. Bonham, who snuck out of the house on Dean’s heels, is letting out excited barks and leaping around his legs.

“Dean!” Sam shouts as he runs forward. “Hang on a second, man.”
“Get back inside, Sam,” Dean bites out, getting one foot in the car, and Sam can’t let this happen. He can’t let Dean run away for whatever stupid, stupid reason he’s running. He reaches into the car after his brother without thinking and Dean comes back out swinging.

His first punch goes wild, just glancing off of Sam’s jaw, but Dean’s reflexes haven’t slowed at all over the last four years and Sam has barely registered the fact that he’s being attacked when Dean’s second blow slams into his left eyebrow. Pain explodes through his eye socket, making him leak tears, and he staggers back, one hand cupped protectively over his face.

“Get back inside,” Dean repeats, each word clipped and cold. He’s standing next to the car now, both hands clenched into fists and radiating enough violence that Bonham is slinking away from both of them to burrow into a nearby snow bank.

Sam’s heart pounds alarmingly in his chest, and his stomach is tight enough that he’s in danger of losing everything he ate at dinner, but he shakes his head. Because whatever’s wrong with Dean right now, Sam can sense his brother close to the surface. His brother, Dean, the one he left behind and was beginning to think he’d never see again. All those shared memories of the lifetime they spent breathing each other’s air are seeping back into Dean’s eyes now, even buried as they are beneath the rage and the spiking, hostile fear.

Dean’s pissed because something about Sam’s job scared him. And he’s scared because, despite everything he’s been trying to project in Sam’s direction for the past six months, he still cares. Maybe just a little, and grudgingly, but he does care, which means that Sam actually has a chance to get his brother back.

He isn’t going to let Dean throw that chance away. Not without a fight.

Luckily, a fight seems to be just what Dean wants right now, because he surges forward and shoves Sam in the chest, driving him back a couple of steps. “Get out of here!”

“No,” Sam says, lowering his hand and blinking at his brother through his watering eye.

“Fuck you,” Dean spits, shoving him again.

Dean may not be quite as bulky as he used to be, but he’s all lean, hard muscle and he isn’t holding back. Sam can already feel the bruises blooming on his chest as he’s driven back again. But he doesn’t lift a hand to defend himself from a second and a third push, and finally Dean grinds his teeth together and lets out a harsh, frustrated noise.

“What the fuck’s wrong with you, asshole? Never had any trouble leaving before.”

The jab hits closer to home than any punch Dean can throw, and Sam’s breath huffs out. This isn’t just Dean accusing him of past crimes. This is Dean skirting around a request that Sam was terrified he’d make in those first few weeks. A request that Sam thought he was safe from now.

Let it go, he tells himself. Turn around and go inside and let it go. He’ll come back next week when he’s cooled off, and you can try talking to him again then.

But the question slips out before he can stop it, terrified and breathless: “Are you telling me to leave?”

Dean’s eyes widen minutely, and Sam has time to give himself a mental kick for putting the idea in his brother’s head before Dean’s right shoulder pulls back—telegraphing his intentions, which Dad’d give him hell for if he were here.
This time, the punch lands solidly on Sam’s jaw, clicking his teeth together and leaving him with a mouthful of a copper and a hot, white scent in his nose. He staggers backward another step, one hand up and cradling the burning line of his jaw. When he spits, the gob of saliva that hits the snow is red, and there’s more blood leaking into his mouth from where he bit his tongue (it’s fucking throbbing). From the corner of his watering eyes, he can see Dean moving in for another blow.

Sam wants to stay still for this—knows he deserves it—but his survival instinct kicks in and instead he jerks to one side. The air stirs as Dean’s punch narrowly misses his face and then Sam is away, circling back to get himself out into the open, cleared bit of driveway where he has room to maneuver.

“You fucking coward,” Dean growls, following. “Why the fuck don’t you just leave already?”

He tosses another punch Sam’s way—a quick jab that Sam just manages to block.

“I’m not going anywhere, Dean,” Sam answers, and then brings his arm up higher to deflect a hook punch. “Not unless you tell me to.”

“You leave,” Dean pants, but it isn’t a command. Even as distracted and hurt as he is, Sam can tell his brother’s making a statement of fact rather than a demand. “You always fucking leave.”

When Sam blocks his brother’s next punch with his left arm, his right moves automatically—muscle memory—and to his horror he sees Dean’s head snap back and to the side. His knuckles are hot and stinging, and oh fuck, he just punched Dean.

Sam hauls in a single, terrified breath—oh shit, oh shit, what did he just do—and then gives a single, abrupt shiver as he realizes that it isn’t just fear and guilt filling his chest. There’s a part of him—a part that has been pushed and shoved and cut and kicked far too often over the past six months—that isn’t guilty at all. The realization comes again, this time flushed and dizzy with triumph.

He punched Dean.

Several feet away, Dean tentatively swipes a pair of fingers over his lips. They come away red and slick, and when he looks up at Sam, there’s a bloody smear on his chin, His lower lip is already starting to swell around the cut.

“You son of a bitch,” Dean says, almost calmly, and this time when he lurches forward there’s no pausing to talk.

It isn’t pretty or organized or anything resembling a fight. No, this is a brawl, pure and simple, and within moments they’ve both forgotten all of their training and are just doing their damnedest to hurt one another. Dean kneels Sam in the stomach, Sam borrows a trick he learned from his brother and headbutts Dean. Dean gets hold of the pressure point at the base of Sam’s neck and squeezes, and Sam drives a couple of quick, rabbit punches into his brother’s gut to make him let go.

Within minutes, they’re both covered with sweat, and Sam has blood dripping into his eyes—he’s not sure if it’s his or his brother’s. Bonham is barking from somewhere, but all Sam is concerned with are the immediate sounds of fists hitting flesh and Dean’s rasping, panting breath. It reminds Sam of how his brother sounded after the hospital—reminds him that he shouldn’t be doing this—and he tries to disengage, but Dean sweeps his feet out from under him and brings them both crashing to the ground.

Now there’s snow mingling with the blood in Sam’s mouth, and he rolls, trying to get some leverage on his brother. If he can pin Dean to the ground, maybe he can hold him there long enough to talk
some sense into him. Except Dean is impossible to catch hold of—he may or may not have been keeping up with his other training, but he’s been taking Judo classes somewhere, or maybe just wrestling, because within seconds he has Sam pinned.

Sam lies with his face pressed into the snow and Dean’s knee pressing down on his left kidney. Dean’s fingers are locked around Sam’s right wrist, wrenching his shoulder up and almost out of the socket. Sam’s other hand is free, but it isn’t doing him any good twisted under his body like it is, and he can’t do anything but grunt as Dean leans forward and presses his forearm against the back of Sam’s neck, shoving his face more firmly into the snow. Sam’s cheeks and mouth are burning, and he can feel the hard edge of the leather cuff digging into his skin.

“You don’t know me,” Dean says in his ear, voice low and private. “We’re not brothers anymore, you hear me? We haven’t been brothers since you fucking dumped me here.”

It hurts to hear that, rips Sam open deep inside, but he can tell from the anguish in his brother’s voice that the words are hurting Dean even more.

“And I—” Dean stops, making a choked, rough sound that Sam might mistake for a sob if he were a little more oxygen deprived, and then finishes, “I think I might hate you for that.”

Sam can’t help flinching. Scrunching his eyes more tightly shut, he sobs noiselessly into the snow.

“I would have done anything for you,” Dean continues relentlessly. “Now I can’t even look at you. There’s nothing here for you. Nothing.”

Somehow, despite the grating, broken feeling in his chest—despite the barbed wire Dean’s words just wrapped around his lungs—Sam manages to twist his face to one side and gasps, “Not unless you tell me to. I’m not leaving.”

Dean swears at the announcement, releasing him and clambering up to his feet. Sam uses his newfound freedom to move his arm into a more comfortable position and then lies in the burning snow, waiting.

After a long, agonizing pause, Dean says, “No. You don’t get to have that out. You want to leave, then you can slink off the same way you always have. But you don’t get my permission. I’m not fucking absolving you so you can cut and run again.”

Sam doesn’t move as his brother crunches away through the snow and gets into the Impala. All of his injuries—bruises mostly, but his mouth is bleeding and the shoulder Dean was putting all that pressure on is throbbing in a way that makes him think it’s either dislocated or torn—sing through him, but nothing hurts as much as the crushed, ruined weight of his chest.

Sam hears the Impala pull away down the drive, but he still can’t bring himself to move. Finally, after a couple of minutes, there’s a whine to his right and a tentative lick at his fingertips. He lifts his head and meets Bonham’s eyes. The dog looks terrified and guilty, like this whole mess was his fault, and he wags his tail pitifully as he inches closer and laps at Sam’s wrist.

“You gonna get up anytime soon, or should I call an ambulance?”

Sam shifts his gaze past the dog and finds Bobby standing just outside the kitchen door. Grimacing, he pulls his trapped arm out from underneath his body and uses it to push up onto his knees. Now that he’s closer to being vertical again, it feels like there’s more blood dribbling from his nose, which at least doesn’t seem to be broken.

Bobby comes forward as Sam wipes the blood away with a cautious swipe of one hand, pushing
Bonham to one side and bending down to help Sam to his feet. Sam’s head spins when he gets up—he’ll have one hell of a headache tomorrow morning, courtesy of all those blows to the face. Probably a nasty case of whiplash as well.

“Damn, boy,” Bobby mutters, looking him over. “What the hell did you say to him?”

Sam wordlessly gives his head a little shake—he can’t talk about what just happened, and anyway he doesn’t understand what set Dean off—and Bobby offers up a weary sigh while hooking an arm around Sam’s waist.

“Come on, let’s get you inside and cleaned up.”

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It isn’t until later, after Sam has showered and changed into fresh clothes, that he can bring himself to face up to the bitter, broken truth Dean hurled at him before leaving. Bobby has just forced a couple of aspirin down his throat and the words come tumbling out without any forethought as he hands the empty glass back.

“He hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you,” Bobby replies immediately, turning around to set the glass down on the counter. When he turns back again, he’s cupping a bag of frozen peas in one hand. “Here,” he says, holding the bag out. “Put this on that eye.”

Sam does, and then sits there silently replaying the fight in his head. Replaying Dean’s vicious, wounding declaration.

After a moment, Bobby rests a hand on his shoulder. “Give him some time to get used to the idea of you being here more permanently,” he advises.

“What if he doesn’t want to get used to the idea?” Sam asks.

But Bobby doesn’t answer.
Chapter 55

Dean doesn’t show up at Bobby’s next Tuesday. Or the Tuesday after that. Or the one after that. Sam’s face heals, but his chest keeps pulling tighter with each day of silence, and on the third Tuesday he gets in his truck and sits behind the wheel for almost three hours. His duffel is packed and sitting on the seat beside him—there’s nothing tethering him here now that Dean has cut him so ruthlessly free. But he can’t bring himself to start the engine.

Bobby is watching him from the window, Sam knows. It isn’t a constant vigil, but Sam catches movement behind the glass every once in a while as the man checks to see he’s still there.

Finally, he opens the door again and climbs out of the cab. His breath fogs in the air as he trudges across the yard and lets himself back inside. Bobby, sitting at the kitchen table and reading a newspaper, doesn’t so much as glance up at him.

“Don’t forget to wipe your shoes. I don’t want you tracking snow everywhere.”

Still shaking slightly from the near-flight adrenaline coursing through him, Sam wipes his shoes clean and then brings his bag back upstairs to unpack.

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Four days after that useless, futile attempt, Sam is sorting the nails and screws in Edgar’s wooden display bins. When he senses someone come up to stand beside him, he puts one hand on his knee and pushes up to his feet. A professional, empty smile slips into place as he turns to face the customer.

“What can I help y—”

The rest of the question shrivels in his throat, trapped with his breath as he finds himself eye to eye with Dean. He feels the smile fade from his face, but that’s okay because Dean isn’t smiling either. Dean’s standing there with eyes like shards of green sea glass and artfully disheveled hair, looking impossibly beautiful and distant, and Sam has to resist the urge to reach out and touch his brother to make sure he’s real.

After a moment he manages to croak out, “Dean. Hey. Uh. Did you need a washer or something?”

Dean’s eyes cut away at the sound of Sam’s voice, moving over the wooden bins Sam was sorting through before shifting to the display of hammers and screwdrivers on the other side of the aisle. He looks uncomfortable and annoyed, like he was dragged here against his will, and his voice is grudging as he says, “I came to see you.”

“You going to hit me again?” Sam asks. He doesn’t really think Dean will—his brother is clearly unhappy with the encounter, but his hands are shoved in his jean pockets deep enough to hide half of his customary wrist cuffs, and the tension stiffening his body doesn’t contain any trace of violence. Still, Sam figures it’s prudent to ask. He doesn’t want to break any of the merchandise if the answer is yes.

Dean scowls in response to Sam’s question, but he also shakes his head.

The answer is reassuring as far as Sam’s face is concerned, but doesn’t leave him any closer to figuring out what Dean wants from him. He can’t figure out why his brother is even talking to him,
after all this time. After Dean basically washed his hands of Sam. After what he said.

Then Dean blurts, “Look, about ... about what happened. I was. You kinda caught me off guard, all right? And anyway, you had that coming.”

Sam’s head comes up slightly, and his chest aches with sudden, tentative hope. It doesn’t sound much like one, but ...

“Are you apologizing?”

“No,” Dean growls, instantly bristling and defensive. But he deflates before Sam has a chance to respond, reaching up to rub the back of his neck while muttering, “You deserved to get your ass kicked, but what I said, I just. I wanted you to know I didn’t mean it. I don’t—” He pauses, mouth contorting like he’s sucking on a lemon, and then finishes, “—I don’t hate you, okay?”

It’s kind of pathetic how easily that reassurance tears through Sam’s chest. As though his ribs and heart are made of rice paper and tissue.

“Really?” he breathes, eyes watering as the warming, hopeful ache in his chest spreads.

When Dean finally swings his eyes over to meet Sam’s gaze, though, they’re just as cold and hostile as ever.

“But I meant what I said about us,” he says more firmly. “We’re not brothers anymore. Right now, we aren’t anything.” He glances around as though worried that he’s going to be overheard—usually not a bad precaution, but Edgar and Mack are out picking up lunch, and no one’s browsing around this time of day—and then concedes, “But I owe Bobby, and I don’t want to make things awkward for him, so until you leave again, I guess we’re going to have to figure something out.”

Sam considers protesting again, but if his promises to stay haven’t sunk in yet, then nothing he can say will make any difference. He’s just going to have to prove to his brother that he isn’t going anywhere. Not this time.

After a moment, he asks, “What’d you have in mind?”

It doesn’t even occur to him that Dean won’t have an answer. He wouldn’t have come in here without a primary game plan and several backups.

“Some of the guys are going ice fishing tomorrow,” Dean says, and then stops yet again. He’s chewing the words over on one side of his mouth, jaw clenching and unclenching rhythmically. His eyes scan the shelves and not Sam, but his face isn’t averted quite enough to hide the annoyed wariness in his expression.

Sam gives it almost a full minute before checking, “Are you asking me to come?”

Dean shrugs, which could mean anything, but then mutters, “It’s last minute notice, and the company’s probably beneath you, but—”

“I’ll be there,” Sam interrupts, and tries not to be hurt when Dean looks surprised. “What time?”

‘What time’ turns out to be six in the morning, which is way earlier than Sam expected. He’s half asleep as he drives out to Dean’s, where he finds his brother already standing in the driveway with about half a dozen men—including Leroy, whom Sam is glad to see. At least there’s one familiar,
friendly face in the group. Dean introduces the others quickly—Winston, Bull and Tex are there (frighteningly enough, ‘Bull’ isn’t a nickname), as well as a short, thin man with a moustache and the unassuming moniker of Joe—and then it’s time to saddle up and head out.

Sam freezes his ass off on that trip, and he gets to talk to Dean for a grand total of two minutes, both of which are spent in his brother’s driveway before they leave. When he heads back to Bobby’s that afternoon, he isn’t sure what the point of his uncomfortable, awkward day on the ice with Dean and his friends actually was.

It isn’t like he made any headway with his brother. Hell, Dean didn’t even seem to notice Sam was there after he handled that haphazard round of introductions.

That doesn’t stop Sam from accepting his brother’s next invitation, though—this time out to the Municipal Bar for a few drinks on Wednesday night. It’s the same crew—Dean’s usual, Sam assumes—and when they give their orders to the waitress, Sam’s ‘Just a Coke, please’ raises a couple of eyebrows.

From his position across the table, Dean leans back in his chair and announces, “Sam never could hold his liquor.”

He’s said it a hundred times before at least—a teasing nudge that never held any real rancor, but used to make Sam’s competitive streak flare up like wildfire. Tonight, for the first time, Dean’s tone is cutting and his words clipped. The quick flash of his teeth is insincere and vaguely mocking.

Sam flushes at the burst of laughter that follows—the jokes from Dean’s friends about how it’s always the big guys, and maybe they ought to get the kid a sippy cup for his soda. When Bull trots out the inevitable “Samantha”, Sam’s hands tighten on his thighs beneath the table.

It’s stupid to get angry over something like this, but he’s a hunter, damn it. He’s seen shit that would make these men piss their pants. He’s done things that would leave them shell-shocked and whimpering in a corner.

Dean is watching him steadily from the other side of the table.

There’s still an air of smug amusement surrounding him—he’s enjoying watching Sam get riled up—but something about the tilt of his mouth makes Sam bite back the angry retort he wants to make to Winston’s latest joke. Because Dean might be amused, but he’s also watching Sam the same way Dad used to watch them both, back when he was training them to interview witnesses on their own. Dad used to wear that same expression whenever they were about to fuck up—disappointed regret mingled with wry humor.

This is some kind of fucking test.

Shifting the conversation away from his choice of beverage is difficult—not because of any real malice, Sam thinks; just because Dean’s friends haven’t ever met anyone who doesn’t drink before—but Sam perseveres, and eventually the talk moves on to Bull’s new hunting rifle and the best place to break it in. From there, it spreads to hunting in general, and Sam finds himself learning more than he cared to know about the ‘right’ way to gut a kill. But it still feels like a win—not just with Dean, who seems satisfied by the maneuver, but with himself.

The last time Sam’s anger snuck up on him like that, he disemboweled the demon he was hunting and then broke more than a couple of windows on his way out of the warehouse he had cornered it in.
Despite that initial awkwardness, the rest of the evening runs almost smoothly. Sam’s still keyed up, of course—jittery with performance anxiety, now that he knows he’s being closely watched and evaluated. But he thinks he handles himself well, and his respectful awe for Tex’s story about going buffalo hunting in Colorado—*most dangerous game there is, Sam; you mark my word*—doesn’t seem to come out patronizing at all. He even catches Dean smiling a little at that one, and for once there’s no bitter edge tainting his brother’s expression.

When he tries to catch Dean’s eye and share the moment, though, his brother downs the rest of his beer in a single, long swallow and then gets up with a grunted, “Gotta make some room.”

He comes back from the bathroom ten minutes later with a sober, distant expression and walls as high as Everest, and doesn’t so much as glance in Sam’s direction for the rest of the night.

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Sam’s next few outings with his brother’s friends aren’t much easier on his nerves than the first two were. Dean is watching him like a hawk, making it impossible to relax—especially when he refuses to offer Sam any kind of guidelines for what sort of behavior he wants to see.

Being tested is one thing—Sam guesses he deserves to jump through a few hoops. But this is like getting handed a blank Scantron and told to fill out the correct answers without ever having seen the question booklet. Actually, Sam would have a better chance of passing with the Scantron—one chance in four he’ll get something right there, unlike this sadistic game Dean is playing, where there are at least twenty wrong moves for every right one.

By the end of his first month on trial acceptance, Sam is one calculating glance away from grabbing his brother, shoving him against a convenient wall and demanding to know what the fuck he’s after. Dean wouldn’t even have to be specific about it—just knowing whether or not Sam is playing somewhere on the right continent would be enough to settle his aching, nauseous insides.

But in the end, when he snaps, he falls the opposite way. They’re at the Municipal Bar when it happens, and one second Sam’s insides are vibrating like a knot of plucked guitar strings and the next the impossible web of tension collapses in on itself like a tower of cards built too high.

It isn’t that he doesn’t care whether he gets it right any longer. It’s that he finally understands that he can’t do anything about it. Either he’ll pass Dean’s test or he won’t, but constantly second guessing himself isn’t doing anything but keeping him up nights.

There’s something incredibly freeing about accepting the fact that he’s flying blind.

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Less than two weeks after his revelation, Sam receives his first invitation to hang out one-on-one with one of Dean’s friends. *Their* friends now, he supposes.

Examining Winston’s trophy room isn’t actually on Sam’s Top Ten List of things to do—he’s never liked hunting, and hanging out with the guys over the past month or so hasn’t changed that—but it’s the first positive sign of acceptance he’s received, and he’s supposed to be into this sort of thing, so he accepts. The room turns his stomach just as much as he expected it to—filled with glass marble eyes and frozen snarls and the bare, twisting bone of deer antlers—but it isn’t until he notices the oversized, gnarled black paw mounted on a plaque on the wall that he’s really in danger of throwing up. He clenches his jaw against the instinctive impulse, ignoring the waves of cold washing through him, and moves toward it with dragging, reluctant steps.
“Dean bagged that one, actually,” Winston says, coming up from behind Sam and passing over a can of Coke.

Of course Dean did.

“Wolf, right?” Sam asks, playing stupid.

Winston shrugs as he pops the tab on his Coors, but he looks more than a little uncomfortable with the question—and with the paw itself, actually. Sam guesses that it was fear that drove the man to claim the trophy in the first place—or rather, the mulish determination to face up to a night terror made flesh. From the pallor of his face, tackling this particular night terror head-on isn’t working out so well for Winston.

“Sure,” the man says, all but the faintest tremor of fear hidden by the false bravado of his voice. “I mean, what else would it be, right?”

Sam could tell him, but it wouldn’t help Winston sleep any easier at night to know for sure what sort of things are out there in the night. If the man hasn’t recognized the owner of this paw as a black dog by now, then Sam isn’t going to be the one to break the news to him. He toys with the notion of asking for a description of the kill, but he doesn’t actually want to hear how close Dean had to get to this son of a bitch to slit its throat with a blessed, silver blade.

Bullets won’t hurt a black dog. They pass through its skin like knives through water. There’s no way to slow one of the creatures down, no way to incapacitate it. No way to kill it aside from letting it come at you with snarling jaws and scalpel-sharp claws and hope you can slit its throat before it guts you.

Hunters don’t go after black dogs without backup. Not if they want to be able to walk away afterward.

Somehow, Sam makes it through the rest of that visit, but he isn’t even back into truck before he’s pulling out his cell and dialing.

“Yeah,” Dean answers after the third ring.

“You’ve been hunting?” Sam demands, getting in the cab and pulling the door shut behind him.

“Hello to you, too, Sam,” Dean says dryly.

“What the fuck do you care?”

“I care because you’re my brother. I can’t believe you’ve been running around on your own! What the hell, Dean? Do you have some kind of death wish or something?”

There’s a beat of silence and then Dean says, “You know what, you hypocritical son of a bitch? You can go to hell.”

And just like that, he’s gone.

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Dean won’t answer Sam’s calls. Sam considers going to find his brother at the bar or his house, and then thinks better of it. He’s pretty sure his pacing is driving Bobby nuts.
“Why the hell’d you have to go and say a damnfool thing like that?” Bobby asks when Sam finally cracks and tells him what’s wrong.

“I didn’t,” Sam starts, and then stops, grimacing, and corrects, “I wasn’t thinking. I just. A black dog, Bobby. Do you—did you know he went after one?”

“You going to tell me you weren’t running down anything nasty on your own when you were gone?”

“That’s different. I—” He stops, not sure how to finish that. Or maybe does know, but doesn’t want to.

“You what?” Bobby prods.

Sam thinks about putting it out there—thinks about telling Bobby about the power, about how fucking easily he took out a wendigo on his own. How he once crushed an entire pack of hellhounds against a brick wall with nothing more than a stray thought.

Dean’s vulnerable, though. And Dean is irreplaceable.

When Sam doesn’t say anything, Bobby sighs and offers, “Look, I’ll call him. Just don’t expect any miracles.” He turns away, shaking his head. “You really stepped in it on this one, Sam.”

Sam expects Dean to skip dinner that Tuesday—Bobby’s good, but not even he’s a miracle worker, and Dean is going to need some time to cool down. When he hears the unexpected rumble of the Impala’s engine, he can’t get outside quickly enough. He draws to a stop out in the yard as the car comes into view, trying to fake a nonchalance he doesn’t feel by burying his hands in his jean pockets.

Dean puts the car in park without acknowledging him and then gets out. Behind him, Sam can hear Bonham barking and scrambling at the kitchen door in an effort to get to Dean, but for once Dean isn’t paying the dog any attention. Instead, his head comes up and his eyes lock on Sam’s.

For a long moment they stand there silently, regarding each other.

Then Dean says, “Twice for me. How many for you?”

Sam winces, because even with the power, Dean has a point. And it isn’t like he’s been using these past few years, and he’s been taking almost as many stupid risks.

“Look, I’m sorry,” he says. “I know I don’t have any right to get upset over th—”

“Damn right you don’t,” Dean interrupts, expression stony. “You think I wanted to do that? You think I want anything to do with that world anymore?”

Sam shrugs, dropping his eyes slightly and mumbling, “You used to like it.”

“Yeah, well, get burned enough times and even a stupid fuck like me can learn not to stick his hand in the fire.”

A pulse of anger brings Sam’s gaze up again and he insists, “Don’t talk about yourself like that!”

Dean’s expression doesn’t change—there isn’t so much as a flicker of emotion in his eyes. Sam senses that it isn’t because Dean is ignoring his words (not this time, anyway) so much as it is that he
doesn’t understand them.

But there’s no point in arguing about it now—Dean isn’t going to hear Sam, not when he barely acknowledges him on a superficial, social level—so Sam swallows and says, “I don’t like the thought of you getting hurt.”

Dean laughs at that, short and bitter. “You don’t think that’s kind of ironic, coming from you?” he demands.

The attack finds its target, just like it always does, and Sam’s chest pulls tight and sore. At least this time Dean doesn’t twist the knife. He just stands there staring at him, waiting for Sam to bleed out around the blade.

“I’m sorry,” Sam whispers.

It’s not enough. It never will be.

But it’s all he has to offer.

“Yeah,” Dean grunts, carelessly pushing past him into the house. “So you’ve said.”

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“It was killing kids.”

Sam starts a little at the sound of his brother’s voice. He thought Dean was out back with Bonham, playing their usual game of tag. Looks like tag is over, though, because Bonham is flopping down at Sam’s feet and going to work licking his muddy paws clean.

“You don’t.” Sam pauses to clear his throat and then tries again. “Dean, you don’t owe me any explanations.”

“I know,” Dean agrees. He sits down across the kitchen table from Sam anyway, and continues, “Bobby was out of town, and by the time he got back it would’ve gone through half the elementary school.”

Sam plays with the cuffs of his shirt, nervous with all the honesty and attention after the stony silence of dinner, and then asks, “And the other one?”

“Meg.”

Sam’s breath catches at the familiar name and he stiffens, but before the fear has a chance to blossom, Dean adds, “I took care of her. And no, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” Sam agrees, even though he’s dying for details—not out of morbid curiosity, but because he wants to be sure. He wants some kind of assurance that the bitch won’t be back for another try.

Maybe Bobby will put his mind to rest later.

For a couple of minutes, Sam watches Dean slouch in his chair across the table, one hand loosely wrapped around a leather cuff and rubbing at the etchings. He looks at his brother’s strong, nimble fingers, and the protective symbols wound through the leather, and then asks, “Do you miss it?”

Dean starts at the sound of his voice, and from the way he looks at Sam, Sam gets the impression that his brother forgot he was even there. Frowning, Dean releases the cuff and presses both hands flat on the kitchen table. He starts to shake his head and then hesitates, pursing his mouth in consideration.
“Sometimes,” he admits after a moment. “Some of it.”

Sam wants to ask which parts, and whether they involve him at all, but he knows better. Instead, he offers, “Do you want to—I could tell you about mine?”

Some of them, anyway. Sam’s pretty sure they aren’t ready to have the ‘I have demon powers and went darkside for a bit’ conversation.

But this time, the shake of Dean’s head is definite.

“No,” he says, pushing to his feet and walking away.

He doesn’t say anything else as he leaves—no ‘some other time’, no words of encouragement or forgiveness, not even a goodbye—but Sam can’t help feeling it’s the best conversation they’ve had in a long time.

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Less than a week later, Sam receives his first invitation to Dean’s house. It’s game night—the Twins are up against the Indians—and Sam wakes up the morning of the gathering as nervous as he was on his first date with Jess. It’s stupid, because this isn’t anything like a date—the rest of the guys are going to be there, and Bobby, and some of the women as well, apparently—but it’s going to be the first time Sam has seen Erica since the picnic last July, and that ... that means something.

For someone who holds such an important place in his brother’s new life, Sam knows next to nothing about the woman. Dean won’t talk about her with Sam—not that Dean talks about much of anything with Sam—and Sam hasn’t felt comfortable enough to ask for the gossip around town. He’s picked up a few nuggets of information anyway—Erica is footing most of the bill for the house, according to Frannie’s incessant gossip, and Mack once told Sam that she works from home on the computer—but otherwise she’s a petite, curvy void.

When Sam realizes that his stomach isn’t going to stop tying itself in knots anytime soon, he bites the bullet and calls Andy.

“Gallagher’s Smoke Shack, Andy spe—”

“What do girls like?” As soon as they’re out of his mouth, Sam wants to suck the words back in and rephrase.

It’s too late for that, though, because Andy has had his beat of silence to digest the words and now he’s saying, “Aww, do you wike someone, Sammy?”

“Shut up, it’s not like that,” Sam grumbles. “I want to get something for Erica, all right?”

“Wait, your brother’s Erica?”

“She’s not his,” Sam corrects. The words come out laced with petty resentment—worse, they come out sounding false. He knows damned well that Erica is very definitely Dean’s in some intimate, if undefined, way. No matter how much he’d like to deny it.

“You do get that you’re not his either, right?” Andy’s voice comes back, hesitant and concerned.

“Yeah,” Sam answers sourly. “He’s made that pretty clear.”

There’s another, longer moment of silence and then Andy says, “I’m coming out there.”
Sam’s chest clogs with panic at the idea, and he blurts out, “No!”

“Why the fuck not? Seriously, Sam. I could be there tomorrow.”

And it isn’t as though Sam doesn’t want Andy to come. He does—he’d fucking love a fresh set of eyes on the situation, and anyway it’s been too long since he and Andy have hung out. But ... but he can’t shake the feeling that it would be cheating.

Dean would see it as cheating, anyway, which would amount to the same thing in the end. Sam doesn’t have to be told that he isn’t allowed to call in relief pitchers from the dugout. He figured that one out on his own.

“I’m alright, okay? I just—Dean finally asked me to go to one of those game night things, and Erica’s going to be there, and I was sort of hoping she’d spend a little less time treating me like a child molester if I bring her something nice.”

“You mean something like a bribe,” Andy says, thankfully dropping the whole visit angle.

“I mean something like a very nice, inexpensive, gift-shaped bribe,” Sam replies.

“Hang on.” Andy’s gone without waiting for a response, but almost immediately returns with, “Heather says to get her a candle.”

“A ... candle?” Sam scrunches his nose, thinking about the long, black tapers he and Dean used to toss into the weapons bags whenever they needed to perform a ritual. He’s pretty sure that handing Erica a pack of those isn’t going to send him anywhere but down in her opinion.

“Not, like, a birthday candle,” Andy clarifies. “One of those smelly things. They’re like, decorations or something.”

“And girls like that kind of thing?” Sam tries to remember Jess expressing any sort of interest in that direction and fails miserably. Then again, Jess’s tastes were always rather Dean-like when it came to the finer things in life.

“I dunno,” Andy says. “Not like they give out manuals, you know?”

“God, wouldn’t that be nice.”


Sam’s palms are still sweating six hours later when he hurries up Dean’s front walk and rings the doorbell. Bobby’s already here—everyone is already here, actually: it took Sam longer than he expected to decide between the lavender and the vanilla. And then Frannie caught him walking out of the drug store with a decorative candle the size of a chicken clenched in both hands, and it took almost thirty minutes to extricate himself from the conversation.

Sam doesn’t want to know what the woman thinks he’s planning on doing with the candle, but he thinks he somehow managed to give her the impression it would involve Erica, flowers, and a bottle of champagne. By this time tomorrow, half the town is going to be convinced he’s madly in love with Dean’s roommate—possibly that they’re about to run away together to Vegas for a shotgun wedding. Sam’s going to have to apologize for that when he hands the candle over, and he isn’t really looking forward to it.
Maybe he can avoid her for a while, ease into the conversation.

But of course it’s Erica who opens the door. Hugging the frame, she looks up at him with the same mistrustful expression she wore last time he saw her. Sam fights to keep the smile on his face as his stomach lurches anxiously.

“Hey,” he says, holding out the vanilla-scented candle. “I, uh, brought this. For you. Kind of a, ‘getting to know you’ thing.”

For a few moments, he thinks that she’s going to leave him hanging by refusing it, but she finally takes the candle, careful not to touch his skin. The way she’s gingerly holding it with nothing more than her fingertips doesn’t bode well for the offering, either.

“I ran into Frannie when I was leaving the store,” Sam blurts. “And she, uh, might have gotten the wrong impression.”

“I doubt it,” Erica says offhandedly. “She knows how I feel about you.”

Which maybe-possibly-probably explains Frannie’s fascination with Sam’s intentions. Fantastic.

“Everyone’s in the living room,” Erica adds, as though Sam can’t hear that for himself—couldn’t see it if she’d open the door wider and let him past.

“Okay,” Sam says, and then stands there, waiting. After almost a full minute, he clears his throat and tries, “So, can I come in?”

“I’m trying to decide,” Erica answers, and Sam’s sure as hell going to say something to that, Dean’s new best friend or not.

Except then a familiar voice calls, “Hey, pipsqueak, you’re letting all the warm air out.”

The voice—Dean’s—is approaching the door, and as Erica stiffens and glances back over her shoulder, Dean’s fingers curl around the edge of the door and pull it open. He starts when he catches sight of Sam on the step, smile slipping, and for a few heartbeats Sam is filled with the crawling, uncomfortable sensation impression that his brother is going to slam the door shut in his face.

Then Dean’s smiling again—not as broadly or easily, but at least the expression doesn’t seem forced—and swinging the door wider as he says, “Hey, man. Come on in.”

Sam glances at Erica, who is still standing in the doorway staring at him, and when he looks back at his brother, Dean is staring at her as well. Or rather, at the candle in her hands.

“Is that a candle?” he asks, sounding confused.

“Sam brought it,” Erica answers. Turning, she shoves it into Dean’s chest and jerks her hands away as though the wax has suddenly turned molten hot. If Dean didn't still have reflexes to rival a cat's, the candle would have dropped to the floor and broken. Not that Erica seems to care. “I have to go get the pizza bites out of the oven.”

Her exit is abrupt enough that it’s impossible to interpret it as anything but an insult, but Dean is too busy examining the candle in his hands to notice.

“You brought a candle?” he says, turning it over with a perplexed expression. “Dude, I said it was BYOB, not ‘bring your own tacky decoration.’”
Sam is going to kill Andy.
Possibly slowly.

Over the next couple of months, Dean starts peppering Sam’s group-invites with smaller gatherings—one or two of the guys and himself at first, and then, finally, dinners at his place. It’s a mixed blessing, because dinner at Dean’s means dinner with Erica, and while things with Dean have warmed up considerably from Sam’s initial glacial reception, she hasn’t thawed at all. When she deigns to acknowledge Sam, she treats him like he’s some kind of kleptomaniac who needs to be watched constantly in order to prevent him from running off with the silverware.

Although in this case, the ‘silverware’ is Dean.

Every time Sam feels like he’s making headway with his brother, Erica somehow manages to drag Dean’s attention back in her direction. She goes out of her way to make Dean laugh twice as long and honestly as Sam does—makes the few, paltry chuckles he gets look even more meaningless than he already knows they are. She does her best to exclude Sam from the conversation as well, referencing events he wasn’t there for and keeping Dean’s focus in the past—trapping them all in those four years Sam is trying to make up for missing.

Whenever that tactic doesn’t work, she distracts Dean with technical talk—Sam has to wonder if one of the reasons they’re so close is because they’re the only ones who can understand each other. He loses track of the amount of times those discussions end up with Dean drifting after Erica into the basement, where he apparently has a workshop of sorts set up. It’s always ‘just for a second’, but Sam inevitably ends up having to call down a quick goodbye before letting himself out.

He wants to call Erica on it, but the one time he comes close to doing so—opens his mouth with his brow furrowed and neck cored with frustration—he gets a sharp look from his brother. Dean’s eyes aren’t as stormy as they can get, but the washed out grey-green is enough of a warning for Sam to shut his mouth and swallow the angry accusation of sabotage that he was going to make.

Dean continues to regard him steadily for several moments, and the expression on his face tells Sam that not only does Dean know what’s going on, he welcomes it. Or at least he’s allowing it.

If Sam wants back in, that look says, then he’s going to have to find a way to get Erica to accept him, even if making her like him is an impossible task.

But it’s difficult to be pleasant when Erica persists on treating him like the villain of the play—Sam has fucked up and he knows it, but he’s pretty sure he never did anything to warrant getting flinched away from when he reaches for the butter too quickly. Or snapped at when he accidentally brushes against her on his way to the table.

And whatever rules Erica has against touching only seem to apply to Sam, because she’s constantly touching Dean—little intimate brushes of her fingertips against the nape of Dean’s neck, or quick hugs as she helps him put dinner together. If they end up watching TV after the meal, Erica inevitably ends up curled against Dean’s side—close enough that she might as well be sitting in his lap.

From the way Dean lifts his arm to make room for her without even batting an eyelash, it isn’t anything but business as usual. Which means they touch like this when Sam isn’t here.

Sam isn’t sure what to make of that, but he knows he doesn’t like it.
Half-formed suspicions gnaw at him, tearing apart what little hope he’s been stockpiling, and finally, one Tuesday night at Bobby’s, the question slips out. Bobby is in the bathroom, and Bonham is chewing on a large chunk of steak that Dean saved for him, and Sam just isn’t going to get a better chance.

“Are you and Erica together?”

The look Dean gives him—two parts puzzled, one part pissed—tells him his answer easily enough, even though Dean’s only response is, “We’ve been over this, Sam.”

Sam drops his gaze to hide the blossom of relief in his eyes—whatever’s between them isn’t romantic, anyway: no matter how much it looks like it is—and shrugs while spearing another chunk of sweet potato. “Things change.”

“Not that.”

Sam sticks the potato in his mouth to keep other, more unfortunate questions from coming out, but when he chances a glance up at his brother, he can tell that he isn’t fooling Dean one bit.

“So,” Dean says as he watches Sam chew. “Why the sudden interest in my love life?”

Dean’s tone is dangerous, and Sam senses that the ice has gotten very, very thin underneath his feet. He considers ignoring the question and hoping his brother will let the matter drop, but he already knows from the panicked, sinking sensation in his gut that this is a discussion he’s going to be forced to see through to the end.

Serves him right for thinking it was safe to open his mouth in the first place.

“You guys just seem really close, that’s all,” he says after a moment, keeping his voice carefully neutral.

“I’m close with Bobby. Don’t see you wondering whether I’m shacking up with him.”

Slightly annoyed by how quickly the evening is coming off the tracks, Sam maybe doesn’t think through his words as much as he should before replying, “Maybe that’s because you aren’t shacking up with him.”

“You are,” Dean comes back immediately. His jaw has pulled alarmingly tight and his expression is frosty enough that all Sam wants to do is call back on the entire conversation. “Anything you want to tell me?”

“About what?”

“Well, you’re living with Bobby, and you two are pretty close.” Dean leans back in his chair, eyes hostile and challenging. “So how about it, Sam? You been bumping uglies with Dad’s old hunting buddy?”

“Oh for Christ’s sake,” That’s Bobby’s voice, and Sam jerks his eyes away from Dean to see the man turning around and heading back out of the kitchen.

“No way in hell am I sticking my neck in this one,” Bobby announces as he heads toward the front of the house. “You two are on your own.”
“Well?” Dean prods. From the expression he’s wearing when Sam looks back at him, he isn’t paying any attention to Bobby’s accidental interruption.

“Well what?”

“Are you and Bobby—”

“No! I’m not fucking Bobby, okay?” Sam shouts. He can’t believe he’s being forced to actually say the words out loud.

From deeper in the house, there’s the muted sound of cursing and then the sound of a door slamming.

“See what you did?” Dean accuses, which—this is not Sam’s fault.

“What I did?” he repeats incredulously. “You’re the one who brought it up! I asked a simple, perfectly reasonable question, and you just—”

“Reasonable?” Dean’s face twists in angry disgust. “What, we live together so we must be fucking? Or am I just so much of a whore that you can’t even consider that we might just be friends?”

“I never said that, Dean! Damn it, would you—”

“Then why? Huh? What the fuck would make you ask a dumb question like that?”

“Because you touch her all the time!” Sam shouts, spreading his hands helplessly. “What the hell else am I supposed to think?”

Dean’s jaw works for a second and then he nods, cutting eyes that have gone the furious, churning color of rain-damp evergreens away toward the back door.

“You know what, Sam?” he spits as he gets up. “Think what you want.”

He’s gone before Sam knows what’s happening, and then there’s the sound of the Impala’s engine revving from outside. By the time Sam gets to the kitchen door it’s too late.

Dean is gone.

Again.

Erica is sitting on the sidewalk out in front of the hardware store when Sam shows up for work the next morning.

He thinks about driving past and then calling in sick so that he can go hide at Bobby’s for a while, but he guesses he isn’t going to be able to escape whatever tongue lashing he has coming—Erica must know where Bobby’s is, even if Sam hasn’t ever seen her there—so he parks across the street and heads over. She tilts her head up as he approaches, squinting into the bright sky.

“Make it fast,” he says. “I have to be at work in four minutes, and I’m not coming in late just so I can stand here and get yelled at.”

But Erica just looks up at him for a few moments anyway, as if proving that she can, before announcing, “Dean told me what happened.”
“I figured.”

She tilts her head, eyes scrunched nearly shut as she peers up at him. “I don’t like you,” she says bluntly. “I don’t think you’re good for him, and not just because of the brother thing.”

Sam starts—he was beginning to think Dean hadn’t told her after all—and Erica smiles slightly at his reaction.

“When did he tell you?” he asks after a brief delay. He sits down next to her less because he wants to and more because his knees just won’t support him anymore.

“Before we moved in together,” Erica answers. “He said he wanted me to know everything.”

“And do you?”

She pulls her knees in and hugs them against her chest. “Do I what?”

“Know everything?”

Regarding him soberly, Erica says, “Sam and Dean Winchester. Your mother’s name was Mary; your dad is John. Ghosts and vampires and werewolves are real. Demons are real.” She smiles then, a little bitterly, and rests her cheek on her knee. “Dean didn’t actually have to tell me that one. I found out the hard way.”

Sam frowns, trying to connect the dots she’s spreading out in front of him and failing.

After a couple of moments, she gets tired of waiting for a response and says, “One of them came here and tried to kill me. Dean saved me. He doesn’t think it counts, because she was really trying to hurt him, but it does. You understand?”

Sam thinks maybe he’s beginning to. “You fell in love with him?” he guesses. God knows it wouldn’t be the first time. Dean’s charming enough when he’s just some good-looking guy in a bar. Throw in the whole white knight angle, and Dean has left more than a few broken hearts in his wake.

But Erica laughs, lifting her head again with a snort. “Fuck no.” She bites her lower lip, hesitating, and then amends, “Well, a little. If things were different, maybe. But they’re not.” The look she fixes him with is sober and intent, her eyes full of edges and shadows.

“Sometimes,” she says more quietly, “Things happen and you can’t undo them. You can’t go back and be who you used to be, even if you want to.”

She hasn’t come out and said anything—isn’t doing anything but hinting, really—but suddenly Sam knows. The realization shocks into him, twisting in his gut, and now he really does get it. Now he understands how connected they are, and why she doesn’t like to be touched, and why she always shrinks back whenever Sam gets a little too loud and close.

He doesn’t think his expression changes at all, but Erica’s lips pull tight and she turns her face away from him.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she says curtly.

“I didn’t—”

“It changes things, when people find out. They look at you different. They look at you like it’s going
to rub off on them if they get too close.” Her voice is thin, and a little resentful. She’s blushing, some high emotion—maybe anger, maybe embarrassment—coloring her cheeks. “And then you get to thinking that maybe they’re right. Maybe you are contaminated, and nothing is ever going to wash you clean, and then you just get to wanting it to be over.”

She turns back then, facing him directly, and there’s no dissembling as she says, “And then maybe you chase a dozen Vicodin with half a bottle of bourbon and go to sleep for a while.”

“You said you met him in the hospital,” Sam says with belated, dawning comprehension.

Erica nods, tucking a stray curl back behind her ear. “That was the first time he saved me. I love him, and I owe him. So when I tell you that I want Dean to be happy, I want you to believe that I mean that. I mean it no matter what it takes.”

Slowly, Sam nods.

“Like I said, I think you’re bad for him. Ever since you showed up, he’s been ...” She trails off, pursing her lips, and then says, “He can’t trust you. He shouldn’t. You left him once, no reason not to believe you’ll do it again.”

“I won’t,” Sam protests.

“Talk’s real cheap, Sam,” Erica responds flatly. “And when you decide you don’t like the sound of your voice anymore, or when you figure out it takes actual effort to make a relationship work—when you realize he isn’t the perfect prince you’re making him in your head—then I’m going to be the one trying to fit the pieces back together. So I’m asking you to get out now, when I still have something to work with.”

There are so many responses Sam could make to that—what Erica has been through is awful, but it doesn’t give her the right to judge him the way she is. It doesn’t give her the right to tell him he doesn’t love Dean enough to stay. That Sam doesn’t have it in him to stay.

But the things he wants to say would take this conversation down paths best trod in private, and he’s becoming increasingly aware of how exposed they are out here at the side of Main Street, so he limits himself to saying, for what feels like the millionth time, “I’m not leaving until he tells me to go.”

Erica sighs and chews on her lower lip for a moment. Then she says, “Dean can get pretty touchy about our relationship. Not just with you, with everyone. He knows how I feel about sex, and he gets—he doesn’t like people thinking he’s taking advantage. Add the fact that it was you asking to the mix, and he was pretty much guaranteed to fly off the handle.”

After pausing to take a deep breath, she continues, “He feels like shit about it today, but he’s a stubborn son of a bitch, and unless you want to wait around for a couple of months for him to cave, you should go find him first. Actually if you hurry, you should catch him out back working on the garden. He’ll be in a more receptive mood if you get to him before he goes back inside.”

Sam frowns as he tries to find the catch in Erica’s sudden burst of helpfulness. “Why are you telling me this? I thought you didn’t want me coming around and messing up Dean’s life.”

“I don’t,” Erica answers plainly. “But I don’t want to be the reason you couldn’t work things out either. Dean would never forgive me for that.” Climbing to her feet, she adds, “And Sam?”

“Yeah.”
“I’m not your ally on this. In fact, if a day goes by that I haven’t told him I don’t trust you, and that he shouldn’t either, I more than make up for it on the next day. I’m not letting you hurt him again. Are we clear?”

Dry-mouthed, Sam nods and gets a smile in return. It almost looks friendly.

“I just want what’s best for him,” Erica announces, folding her arms over her stomach and looking down the street at an approaching car.

“Me too,” Sam agrees.

She tilts her head at that, looking back down at him with a considering frown. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Then walk away,” Erica tells him. “Say goodbye first this time, but walk away. You being here is making him miserable, and he deserves better than that.”

She’s halfway down the street before Sam relocates his voice and calls, “I’m not giving up.”

This time, there isn’t anything friendly about the smile she tosses back in his direction.

“Neither am I.”

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Erica was right about one thing, anyway: Dean is in the garden. He’s mentioned things once or twice over the past five months that made Sam wonder if he was responsible for that as well, but he wasn’t quite able to credit it. Gardening takes too much patience for Sam to associate it with his impatient, rough and tumble brother.

Except here Dean is, wearing his ever-present St. George medal and leather cuffs. He’s barefoot in the early morning sunlight, dirt smudges on the soles of his feet and all over his jeans. The t-shirt he’s wearing is old and ratty, with a hole in the lower back showing a tantalizing peek of skin.

“So you garden too, huh?” Sam says before he can get close enough for his brother to accuse him of sneaking up.

Dean doesn’t start, though: just tilts his head up and then sits back on his heels. He has some kind of plant in his hand, and from the dirt dribbling from its roots, Sam is pretty sure it used to be in the hole by Dean’s right knee.

Dean looks at him for a while, and Sam can tell that his brother is considering telling Sam to get the hell off his property. He worries that Erica lied to him about Dean’s ‘more receptive’ frame of mind, but Dean finally tosses the plant into a bucket to his left and shrugs.

“Looks like,” he says.

“Can I help?”

That gets him a second, more searching look, and then a grudging nod. Leaning forward, Dean grasps a clump of green close to the earth and then slants a glance back at Sam. “You grab here,” he instructs. “And pull slow. Otherwise, you’ll leave part of the roots behind and the son of a bitch’ll just sprout up again in another day or so.”

Sam shifts a few feet down from his brother and crouches himself, reaching for a nearby tuft of
“Those’re carrots. Pull them up and lose a hand.”

Dean’s voice is mild, but Sam snatches his hand back quickly anyway, taking a closer look at the leaves on the plants his brother is pulling up. After a few moments of contemplation, he hesitantly reaches again—this time for a different bunch. Dean doesn’t say anything, and after Sam has worked the roots free from the soil, his brother wordlessly shifts the bucket forward so that it’s between them.

For a while, Sam doesn’t say anything. At first it’s because he doesn’t know how to start, but then he realizes that he’s enjoying this. He hasn’t felt so close to Dean in a long time, and even then it was never this peaceful. It was never just the two of them hunkered down beneath the wide sky and doing something that doesn’t involve either of them bleeding or killing anything.

When he chances a glance over at his brother, Dean’s concentration seems completely focused on the task at hand, so he steals the moment to observe. He takes in the smudges of dirt on Dean’s cheek and forehead where he must have mopped his face—it’s warm already, even this early in the morning, and Dean’s really working to pull some of the weeds free. He notes the splash of white cutting through his brother’s hair, and the crease of the scar on his forehead, and the way that the sun is glinting off the short, pale hairs on his forearms above the leather cuffs.

“Take a picture,” Dean says without looking up. “It’ll last longer.”

The words don’t hold any of the chill hostility Dean normally warns Sam with, but Sam grimaces anyway. “Sorry,” he says. “I forgot.”

“Forgot what?” Dean grunts as he tosses his most recent retrieval into the bucket.

“That you don’t like being looked at.”

Dean stills at that, caught in mid-reach for another victim. He recovers, but too belatedly for him to be able to pass the moment off. “You’re a little intense,” he says after a moment, and digs his fingers into the earth by another weed’s roots.

Sam isn’t sure what to say to that. A denial wouldn’t be anything but a lie. An apology wouldn’t be any better—he isn’t sorry about the depth of his emotions for Dean. He can’t be. In the end, he keeps his mouth shut for a change and continues to help his brother clear out the vegetable garden.

A couple minutes later, Dean says, “I thought you worked on Wednesday.”

“I called out,” Sam answers. “I wanted to come see you.”

“What for?”

Sam’s pulse races, now that the moment is here. Now that he has to get the words out. “I wanted to apologize for yesterday,” he says softly.

Dean stops moving again, with the weed he’s working on pulled half out of the ground.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Sam continues. “But I was jealous and I—I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Jealous, huh?” Dean repeats, releasing the plant and straightening to meet Sam’s eyes. “Why, because I live with her?”

“Because you let her touch you.”
Sam said something similar just last night, but Dean must have been beyond listening then because he blinks like it’s the last thing he expected to hear. Then the words sink in and Sam can see his brother beginning to take it the wrong way. He sees his confession start to twist into something low and dirty, and his gut lurches.

“Not like that,” he hastens to say. “I don’t mean that I want to—to touch you, touch you. Not that I don’t want that, I just. I meant casual. Little things.”

“It’s called trust,” Dean replies scathingly. “You earn some, maybe I’ll let you hold my hand too.”

“Do you think I can?” Sam asks, and at his brother’s sharp look he clarifies, “Earn your trust again?”

He wants Dean to say yes—to assure him that they’ll get there some day—but Dean only shakes his head with a sigh. “I dunno, Sam,” he says. All of the sarcasm has drained out of his voice, leaving it weary and dull. “Try me again in a couple of years if you’re still around.”

There’s really nothing Sam can say to that—nothing Dean would believe, anyway—so he doesn’t even try. Instead, he bows his head and goes back to weeding, soaking in the balm of his brother’s presence. He tries to keep his mouth shut—tries to enjoy the moment—but he can’t stop thinking of what Erica told him. After hearing Dean sound so thin and worn, it seems more plausible by the second, and in the end the question is rattling around too loudly inside of him to be ignored.

“Do I make you unhappy?” he asks.

Dean looks up again, face creased with surprise. “What?”

“Me being here,” Sam clarifies. Ignoring the snaking, uncomfortable sensation in his stomach, he continues, “Am I upsetting you? Because I don’t—I want you to be happy, Dean. If you need more space, I can back off.”

For a long moment, Dean stares down at his hands, frowning. Sam’s stomach winds tighter and tighter as he waits—he’s starting to wish he never asked the question, not when it’s getting this kind of response.

Then Dean says, “Having you around, Sam, I don’t—I can’t think straight. You piss me off, you know? And you just—it’s fucking my head up, having you here like this. There’s a lot of water under the bridge, or whatever, and it’s not easy to handle, man. So yeah, sometimes, you. Sometimes I wish you never came back.”

Sam’s throat closes up on him at his brother’s condemning words, and before he can tell Dean that he doesn’t have to worry about it anymore—he can leave if Dean needs it, give him his peace and happiness back—Dean’s gaze lifts and pins him in place. His eyes are so dark they’re almost black, pleading and vulnerable as they search Sam’s.

“But that doesn’t mean I want you to leave.”

For a long, painful moment, Sam doesn’t know what to do with himself. He can’t think through the alternating surges of devastating pain and illuminating joy crashing through him—one right after the other, and sometimes both at once. He doesn’t know when he starts crying, but he can feel moisture on his cheeks, and he knows it isn’t sweat. Blinking the tears from his eyes, he lifts a hand and tries to rub them—smears dirt on his face and doesn’t care.

“Okay,” he manages. His voice is hoarse, roughened with all of the emotion clogging his throat and chest, and he swallows before trying again. “Okay, I’ll stay.”
And, for the first time, he thinks there might be a part of Dean that actually wants to believe him.
Two weeks later, in early July, Sam moves out of Bobby’s. He can’t deny that Dean’s admission is a contributing factor in his decision, but mostly it just feels like time. He’s been in town for a full year, after all, and he can’t go on living with Bobby forever.

There aren’t all that many options in a town of Humboldt’s size, though, and when Sam factors in his current income, his search field narrows to just two: a motel a few miles outside of town that rents rooms by the week, and a series of cramped apartments located above the storefronts along Main Street.

Sam decides against the motel for the simple reason that it will send Dean the wrong message, and puts a five hundred dollar down payment on the apartment on the same day he views it. Three days later, he and Bobby are hauling cardboard boxes filled with his meager belongings up a narrow stairway. Dean isn’t there to help because Sam never told his brother about the change—he meant to when he went over to Dean’s house for poker a couple of nights ago, but he was too afraid of how Dean would react to get the words out.

“Tell you what, son,” Bobby grunts as he drops the first box down on the apartment’s bare floorboards. “It ain’t the Taj Mahal.”

Sam glances around, wistfully hoping that the apartment has somehow grown since his new landlord showed it to him, but it hasn’t. It’s still the same single room with its futon and tiny radiator below a rickety window. No kitchen aside from a two-foot square tiled area in one corner with plug-ins for the stove Sam doesn’t own. Then again, he doesn’t have a refrigerator either, so not being able to heat things up isn’t going to be much of a hardship.

The apartment’s only door leads into a bathroom with a yellowing toilet, a chipped sink, and a shower stall that Sam is going to have to contort into new and interesting shapes to fit inside. The walls are all peeling and faded, and the light bulb is bare in its socket overhead, although Sam guesses there was some sort of cover when the place was new.

He drops his own box on top of Bobby’s and pushes them both over to the wall. They’re going to have to serve as his dresser for a while—even if Sam could afford a second-hand piece of furniture, he sure as hell isn’t going to be able to fit one in here when the futon is unfolded. And it isn’t quite long enough for him to sleep on it comfortably in couch form.

“You sure you don’t want to come on back with me?” Bobby asks, eyeing a brownish stain on the futon cushion that the landlord swears is from a pot of tea. “You can save up some more, get a nicer place. And it ain’t like you’ve told Dean yet, so he doesn’t even have to know about this little misadventure of yours.”

Although Sam is tempted to take Bobby up on the offer—the thought of spending even a single night here makes him want to cry—he knows he can’t. “You know how fast news travels around here,” he says. “You really think he hasn’t heard by now?”

“ Took him long enough to figure out about your job.”

That’s true enough, but things were different then. That single day at the picnic wasn’t enough for people to connect him with Dean. Sam was an outsider, and not worth gossiping about. He knows the townsfolk now, though—greeted several by name as he carried his box from the truck to the back door. And he may not be as closely linked with Dean in anyone’s mind as Erica is, but someone is
going to mention this to Dean—probably within the hour.

Besides, as depressing as this place is, it’s Sam’s. And he hasn’t had his own, stationary space in a long time.

“I’m good here,” he says softly.

Grimacing, Bobby tugs at his cap and turns back toward the door. “Damn dog’s gonna miss you,” he mutters.

Bobby isn’t looking in Sam’s direction, but Sam smiles at the man anyway, his chest warming.

“It’s not like I’m moving across the country,” he points out. “I can come visit whenever you want.”

“Who says I want to see your ugly mug?” Bobby says gruffly as he starts down the stairs. “It’s the dog I’m worried about. Pea-brained mutt’s gonna drive me nuts pining.”

Sam prudently doesn’t mention the emotion he hears choking the man’s voice as he follows Bobby out.

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Early the next morning, Sam wakes to an insistent pounding on his door. He rouses slowly—after so long at Bobby’s, he’s lost the knack for sleeping in unfamiliar surroundings, and he didn’t drift off until well after midnight—and then staggers for the door while rubbing at his bleary eyes. Unused to the smaller confines of his new apartment, he stubs his toes against the wall and then swears, leaning down awkwardly to rub them. The knocker pounds on his door again.

“I’m coming already!” Sam calls, fumbling for the lock. “Jesus!”

The door swings open as soon as he manages to pop the lock and then Dean is pushing past Sam and striding inside. Sam turns, still hanging onto the knob as he watches his brother move around his apartment in a slow, cautious circuit. Dean’s eyes are going everywhere: noting everything. He opens the bathroom door and peers inside there as well, although he doesn’t bother going in—no point when he can see everything just fine from the doorway.

When he finally finishes his inspection, he turns around to look at Sam. Their eyes meet for a moment before Dean’s gaze dips, darting across Sam’s chest and stomach. Beneath the weight of the stare, Sam’s gut twists in a way that isn’t entirely uncomfortable, and he remembers only after his brother’s eyes settle low on his hip that he isn’t wearing a shirt.

“Oh,” he says stupidly. “Sorry.”

As he moves for his makeshift dresser, reaching for the shirt he threw over the boxes last night, his skin pebbles with the realization that Dean was looking at his tattoo. He wonders if Dean still has his, or whether he ponied up the money to have it removed. He wonders how it would feel to see a featureless field of scarred flesh on his brother’s hip instead of his name, his mark. As he pulls the shirt over his head, Sam’s chest gives an unhappy little pulse at the thought. Much as he’d like to, though, he can’t deny that it’s within the realm of possibilities.

When he turns around Dean is over in the ‘kitchen’, standing with his back to Sam as he pokes around by the hot plate Bobby insisted on buying yesterday.

“I, uh, I know it’s not much,” Sam announces into the stifling silence. He expects some kind of joking response from his brother—even something as lame as, ‘dude, we’ve stayed in roach-infested
motels that were nicer than this’—but instead Dean is silent. After a moment, he leaves the hot plate in favor of inspecting the small plant sitting on Sam’s windowsill—the apartment’s lone decoration.

“Shirley sent that over with Leroy,” Sam says, trying again.

This time, Dean turns around. His eyes stay firmly fixed on Sam’s face as he shoves one hand into his pants pocket. He isn’t smiling, but Sam doesn’t think his brother looks angry, either. It’s difficult to tell, though. Dean has his walls up as high as they’ll go and his eyes are unreadable mirrors.

“You should come over tonight,” Dean says after a long pause. “I’ll make you dinner.”

“Okay,” Sam agrees, just as easily and readily as he’s accepted all of his brother’s other invitations. He’s proud that the nerves fluttering around in his stomach don’t show in his voice.

Dean stares at him for a moment longer, as though searching for the lie, and then nods and lets himself out without another word.

When Dean pulls the door open at Sam’s knock that night, the friendly greeting Sam was about to offer gets caught in his throat. As the moment stretches out, Sam understands that he’s staring—knows Dean hates it—but he can’t bring himself to look away.

Dean’s hair has been meticulously styled into soft-looking spikes. He’s wearing a button-down shirt instead of the t-shirts he normally favors—lightweight and close fitting, it hugs the line of his body and shows off his broad shoulders and tapered, narrow hips. The St. George medal glints at the exposed hollow of his throat, where the shirt gapes open. He has the sleeves rolled back up to his mid-forearms, exposing the dark, solid cuffs wringing each wrist. His jeans are new and a dark, midnight blue. He’s wearing honest to God dress shoes.

Except for the faint impression of the scar creasing his forehead, and the near invisible hook at his temple, he might be a model posing for a high fashion photographer. Or possibly some kind of demigod. Either way, just the sight of him is leaving Sam weak at the knees, and now he’s starting to get a whiff as well—Dean must have oiled his cuffs, because Sam can smell them: the familiar burnish of leather mingling with the virile, warmer scent that’s just Dean. The alternating waves of arousal and longing that go through him every time he breathes in are making his hands tremble.

Dean’s eyes are the translucent, anxious color of limes. His mouth is frozen in an uncomfortable, awkward little smile. As the moment drags out with Sam’s entranced stare, Dean looks away and rubs a hand at the back of his neck, stepping back out of the doorway.

“Come on in,” he offers.

Somehow, Sam gets his feet moving and steps over the threshold. He turns as Dean shuts the door, unwilling to lose sight of his brother even for a moment.

“Are we going out?” he asks as his voice finally comes unstuck.

Dean is still avoiding him, eyes down on the floor now while he shrugs and moves past Sam deeper into the house. “Does it smell like we’re going out?”

Now that Dean mentions it, Sam can smell something filling the air past his brother’s more tantalizing scent. Something that smells like herbs—rosemary, maybe, and the mouthwatering undercurrent of warm bread.
“What is that?” he says, following his brother toward the kitchen.

“Focaccia,” Dean answers. The casual, easy-going tone of his voice is only slightly forced, and his smile looks genuine enough when he glances back at Sam on his way toward the marble-topped island. “Thought we could have Italian.”

“Oh,” Sam says, and then, because his mouth is still stupid sometimes, he adds, “You look nice.”

Dean tenses for a moment, shirt pulling tight across his shoulders, and then relaxes again. “Thanks,” he mutters, reaching for a knife and a purple onion. “If you want, there’s a Coke in the fridge.”

Sam isn’t actually thirsty, but he’s twitchy with nerves—doesn’t know what to make of Dean looking so nice, or with the stiff, awkward tension in the room—and he needs something to focus his attention on, so he nods and heads over to pull out a can. When he turns around again, his eyes come to rest on the kitchen table—two settings, not three. And that stupid, oversized candle he brought over so many months ago set up in the middle.

“Where’s Erica?” he asks as he fights to get his heart to slow down.

“At a friend’s,” Dean answers. He doesn’t pause in his work, dicing the onion into neat, tiny cubes with competent flicks of his wrist. He always was good with knives.

“So we’re eating when she gets back?”

Now Dean stops, putting down the knife and turning around. He leans back against the island, hands loosely cupping the lip of the marble top, and looks at Sam wordlessly.

This time, Sam is the one who looks away, stomach flipping as he moves toward a harmless photograph of a mountain on the wall. He tries to think of something to say to deflect the moment and comes up blank, all of his words lost in the upwelling of adrenaline pounding through him. Licking his lips, he tightens his grip on the can of Coke and pretends to study the photograph.

After a few agonizing minutes, the sound of Dean chopping resumes.

Sam is startled to find that he’s sweating from relief—grateful Dean didn’t push and force a confrontation on him. His fingers are trembling badly as he tries to pop the Coke open, and he feels lightheaded. Each beat of his heart thunders through his body like the aftershocks of an earthquake.

Erica isn’t here. She isn’t going to be here. It’s just the two of them. Alone.

Sam’s been alone with Dean before since he came back, of course, but for some reason it feels different tonight. It’s Dean’s clothes, perhaps, or something about the way Dean is acting. It’s something in the way the air feels charged and heated between them. It can’t be what it looks like—Sam’s certain of that much—but he can’t seem to interpret it any other way. Can’t make it feel like anything except the impossible.

He chokes on the first pull from the Coke. His hands are still shaking, the rush of anxious nerves running through him and making him tip the can back too far and too fast. Coughing, he lowers it and presses his other hand over his mouth.

In the next moment, there are strong hands on him—one lightly pressing against the small of his back, the other gently but insistently taking the soda away. Sam tries to say that he’s fine, that Dean shouldn’t worry, but his brother is already guiding him over toward the sink. The steady pressure of Dean’s hand only eases when Sam is gripping the metal edge of the basin and coughing into it. Before Sam has a chance to miss the contact, it’s back again—this time resting solidly between
Sam’s shoulder blades.

Dean doesn’t say anything—doesn’t offer any reassuring words as Sam coughs in an attempt to clear his lungs—but the weight of his hand feels almost like a benediction. It feels like the forgiveness Sam’s sure he hasn’t earned yet. God, all he wants to do is turn and drag his brother into a tight hug. Not let go again until sometime next year.

But he’s coughing too violently to manage it, and when the hacking coughs ease, Dean moves away again, leaving the treacherous can of Coke on the counter to Sam’s right as he goes.

“There’s a facecloth in the bathroom if you want to clean up,” he offers on his way back over to the kitchen island.

Sam stays where he is, shaking and even more strung out than he was before his coughing fit. He isn’t ready to move—not yet.

Dean isn’t making any sense, damn it. He isn’t acting the way Sam’s accustomed to—hasn’t so much deviated from the script as tossed it into the fireplace to burn—and the uncertainty of the evening is getting into Sam’s mouth and head and, worst of all, his heart.

He’s reading this wrong. He has to be.

He can’t stand at the sink forever, though, and finally he makes himself turn and heads for the downstairs bathroom. The sound of Dean’s knife snicking down into the chopping block chases after him, and Sam welcomes the silence that folds around him when he shuts the bathroom door behind himself with a shaky sigh.

When he reemerges fifteen minutes later, face cooled and freshly washed, Dean has finished with the onion and is busy pouring some kind of herb and olive oil mixture over a tray of chicken breasts. The tangy scent of lemon has replaced the sharper onion smell, but Sam is past noticing food. He barely gives the loaf of focaccia cooling on the counter a glance as he makes his way over to his brother.

Dean doesn’t look up, although he has to be aware of Sam’s approach. His eyes are locked on his preparations with resolute steadfastness, but the tiny twitch of his jaw muscle gives him away as Sam comes to a stop across from him. Putting down the bowl, he reaches into the roasting pan and starts massaging the oil into one of the breasts—thumbs moving in tight, purposeful circles. It would be distracting if Sam’s stomach weren’t already wound up as tight as it could possibly get.

He watches anyway, standing across the island from his brother as Dean finishes with one breast and moves on to the next. He watches and remembers how those fingers used to feel on his own body, and how strong Dean’s grip is.

He watches until he can’t stand it anymore and then gasps out, “Dean.”

Dean’s hands still.

Licking his lips, Sam continues, “Dean, man, you need to. You need to give me some kind of clue here.”

For a moment, he doesn’t think he’s going to get any kind of meaningful answer. Then Dean takes his hands off the chicken and looks up.

Sam has been dealing with his brother’s sudden shifts in mood his whole life, but he’s gotten used to Dean being opaque over the past year or so, and the naked honesty of his expression now takes Sam by surprise. Dean’s eyes are awash with emotions—anger, sorrow, and fear turning his irises to a
stormy sea-green color. His jaw is tight; his lips thin. His hands tremble where they rest against the counter.

“What are you doing, Sam?” he says. “The apartment, the job. Making nice with the natives. What the fuck do you think you’re playing at?”

Sam’s heart sinks so quickly that the empty ache which replaces it in his chest leaves him breathless. “I’m not—Dean, I’m not playing at anything,” he whispers. “I told you, I’m here. I’m not leaving. But I don’t. I don’t know how to make you understand that.”

Dean blinks and turns his head sharply, looking away. Sam doesn’t think that the way his brother’s eyes are watering has anything to do with the onion he was cutting up before.

“I used to pray you’d come back,” Dean says after a moment. The words come out roughened by the emotions Sam can still see flickering across his brother’s face. “I made every deal with the man upstairs that I could, and then I. Then I tried looking somewhere else for help. Had a cigar box made up and everything.”

The cold ice flooding Sam’s gut tells him instantly what Dean means—images of the red-eyed demons he ran into during his own years alone flicker through his mind—and he breathes, “Dean, you didn’t…”

But Dean shakes his head, thank god.

“Bobby caught me. He dragged my ass back to his place and locked me up for a few days. You know he’s got a panic room in the basement?”

Sam wants to reach across the island and touch his brother. He wants to haul Dean into a hug and apologize for leaving yet again. But he can’t say anything that hasn’t already been said a hundred times, and he knows that Dean wouldn’t welcome the contact. So he’s silent while his brother stares at the stove and lets slow, solitary tears slip down his cheeks.

“Anyway,” Dean says finally. “You never showed. And then one day, I thought, ‘fuck it. Fuck him if he wants to leave. I don’t need him.’” The smile that twitches across his lips is terrible—weak and self-mocking. “But I never figured out how to make myself stop wanting you back. No matter how hard I tried, I kept hoping I’d look up one day and you’d be there.”

“I am here, Dean,” Sam offers, unable to hold his tongue any longer. “I wish I could have come back sooner, but I’m here now.”

“I know,” Dean agrees as he looks back over. His smile softens as he meets Sam’s eyes, but there’s still far too much regret and sorrow in it. “But I can’t trust you, Sam. I don’t—I know you’re trying, but I don’t know how to trust you not to leave again. I don’t think I can.”

Sam’s chest twists at that statement, but he clings to hope as he asks, “Then why are we here, Dean? If you can’t trust me—if this isn’t going to work—then why am I here tonight? Tell me that.”

Dean just looks at him for a long moment, eyes wet and reddened, and then shakes his head. “I don’t know;” he confesses. “I don’t—when it comes to you, man, sometimes I don’t know up from down. I’m not—” He laughs weakly. “—I’m not exactly working off a plan, here.”

“Guess that makes two of us, then,” Sam replies.

Instead of turning hostile and defensive like he has every other time Sam has tried to find some common ground between them, Dean nods. He doesn’t look any happier than he did when the
conversation began, but at least there isn’t any anger in his expression. Even if the weary resignation isn’t much better.

For a long moment, it’s silent between them—quiet enough that Sam can hear the oven ticking to his left. But the uncomfortable tension that was filling the air earlier has eased, and Sam has no trouble standing still and letting Dean process his emotions and thoughts. It isn’t until he notices the lines creasing his brother’s forehead that he chances a question.

“You want to share with the class?”

Dean hesitates a moment longer and then, gaze still fastened on his own fingers, answers, “I think it might help if I—y’know, if you told me why.”

“Why I left?” Sam says, surprised by the request. “Didn’t Bobby—”

“I want to hear it from you,” Dean interrupts. His head comes up again, eyes tentative and bruised. There’s hope in that look—mostly buried, but recognizable—and Sam realizes with a start that Dean has been waiting for this. Underneath all the scowls and snarls and sneering words, Dean’s been yearning for it. Maybe he’s telling the truth—maybe he can’t trust Sam, doesn’t know how.

But he wants to. That much is clear from the way he’s looking at Sam now.

With an odd, surreal sensation—like falling upward into the sky—Sam wonders if this is why his brother has been so frantically trying to push him away. If this is why he was so distant for so very long, and so reluctant to let Sam near.

Maybe all that anger that Sam thought he saw wasn’t anger at all.

Maybe it was fear. Maybe it was a frantic, instinctive attempt at self-preservation.

Sam’s ribs somehow wind even tighter beneath the weight of his brother’s gaze, and it takes him a couple of tries to get enough air to say, “It wasn’t you. I didn’t leave because I didn’t love you, or because you weren’t good enough. I left because I wasn’t strong enough to help. I was only making things worse, Dean, and you weren’t—you weren’t going to get better with me hanging around screwing things up.”

Surprisingly, Dean doesn’t explode at the words. He does look away again, hands sliding to the edge of the counter and tightening on the marble lip, but it’s promising enough of a response for Sam to continue.

“I should have called,” he says, which gets him Dean’s attention again—his brother’s eyes are searching now, mistrustful. With an effort, Sam pushes away his own defenses and lets his boundless regret for that mistake show in his expression. “I was—it’s not an excuse, but I was pretty fucked up for a while, and then I was. I was scared, I guess. But I should have called.”

“Damn right you should have,” Dean says. The words don’t contain any of their usual heat, though, and a moment later he sighs and rubs at his eyes. “You’re not the only one who had a rough time, dude. It hasn’t exactly been birthday cakes and sunshine in this neck of the woods, either.”

“I know,” Sam agrees. “And I wish I could have been there for you, but I—Dean, if I was here, you wouldn’t be. I would have—I would have hurt you.”

Something in Sam’s voice must give away just how seriously he means that, and Dean’s gaze sharpens, edged with fear and suspicion.
“Hurt me how?” he asks.

And fuck, Sam didn’t mean to take the conversation here. He isn’t ready for this particular discussion—they aren’t ready for it. The slowly mending bridge between them won’t take the strain of what Sam almost became—what he could still become, if he ever forgets the lesson he learned from Ansem.

“I can’t,” he says, and his voice comes out more broken and rough than he expected it to. He has to pause to clear his throat before continuing, “I can’t talk about that right now, Dean. I’m sorry, I—I’m not trying to keep secrets or anything, I just. I can’t.”

He expects his brother to push anyway—ever since Sam came back, Dean hasn’t seemed to care how he feels—but instead Dean says, “Okay.”

“Okay?” Sam checks, certain the other shoe will drop at any moment. Dean will tell him to get out, or he’ll clam up and back away. Something.

Except then Dean says, “Something else. Anything. I want.” He stops, tongue darting out to wet his lips, before blurring. “Four years, man. Where the fuck were you?”

For the first time, it isn’t an accusation. It’s a question—a request for one of the missing pieces of Sam’s life—and the burst of relief in Sam’s chest surprises him into a laugh.

“You want the cliff notes version, or War and Peace?”

Dean lets out a soft laugh of his own and rubs one hand over his face. When he lowers it again, most of his walls are back up—but not quite as high as before. Not quite as foreboding. He’s wearing a slight smile as he picks up a chicken breast again and starts massaging.

“How about we start with a hunt.”

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Sam actually tells Dean a couple of stories that night—chupacabra down in Mexico, a weeping woman in Colorado. When he cautiously asks a question of his own in return over dessert, Dean only hesitates for a heartbeat before answering that Erica asked him to move in with her as a favor. And no, he wasn’t still living with Bobby when he got the invite.

In the following weeks, Dean lets more precious nuggets of information drop—his first meeting with Frannie, the flood, the bar fight where he got the tiny scar on his cheek (from Winston, apparently: Sam never would have guessed to look at them now), how he got roped into helping out with the fireworks display the year before Sam came back. Twice, Sam tries to get him to go back further, but Dean just shuts his mouth and looks away, and after his second attempt, Sam gets the message.

Dean isn’t ready to talk about those first three years after Sam left.

Which is only fair, Sam guesses, since he isn’t talking about his own struggles with the demon blood inside of him, or about Ansem, or about the retreat. He mentions Andy a couple of times in passing—provides just enough detail for Dean to understand that Andy’s a friend—but mostly his own stories revolve around what it was like to hunt south of the border.

The majority of their conversations take place over dinner at Dean’s house while Erica looks on like a disapproving chaperone. She never misses another night after that first, and Sam can’t tell whether his brother is happy or annoyed about her hovering. He never asks her to leave, but once or twice Sam catches Dean looking his way with an odd, almost wistful expression—an expression that’s
quickly covered up once Dean realizes Sam is looking back.

However they’re meant, those looks leave Sam with a warm, nervous glow in his stomach, and he can’t help craving more. More of those looks, more honest conversations, more of Dean.

Which is why he agrees to fill in when Bull breaks his ankle trying to put a new antenna on his roof and Dean’s baseball team needs a replacement outfielder.

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Baseball isn’t Sam’s sport. Never was, never will be. There’s just something about that tiny, white ball that makes it want to leap out of his glove every time he tries to catch it. Something about that length of polished wood that makes him choke up whenever he steps up to bat.

Soccer, Sam understands. Soccer, he excels at.

Unfortunately, soccer isn’t the sport of choice for Humboldt’s Park and Rec department.

Dean picks him up on the day of the game and they drive over together, windows rolled down to let the wind blow away as much of the late August heat as it can. It’s almost like old times, sitting in the Impala with his brother behind the wheel, and that’s making him just as jittery as how goddamned gorgeous Dean looks in something as simple as jeans and a ratty blue t-shirt. The small crowd filling the bleachers when they get to the park doesn’t help calm Sam’s nerves any, and he’s already sweating as he follows Dean toward the diamond.

“Don’t worry,” Dean says out of the corner of his mouth as he lifts a hand in greeting to an older man Sam recognizes but can’t quite name. “They know not to expect much.”

“Gee, thanks,” Sam mutters back, but his brother’s words actually do help a bit. It’s nice not to be under any real pressure for a change.

Dean gives him a quick smirk and then they’re at their team’s metal bench and Winston is taking Sam in tow and leading him out to his patch of outfield.

“You’re covering from here to here,” Winston explains, walking the limits of his jurisdiction with him. “Just try not to trip Davie up and you’ll do fine.”

“No tripping, check.”

Winston grins and claps Sam on the shoulder with one oversized hand. “Okay, then. Let’s play some ball!”

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The game doesn’t go as poorly as Sam thought it would—he manages to catch what otherwise would have been a double, and actually hits the edge of the ball with his bat a couple times. He never makes it to first base (too surprised he hit anything to start running), but the congratulatory bump on the shoulder that Dean gives him on his way back to the bench more than makes up for that small disappointment. When they win—thanks mostly to Dean’s innate athleticism and Winston’s curve balls—Sam feels justified in hollering the victory to the sky along with everyone else.

Afterwards, he expects to head back to his apartment to shower—baseball isn’t as physically demanding as he remembers soccer being, but it’s the middle of summer and Sam is pretty much soaked with sweat—but instead, as the spectators disperse, Dean and the rest of their team head toward the pond.
Sam jogs a few steps to reach his brother’s side and, when Dean glances over, asks, “What’re we doing?”

“It’s called the post-victory swim, Sammy,” Dean says with a grin. “HumbleBee tradition.”

Sam stumbles a little, insides shocking cold at the sound of that fond, familiar nickname on his brother’s tongue. Dean hasn’t called him Sammy since he came back, and Sam doesn’t think his brother realizes he’s done so now because Dean doesn’t pause on his way to the thin strip of sand that serves as the pond’s beach.

As Dean kicks off his shoes, Sam stops completely, still a ways back from the water. His heart is beating too quickly, and he knows that his face is broadcasting all of the tumultuous emotions roiling through him. And if Dean turns around and sees Sam’s expression, then he’s going to realize what he just said, and god only knows how he’s going to react.

But Dean doesn’t turn around. Dean pulls his shirt over his head and then opens his dusty jeans and pushes them down—at the sight of all that bared skin, Sam catches a vague flash of arousal on the other side of his numbing shock. He watches as, wearing nothing but his boxers and his wrist cuffs, Dean runs forward into the water with a loud splash.

Somehow, Sam makes himself get moving again at the sound, stepping up to the edge of the water before sitting down to pull his own shoes off. Out in the pond, the rest of the team isn’t so much swimming as horsing around—their whoops and catcalls bounce off the tall pines by the picnic tables and echo back. As he finishes with his shoes and starts in on his jeans, Sam glances up quickly to see Dean laughing as he shoves Winston’s head underneath the water.

Winston comes up a moment later, spluttering and wiping water from his eyes, and shouts, “That’s it: everyone get Singer!”

Still laughing, Dean splashes back out of immediate reprisal range and shoots a look toward the shore. “Dude!” he shouts, dodging an attempt to drag him under. “Little help?”

Most of Sam’s shock has finally warmed into joy, and he feels himself grinning as he hurriedly shucks off the rest of his own clothes and thunders through the pond’s shallows. As soon as the water reaches his waist, he takes a breath and dives forward, using his legs to push off from the sandy bottom for some extra speed.

He hasn’t been swimming in years, but all of the lessons that began in a Vegas swimming pool come flooding back—muscle memory coming to life as he cuts cleanly through the water toward the closest target. When he collides with a pair of legs a moment later, he doesn’t hesitate before grabbing them and yanking, and then comes up for air.

Dean’s only a couple of feet away, grinning as he grapples with Randy Halston, who lives two apartments down from Sam. His eyes don’t so much as flicker in Sam’s direction, but his grin widens as Sam pushes his dripping hair back out of his face, and a moment later he says, “What took you so long, Sammy?”

This time the nickname sends a thrill through Sam’s veins—like pent up lightning—and on the accompanying surge of adrenaline, he grabs hold of the man trying to pull him under from behind and flips him up and over his shoulder, dropping him back into the water with an explosive splash.

Everything goes blurred and waterlogged after that—the whole melee a confused mess of flailing arms and legs. Sam can feel the battle calm trying to sink over him and resists it—there isn’t any danger here, no Us-or-It mentality, and he doesn’t completely trust himself not to hurt anyone when
he’s swaddled in that detached numbness. He’s hampered a little by his caution—has to keep on reminding himself this is play and not an actual fight—and time and time he finds himself briefly dunked before he manages to get a good grip on his assailant and flip him in turn.

The names and faces of the men around him run and flow together, until Sam isn’t quite sure whom he’s grappling with at any moment—can’t really see with so much water running in his eyes. But he never, not for one instant, loses track of Dean, and when he takes a step back and collides with a broad, solid expanse, he knows exactly who he just ran into. Dean leans into him—a brief moment of pressure that communicates more than Sam ever expected to be able to read from his cipher of a brother—and instead of giving Dean his space the way he was about to, Sam sets his shoulder blades more solidly back against his brother’s.

For the first time in years, Dean is in his blind spot, guarding his flank. It’s them against the world—or as good as—and although they aren’t doing anything more serious than playing dunk-your-buddy in a small town pond, Sam doesn’t think he’s ever been this content.

He wishes the game could go on indefinitely, but it doesn’t take long for the others to figure out it’s become a futile endeavor. They can’t get to Sam with Dean blocking the way, and they can’t dunk Dean without first going through Sam. Soon after that realization sinks in, the celebration calms as the members of the team either head back to shore or haul themselves out of the water and onto the diving raft to lie panting in the sun.

With the danger of being dunked now passed, Dean shifts away from Sam’s back. Sam turns, already missing the contact, and has a split second to take in Dean’s wicked grin before his feet are kicked out from under him, plunging him beneath the surface. He gets his mouth shut in time to avoid taking a deep gulp of pond water and then grimaces as his brother’s hand comes down on his head, shoving him deep enough that his ass scrapes on the muddy bottom. It only takes Sam a couple of seconds to get his feet under him again once Dean releases him and then he resurfaces with a gasp, blinking rapidly to clear his eyes and looking for the next attack.

Except Dean is already halfway back to shore, glancing back over his shoulder with a lopsided grin as he hurries from the water.

“You jerk!” Sam shouts, wading out after his brother.

“The whiner,” Dean replies easily as he steps out onto the shore and shakes his head. Droplets of water fly off his hair, spraying the ground around him. More water runs down his body, tracing graceful lines of muscle, and Sam comes to his second shell-shocked halt of the day.

Dean isn’t as bulky as he used to be—Sam noticed that his first day back—but this is the first time he’s had a chance to notice that less muscle mass doesn’t necessarily mean less muscle tone. He doesn’t think he’s ever seen Dean so sculpted, every muscle given clear, sleek definition by the sunlight and the water streaming off his skin. He knows he’s never seen Dean this tan—didn’t know Dean could manage that rich, tawny color across his shoulders and lower back.

Now that he’s looking, of course, Sam is noticing the tiny imperfections in his brother’s skin—lighter areas that refuse to hold any color. The thin lines of scars run all over his body—their shared history mapped out: all those hunts Dean came back from banged up and bleeding. All those wounds Sam had to wash out before stitching his brother’s skin closed again beneath Dad’s watchful eyes. The scars have faded a little over the years, but Sam can still see them—he can still read the past from Dean’s body—and his heart beats more quickly at the memory of tracing them with his hands, and of brushing them lightly with his lips and tongue.

He wants that memory to feel tainted and sick—the moments were stolen, were damaging to Dean—
and he does feel a little tremor of cold at the reminder of how close he came to ruining his brother completely. But the sun is bright, and that dark time is distant, and mostly what Sam feels is the ache of longing mingled with the warm flush of arousal.

Suddenly, he’s really fucking thankful that his groin is still mostly hidden by the water.

Then Dean turns around, and Sam’s heart stops.

He stares at his brother, mouth hanging slightly open in what is undoubtedly a stupid expression, and tries to remember how to breathe. Tries to think past the sight of his name—his claim—still etched in dark, solid lines on his brother’s hipbone where Dean’s boxers have slipped low.

Dean’s easy, playful grin falters and then fades beneath the attention. He doesn’t turn away, though. Doesn’t run from the scrutiny. He doesn’t try to cover himself, or flush, or show any signs of being uncomfortable with the weight of Sam’s eyes.

After a few moments, Dean’s gaze lowers, and Sam knows his brother is looking at the mirroring mark on Sam’s hip—Dean’s name edging the rune tattooed into his skin.

Without any conscious decision on Sam’s part, he finds himself moving forward again, coming up out of the water to stand before his brother. The sound of their teammates’ voices is muted around them—distant. The day seems harsh and overbright.

Dean watches him approach and doesn’t move.

Carefully, and as cautiously as though he’s dealing with a wild animal, Sam shifts his right hand forward. His fingertips brush his brother’s side—an instant of water-slicked skin—and Dean flinches.

Guilt sharpens in Sam’s throat, and he immediately starts to take his hand back, hesitating only when he catches his brother’s eyes. Dean’s face may be as blank as he can make it, but those expressive eyes of his are giving him away. Sam can read fear there, which he was expecting, but mostly Dean is projecting a quiet, pleading desperation that makes Sam’s chest give a sharp, deep-seated ache. Responding to the unspoken plea, he grips his brother’s hip more solidly and catches a flicker of relief across Dean’s face.

Still terrified that he’s reading his brother wrong—and painfully aware that he’ll irrevocably break the tenuous connection between them if he pushes too hard—Sam moves his thumb in a slow, careful drag along Dean’s skin.

The tremor that runs through his brother’s body in response is almost imperceptible. Sam is watching for it, though, and he’s keyed up enough to notice Dean’s other minute tells—Dean’s breath shallows and speeds; his lips part slightly. His eyes have gone soft and unfocused. Heated.

They’re just inches apart, Sam realizes. He wouldn’t have to lean in far—wouldn’t have to do more than tip forward to have his brother’s mouth under his own.

He’s trembling himself as he instead releases Dean and takes a single step backwards.

Dean blinks as Sam’s hand falls away, looking confused and slightly dazed. Then he gives his head a shake, and drops his eyes as awareness of what they were just doing floods in. The awkward way Dean crosses his arm over his stomach in a protective, concealing motion tells Sam that he got it right for once. Dean isn’t ready for this.

But if Sam is reading the signals right—and Sam is almost positive that he is—then that doesn’t mean
that Dean doesn’t want it.

“Sam,” Dean starts, his voice husky with emotions Sam can’t even begin to untangle.

“Damn it, Sam. You owe me twenty bucks.”

Sam takes another step back from his brother, startled by the unexpected closeness of Winston’s voice. Dean turns away as the moment breaks, his movements stiff as he heads over to his pile of clothes and starts getting dressed.

“What?” Sam says intelligently as shoves down the desire to break Winston’s nose for interrupting them.

“I bet Shirley twenty bucks that you weren’t that Sam,” Winston says, seemingly oblivious to Sam’s sour mood. “Figured you woulda said something by now if you were. Now I’m gonna have to pony up the cash.”

Sam’s ire slips away in the face of mounting confusion. “‘That’ Sam?” he repeats. “What—” Then he catches another glimpse of his brother’s tattoo as Dean does up his jeans and comprehension crashes in.

For the first time, Sam understands why the entire town was convinced Dean was gay. He’s been assuming it was something Dean said, or maybe Dean’s abstinence when it comes to any kind of relationship, but of course the first time Dean went swimming people would have seen the tattoo. And even if they don’t understand the significance of the rune, there aren’t a whole lot of explanations for having another man’s name tattooed on your body. Now Sam has shown up—right name, his own matching tattoo (two, if you count the protective tattoos they both have stenciled over their hearts)—and oh fuck, the entire town is going to know about this before it gets dark tonight.

Dean carefully isn’t looking in Sam’s direction as he pulls his t-shirt over his head.

“Sorry,” Sam says numbly. “It was a long time ago.”

“Aw hell,” Winston says, clapping Sam on the shoulder. “I ain’t upset about you being a fairy, Sam. Singer set me straight on that one a while back. It ain’t even the twenty bucks. But Shirl’s gonna be a pain in my ass for the next month.”

“Serves you right for betting on my love life,” Dean says, coming to Sam’s rescue. He wasn’t quite dry enough to get dressed, and his t-shirt is clinging to his chest in a really distracting way. Sam does his best not to look as he takes his own clothes from his brother and starts pulling them on.

“At least tell me what the other one’s for. Give me a shot to earn my money back.”

“I already told you,” Dean says. “It’s to ward off demonic possession.”

“Demons, right,” Winston snorts before turning to Sam with a pleading expression. “Hey, Sam, help a pal out. It’s a military thing, right? Some kind of covert ops shit?”

When Sam catches his brother’s eyes, Dean shares a tiny smile with him. “Sure, Winston,” Sam agrees as he finishes zipping up his pants. “See, Dean and I used to be part of this covert military team that hunted supernatural creatures. Demons and ghosts and that sort of thing. And it’s just like he said—the tat’s designed to ward off demonic possession.”

Winston stares blankly while Sam puts his shirt back on, and then lets out a skeptical snort. “Yeah, right,” he mutters, turning away. “Thanks for nothing, guys.”
Sam manages to hold out a moment longer than his brother, but they both wind up laughing all the way back to the car.
Two weeks later, Dean shows up at Sam’s front door and all but forces him into the Impala. There’s a new zombie movie that just came out, apparently, and it’s playing at the Cineplex two towns over. Popcorn, Cokes, and rotting corpses. Just how Sam wanted to spend his Friday night.

Sam manages to keep his mouth shut most of the drive over, but as they’re pulling into the parking lot, he can’t take it anymore.

“Dean, is this a date?”

“What?” Dean says. “No.” He’s scowling and twitchy in the driver’s seat, and the words come out a shade too quickly to calm Sam’s nerves.

“Cause it looks like a date.”

“Look, do you want to see Zombie Apocalypse Three or not?” Dean mutters, pulling the Impala into a free space and parking.

“Just making an observation.”

“Yeah, well, keep your observations to yourself. Bitch.”

“Jerk,” Sam shoots back.

He does his best not to read anything into it when Dean insists on buying both their tickets.

Sam tries to subdue his steadily growing hope, but it’s difficult as the weeks turn into months and Dean continues to send out all the right signals. He judges his progress in terms of his brother’s easiness with his proximity—the way that Dean will occasionally reach out and touch him for no apparent reason. The way Dean has several times let his hand rest against the back of Sam’s neck, as he drives Sam home after dinner at his house.

Things with Erica aren’t going nearly as well, of course—she’s painfully polite whenever it’s the three of them, but on the few occasions Dean has left them alone together, Sam’s been sure he’d come away from the encounter with frostbite. He tries talking with Dean about it, but his brother still refuses to discuss Erica with him. It’s frustrating, no matter how well everything else is going.

Even more frustrating is the blank void that lies between the Now and the Then—those first three years after Sam left his brother that he still knows next to nothing about. He’s asked Bobby once or twice, now that things between them are okay again, and gets absolutely nowhere. Oh, Bobby’s nice enough about it, but he keeps stonewalling Sam with the assertion that if Dean wanted Sam to know, Dean would tell him.

Sam’s pretty sure it will be a cold day in Hell before Dean decides to do that.

It’s just another Tuesday, no different from any of the others they’ve spent at Bobby’s since he and Dean mostly mended the fences between them. Dean picks Sam up after work and drives them both over. Then Dean cooks dinner, while Sam talks with Bobby and distracts Bonham by playing tug-of-
war with a chew toy.

But Sam can’t quite shake the feeling that something is wrong.

Dean’s quieter than usual, is the thing. He seems pale and worn, almost ill. And he isn’t meeting Sam’s eyes. When he does elect to speak, he mumbles so that Sam has difficulty hearing. Bonham senses something wrong too; keeps leaving their game to go over and snuffle at Dean’s leg for a pat on the head. Even Bobby shoots Dean concerned glances when he thinks Sam isn’t looking.

The meal is just as delicious as ever, but Sam can’t bring himself to eat much of it. He’s too worried about Dean, who isn’t doing more than pushing his own dinner around on his plate.

“Dean, man, are you okay?” he asks finally.

In response, Dean drops his fork, gets up, and walks into the living room.

Bobby exchanges a glance with Sam and then they both push up at the same time, following after Bonham, who is already hurrying in pursuit of his master. In the living room, they find Dean sitting on the couch with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Bonham is doing his best to wriggle his head between Dean’s body and his arm, tail wagging slowly from side to side.

Sam moves to join his brother, only to be stopped by Bobby’s hand on his arm. When he shoots an annoyed glance over at the man, Bobby is looking past him at Dean.

“You need to be left alone, son?” Bobby asks.

Dean leans back against the couch at that, lowering his hands so that he can glance over at them, and gives his head a slight shake. “No,” he says. “I need to—I have to talk to Sam.”

Bobby’s hand tightens on Sam’s arm. “You sure you want to talk to him now?”

“Yeah.”

Bobby waits a moment longer and then releases Sam, leaving him free to move forward again. Only now, of course, he doesn’t want to. There’s a cold pit of dread hollowing out his stomach, and he doesn’t think he’s been this frightened since he first came back. He doesn’t know why Dean’s acting like he is—doesn’t know what’s coming—but whatever it is, it can’t be good.

“You want me to leave you two alone?” Bobby asks.

Dean hesitates and then shakes his head wordlessly. For a long moment they all stand there, frozen in awkward silence. Then Bonham whines and leaps up onto the couch, crawling onto Dean’s lap and nosing apologetically at his face. Dean gets a hand up and pats clumsily at the dog’s head.

“S’okay, buddy,” he says. “It’s not your fault.”

Freed by the sound of his brother’s voice, Sam tentatively moves further into the room. “Did something happen?” he asks.

Dean shakes his head. “No. It’s just. That time of year, I guess.”

And then it hits Sam.

It’s November second.

How the fuck could he have forgotten what day it is?
On shaky legs, Sam makes his way over to one of Bobby’s chairs and sits down.

“Anyway,” Dean continues as Bonham settles across his lap. “I’ve been meaning to talk with you. About a couple things. I was gonna wait until after dinner, but I guess it isn’t gonna keep that long.”

Sam’s throat has gone bone dry. His chest is a lump of ice. “What sort of things?” he rasps.

Dean is silent for a moment and then, head lowered and eyes focused on Bonham, he says, “I met Erica in the hospital. She told you that, right? She said she did.”

The half-formed dread in Sam’s stomach sharpens to an ache as he nods. Dean doesn’t glance up to note the answering motion, but apparently he wasn’t really looking for a response because he’s already continuing.

“Head doc sent me. Said it’d be good for me to talk to someone else who.”

He stops abruptly, mouth shutting and eyes dropping to stare at the dog in his lap. His hands rub up and down the scruff of Bonham’s neck in a clear sign of nerves. After a few beats of uncomfortable silence, Bonham twists his head around and noses at Dean’s chest, providing the reassurance Sam isn’t sure he’s allowed to offer right now.

That doesn’t stop him from wanting to go over there and put an arm around his brother’s shoulders, of course—fuck, he’d do anything to pull Dean out of whatever black mood has taken him. If he could. If Dean were in a state to let him. But he can’t comfort his brother, so instead he does the only thing he can think of and says the words Dean is clearly having a difficult time getting out.

“Someone else who was raped.”

Dean gives his head a sharp shake of denial. His mouth twists. His hands clench violently enough in Bonham’s scruff that the dog shifts and lets out a protesting whuff.

Oh God. Oh God it’s worse than just the rape.

How the fuck can anything be worse than that?

“Dean,” Bobby calls gently from his place by the door.

The unexpected reminder of his presence doesn’t do anything but leave Sam more on edge. He feels cold, but there’s a damp slick of sweat building at the small of his back. The air has gone thin and dry, and he can’t seem to get any into his lungs past the growing ache in his throat. He watches as his brother tilts his head to one side—a sign that he’s listening, even if he won’t actually look up at Bobby.

“You don’t have to do this now,” Bobby adds.

It’s a sentiment Sam feels he can get behind, because he’s damn sure he doesn’t want to hear whatever Dean’s trying to say. Even if there’s a cold, horrified part of him that already knows.

“What, cause it’s gonna be easier later?” Dean replies as he finally lifts his head. His voice is sharp—almost caustic—but the fear Sam senses beneath his brother’s words is a vast improvement over the stiff, flat tones Dean was speaking in before.

Instead of looking back down at the dog, when Dean turns away from Bobby, he fixes his gaze on Sam. His eyes are like the mirrors he used to shy away from, any emotions he might be feeling hidden behind all the defenses he can muster. Sam would give anything to be standing anywhere but
beneath the weight of that gaze right now, but Dean has turned merciless and holds him with a somber stare.

Then Dean says, “I got sent in as a peer counselor.”

There aren’t a whole lot of ways Sam can take his brother’s words, and only one way that makes any sort of sense. Only one way that confirms the creeping suspicion in his stomach.

“When?” he manages through the sudden blockage in his throat.

“About a year after you left.”

Dean sounds blasé and casual now that they’re actually talking about it—like it wasn’t any more serious than a cold or a stubbed toe. Like he isn’t rearranging Sam’s world view as he sits there, isn’t tearing bloody swathes from Sam’s ribcage and heart.

Leaning back against the couch, Dean purses his mouth briefly before adding, “I slit my wrists. Bobby found me before I bled out.”

Sam’s head swims, leaving him dizzy and close to passing out. His stomach heaves, gripped by nausea so violent that it cramps his muscles. He’s staggeringly aware of his heartbeat, which is pounding out a rapid tattoo of denial against the inside of his ribcage—like he can make Dean take the words back. Like he can make them untrue if his pulse soars high enough, if his blood roars loudly enough in his ears.

His eyes flick down to the cuffs covering—hiding—Dean’s wrists, and the sight of the dark leather makes his skin crawl.

As Dean follows Sam’s gaze, one corner of his mouth quirks up sardonically. “I didn’t do it the right way,” he says. “Apparently, I wasn’t serious.”

“How can you fucking joke about that?” Sam breathes as his voice finally comes unstuck from his thundering heart. “Jesus Christ, Dean!”

Dean shrugs like it doesn’t matter, like they’re talking about the fucking weather. His fingers continue to work absently in Bonham’s fur. “What else am I supposed to do?” he replies. “It happened. I moved on and got over it.”

“You almost died!” Sam shouts, shooting to his feet on a burst of adrenaline.

Bonham startles at the abrupt noise and movement, scrambling off of Dean to burrow into the safety of the cushions at the other end of the couch. To Sam’s right, Bobby takes a single step forward before catching himself.

Dean’s the only one who doesn’t move. He just sits there looking up with a calm, distant expression while Sam’s chest rises and falls in shallow jerks.

The moment stretches out as Sam imagines it—Dean lying pale and blood-smeared on Bobby’s floor. In the bathroom, maybe. Or maybe in the bedroom Sam spent his first year back living in. He sees Dean’s fingers twitch, sees his brother’s lips part as his eyes roll back in his head.

And where the fuck was he when Dean was dying? Drunk? Trying to fuck himself to oblivion in some stranger’s body?

Finally, after what feels like an eternity of waiting, Dean points out, “I’ve almost died lots of times.”
It’s true, but that doesn’t make the announcement any easier to swallow. It doesn’t calm Sam’s nerves, or slow his racing heart, or quiet the fresh doubts in his head. If Dean tried to kill himself once, then he could do it again. He could—there are thousands of ways to die, and Sam can’t protect Dean from himself. Not twenty four/seven. He can’t—Dean could—

No, he thinks stubbornly, hands clenching into fists. *He won’t. He made it this far. He’s not just going to give up. Not now.*

Some of the panic eases at that thought, but the need that replaces it—the need to make sure Dean’s okay, to see—is almost as bad. Shivery and weak with the fresh knowledge of how close he came to losing his brother, Sam crosses the space between them. He senses that he’s looming over Dean, knows that Dean might read the tension in his body as a threat, and is too far gone to care.

“Show me.”

Dean rests his head against the back of the couch and looks up with an air of idle disinterest.

“*Show me,*” Sam repeats. He doesn’t quite recognize the wild, out-of-control pitch to his voice.

“No,” Dean answers coolly, and waits.

For a moment, Sam thinks he’s going to make Dean show him. He could, he knows he could.

Then he notices how light his brother’s irises are, and how wide Dean’s eyes have gotten, and he remembers how upset Dean was acting earlier. No matter how casually he’s behaving right now, underneath the mask he’s as upset by this conversation as Sam is.

Hell, behind the bored facade, Dean is scared shitless.

Somehow, Sam manages to take a single step back. Crossing his arms over his stomach as though he can make his insides settle that way, he looks down at Dean and asks, in a softer voice, “How are you really?”

There’s a pause and then Dean answers, “Good, mostly.”

“Mostly?” Sam repeats, turning his brother’s response into a question.

Dean shrugs. “I have my bad days.”

“Like today?” Sam asks, remembering how jittery Dean was. How pale and quiet.

“No.” Dean shakes his head. “Today was—today was okay. You haven’t seen me on a bad day.” When he looks up again, undisguised resignation and weariness line his face. Cocking one eyebrow, he asks, “You gonna run again?”

Sam could answer that simply enough—he could just say ‘no’ and have done with it. He senses that Dean would take him at his word, that Dean is ready to believe Sam now that he’s laid all of his cards (*oh God, Sam hopes those are all of his brother’s cards*) on the table.

But instead Sam finds himself saying, “I have demon blood in me.”

He half-sees and half-senses Bobby come to attention over by the kitchen doorway, but he can’t look away from Dean’s eyes right now. What he has to say is too important to break the connection between them, even for a moment. Sam can’t risk being misunderstood.

He tells Dean everything—the first, sorry year he spent alone; discovering his powers; learning of the
yellow-eyed demon’s taint. He tells Dean about meeting Ansem and Andy, and about the retreat. He
does his best to explain what it was like there, and how the newcomers sometimes screamed their
way through the initial stages of detox, and how dark and lonely and hopeless the woods seemed in
the dead of winter.

He continues to talk as Dean’s face pales and goes empty. As his brother’s walls come up, higher
and higher. He talks until he’s hoarse and then, finally, falls silent.

Dean sits where he is for a long moment, staring up at Sam with an unreadable expression, his irises
faded to the uncertain color of watered down tea, and then he stands up. Sam doesn’t move. He
doesn’t protest as Dean turns and walks back through the kitchen and outside.

And then, perhaps inevitably, comes the growl of the Impala’s engine as Dean pulls away, leaving
him alone with Bobby.

Sam’s eyes are already watering as he glances over at the man, and he half-expects Bobby to have a
shotgun out and cocked in his hands. But Bobby’s just standing there looking at him. Sam can’t quite
read the man’s expression through the wash of the tears that have started to fall, but he doesn’t think
Bobby looks angry, at least.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“You want to stop apologizing for things that aren’t your fault, Sam,” Bobby replies, and that’s all it
takes.

All of the pent up guilt and lost time and missed opportunities and fear and anger come spilling out,
and Sam has to sit down on the couch before his legs give out on him. His head is pounding; his face
feels flushed. He keeps choking on his snot as he sobs, face buried in his hands. When Bobby settles
a single hand on his shoulder, Sam reaches up and grasps the man’s wrist like a lifeline.

“I fucked up,” Sam chokes out. “Bobby, I—I fuh—”

“You ain’t the only one, kiddo,” Bobby says gently, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “And if you’re
beating yourself up about your brother, then don’t. You gave him a mouthful to swallow just now.
Give him a little while to digest; he’ll be back.”

Despite Bobby’s assurances, it takes Sam almost an hour to calm down. Partway through his crying
jag, Bonham pushes his way into Sam’s lap and Sam grabs onto his brother’s dog and buries his face
in Bonham’s fur. He’s probably scaring the crap out of the animal, but he can’t help himself right
now.

When he finally quiets, Bobby is waiting with a glass of water and a wet cloth.

“Thanks,” Sam rasps, taking the glass and drinking it all in a single, long pull.

Bobby exchanges the cloth for the glass and then, as Sam starts to mop his face, says, “I made up
your old room for you.”

Sam’s chest aches with gratitude and then, almost immediately, constricts shamefully. Bobby
shouldn’t have to put himself out because Sam can’t control his own emotions.

“You don’t—Bobby, you don’t have to—”
“You’re staying here tonight, kid, and that’s that. I ain’t gonna lie awake all night wondering how you’re doing.”

Sam cringes a little inside at how baldly Bobby just set him straight as to what he’s concerned about. “I wouldn’t—I don’t do that anymore, Bobby, I swear, I—the meditation, it—”

“I ain’t talking about that, you damned idjit,” Bobby replies. His voice is dry and filled with enough annoyance to bring Sam’s head up.

“Then what—”

“Hell, Sam,” Bobby says, tugging on his cap with a grimace. “You’re so torn up inside about this demon blood nonsense that even a blind man could see it. You think I’m letting you go off by yourself like this, then you don’t have the sense of a damn dog.”

“You’re not worried?” Sam asks tentatively. “You’re not afraid I’ll—”

“No,” Bobby answers. There’s no hesitation in his voice, no doubt. “Whatever happened to you while you were gone, that’s not who you are now. You’re not perfect—not by a long shot—but you’re a good man, Sam. Always were.”

Sam wants to believe Bobby, he really does, but ...

“I hurt Dean. I hurt—demons, when I was gone, and there were people in there, Bobby, I—”

“Wasn’t you,” Bobby says firmly. The look he fixes on Sam is uncompromising and reassuringly stern. “Way I figure it, you were as good as possessed, using that power. That ain’t a mistake you’ll be making again. Now come on, finish mopping up and I’ll heat you up some dinner.”

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

When Sam stumbles downstairs the next morning, head pounding and entire body aching from the tears he shed after Dean left, his brother is waiting in the kitchen. There’s a brown paper bag in the middle of the table, and a steaming mug of coffee beside it. Dean is cupping a mug of his own in his hands, but he puts it down as Sam comes in.

“Hey,” Dean says, eyes flicking here and there on Sam’s face.

“Hey,” Sam manages in return. He hates how quickly the lump in his throat is reforming at the unexpected sight of his brother, and he wishes that Bobby were awake to act as a buffer. Hell, right now he’d settle for Bonham’s exuberance, but Bobby put the dog outside last night and it doesn’t look like Dean let him back in.

For a long moment, they stare at each other. No secrets between them anymore. No lies of omission. It’s just the two of them, both broken in their own way. Both imperfectly repaired.

But miraculously, there’s none of the fear that Sam expected to see in his brother’s eyes. There isn’t even any wariness.

Eventually, Dean clears his throat and says, “So, demon blood, huh?”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. He doesn’t have anything else left to offer.

Dean looks down at his cuff-covered wrists, the fingers of his right hand stroking the etched leather of his left, and says, “Sorry you had to go through that. Must’ve sucked.”
Sam’s throat clenches. “I didn’t tell you to try and get your pity, Dean, I—”

“I know,” Dean says, cutting his explanation off midstream. His eyes flick up and then back down again as his shoulders hitch in a half-shrug. “ Doesn’t mean it didn’t suck. I wish—” He pauses, mouth contorting around whatever words are trying to come out, and then says, “I wish I could’ve been there for you, Sammy. You shouldn’t have had to deal with that shit on your own.”

A weight Sam wasn’t even aware he was carrying around lifts from his shoulders at his brother’s words. Deep inside his chest, some of the raw, open sores still left from his time alone scab over. It doesn’t fix anything—doesn’t make those dark years any easier to think about—but Sam thinks that maybe, just maybe, he can learn to let them go.

“It wasn’t all that bad,” he offers. “I mean, I didn’t try to kill myself or anything.” The unfortunate choice of words registers only after they’re out, and he immediately grimaces and says, “Oh God, Dean. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Dude, chill. It’s okay.”

Dean’s eyes are beer bottle green when they lift to Sam’s, which could mean anything, but the quirk of his mouth seems more humorous than bitter. There’s a softness to his gaze that calms Sam’s racing heart and steadies him deep inside.

“It was a long time ago, y’know?” Dean adds, stretching his legs out into a sprawl beneath the table.

Silence falls between them again then—not exactly tense, but awkward enough that Sam keeps shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He’s about to try apologizing again—just to have something to say—when Dean asks, “So, are we gonna have to hug this out? Cause I’d really rather skip that and go straight to the part where we stop talking about our feelings and get back to what we were doing.”

Fresh hope twists in Sam’s chest, as painful as any knife. He can’t quite believe Dean is offering to let him off the hook so easily. He doesn’t see how they can just move past it like this.

Then again, in comparison with the rest of the shitstorm they’ve been dealing with, he guesses that last night’s revelations aren’t quite so earthshaking. The damage he feared causing—the poison of the blood running through his veins—the sleepless nights he has occasionally spent thinking about this day—and Dean is sitting at Bobby’s kitchen table, offering to swallow the whole mess in a single gulp.

“Dean,” Sam says finally, his voice unsteady. “I don’t—I’m not sure I know what we were doing.”

“Honestly?” Dean answers, leaning back in his chair and cocking his head to one side. “I’m not really sure either. But it was kind of working for me, so unless you don’t want to—”

“No, no,” Sam babbles, taking a hasty step closer. “I want to. Trust me, I want to.”

“Well, okay then,” Dean says with a decisive nod. Reaching forward, he grabs the bag off the table and tosses it over. His voice is as casual as Sam has ever heard it, but there’s something warmer in his expression—a tentative quality to his eyes. “Breakfast of champions. You still like Boston Creme, right?”

Except that isn’t what Dean is really asking.

There are about a hundred nuances to the question before Sam, and he knows he’s only catching about half of them, but he can’t ask for clarification. He can’t ask because he can tell that Dean isn’t
fully conscious of what he’s asking himself—both of them are stumbling around in the dark on this one, looking for a light switch. But that knowledge is actually calming, and the every-present anxiety to get things right falls away.

Sam’s going to fuck up. Hell, he’s probably going to fuck up a lot. But so is Dean. And neither of them are going to run when it happens. The steadily growing connection between them isn’t going to snap at the first wrong word.

“Sam?” Dean says.

There’s an unexpected quiver of nervousness in his voice, and Sam realizes that he’s been quiet for a while now, looking down at the bag in his hands as he tries to come to terms with the unexpected realization that they really are going to be okay. Except his brother has no idea what he’s thinking, and there’s more than a little panic on Dean’s face when Sam looks back up.

“I—yeah,” he says quickly and earnestly. “Yeah, I do.”

“Great.”

Dean’s voice is suddenly brusque—almost curt—but he won’t quite meet Sam’s gaze as he stands up and takes a sip from his mug. The slightly averted tilt of his face isn’t enough for Sam to miss the fact that his brother’s eyes are a little wetter than they should be.

“C’mon, Sasquatch,” Dean says, putting the mug back down and grabbing his jacket off the back of the chair. “Chow down and I’ll drive you to work.”
This time around, Sam greets the holiday season with open arms. It’s stunning how different it feels this year. He spends Thanksgiving at Bobby’s with Dean and Erica—who’s actually civil for once around Bobby’s gruffly cheerful influence. Bonham gets underfoot and steals an entire turkey breast for himself, but even when Sam twists his ankle in the ensuing chase, he can’t stop laughing.

And the way that Dean insists on checking Sam out himself after everything has calmed down again—fingers light and sure as they explore the site of the swelling—makes all the pain worth it. Sam doesn’t even mind having to limp around for the next week or so.

Humboldt’s Festival of Lights occurs not downtown, but in the park. Sam was supposed to help set up this year—Grant Schneider was joking about Sam being tall enough to work without a ladder when he all but drafted him—but of course, his bad ankle has put him out of commission. He heads over anyway, and huddles by the back of his pickup truck with ten red thermoses and ten blue. The thermoses are color-coded to ensure that the men busy stringing all the pines with lights know whether they’re getting hot cocoa or cider spiced with a dash of rum when they come over to warm up.

And so that Sam knows which to offer the kids who have wandered down to watch their fathers work.

Dean’s shifts keep him at the Municipal Bar for most of the set-up time, but he shows up toward the end of the second day—for the sole purpose of causing trouble, as far as Sam can tell. Because his brother stands at the base of one of the trees for a while, squinting up at Tex—who’s working toward the top of his ladder, almost ten feet above Dean—and then squats down and starts gathering some snow in his hands. There isn’t much on the ground yet—it’s barely an inch deep, grass showing through everywhere—but there’s plenty for Dean’s purpose.

“What’re you doing?” Tex shouts down, twisting on his ladder in an attempt to get a better look at Dean.

“Making some snowballs,” Dean answers matter-of-factly. Finished with his first, he sets it aside and starts packing another.

“There’s kids here, Singer,” Grant shouts from his own perch, two trees over. “You’re supposed to be a role model!”

Dean tilts his head as though considering. But even from his position back by the truck, Sam’s certain that it isn’t anything more than an act.

Sure enough, a moment later Dean shouts back, “You’re right, Grant. Thanks!” Then he turns toward the clump of kids and calls, “All right troops, we need some ammo. I want you all ready to fire when your dads come down.”

There’s a choir of curses and insults thrown in Dean’s direction from the men in the trees as the kids scamper to obey. Of course, it takes a couple of minutes for Humboldt’s Festival of Lights volunteers to figure out how to hook the lights in their hands around a convenient ladder rung, and then more time to climb down, and by the time they reach the bottom, Dean and his troops are ready for them.

It isn’t so much a battle as it is a massacre—there isn’t enough snow for the adults to retaliate once
they’ve been pelted—and after a few minutes the park is full of yelling kids being carried around and
playfully shaken by their fathers. The men are growling, mock furious, but Sam can tell that the kids
can see right through the facades of anger, because they’re laughing uncontrollably between shouts.

Sam’s grinning himself, safely away from the mêlée, and his smile only widens when Grant carries
his daughter over and plucks her down in the bed of the truck next to Sam. Lizzie is giggling, and
there’s snow dusting Grant’s hair, which he wipes clear with a snort.

“Every year,” he mutters, taking a blue thermos while Sam pours Lizzie some hot cocoa out of a red.
“I swear to God, he begs off helping just so he can show up and sabotage us. Good role model, my
ass.”

“Daddy, you said a bad word,” Lizzie points out, holding her Styrofoam cup in both hands.

“Yeah, Grant,” Sam agrees with mock sincerity. “That’s one for the swear jar.”

The look Grant tosses him in return is not amused. “Notice you managed to avoid getting pelted.
Maybe next year you can talk to your boyfriend. Put in a good word for the rest of us.”

Sam’s smile freezes at the label, and his heart flutters alarmingly. For a single, breathless moment, he
wants—oh fuck, he wants it to be true. He wants to be able to claim Dean that way. But he can’t.
Not yet.

Clearing his throat, he says, “He’s not—”

“Gonna listen to the abominable snowman? Damn straight I’m not.”

Sam is just starting to turn to face his brother when he feels his collar grabbed and yanked back. Ice
pours down his neck and back, making him flinch forward and leap off the back of the truck with a
choked out, “Shit!”

He vaguely notes Lizzie announcing that he has also said a bad word, but he’s too busy flopping
around in an attempt to get the snow out from his shirt. Which is a difficult task, since it’s tucked into
the back of his pants right now.

“Dance, Chicken Man, dance!” Dean booms, and Sam twists around to glare at his brother while he
finally gets hold of his shirttails and shakes them out.

Dean is leaning against the truck, a smug smirk plastered across his face. When he sees he has Sam’s
attention, he leans over and high fives both Grant and Lizzie.

“Did I do it right?” Lizzie asks, crawling across the truck bed to curl against Dean’s side.

Dean lifts his arm to make room, not seeming to care when she spills some of her hot chocolate on
his coat. “Perfect. You can be my decoy any time, sweetheart.”

Sam can’t tell Dean off for dumping snow down his shirt the way he’d like to with a little kid
around, so he settles for glaring at both men. He wasn’t thinking about his ankle when his back felt
like it was on fire, but he’s sure as hell thinking about it now. Damn thing is throbbing and hot as he
limps back toward the truck.

“Aw, c’mon, Sammy,” Dean says. “You didn’t really think I’d leave you out, did you?”

“I’m injured, Dean.”
Dean snorts, absently patting Lizzie’s arm as she grips the front of his coat with one hand. “Yeah, sure. You’re the walking wounded, all right.”

And yeah, okay, maybe Dean has a point. After all, it’s not like Sam hasn’t run through the woods with worse. Isn’t like he hasn’t seen Dean sprint through the trees with his hand clamped to his side and blood seeping through his fingers. After all of that, he guesses he can’t expect Dean to baby him over something as simple as a sprained ankle.

But that snow burned, damn it. And Dean’s going to be too cautious for Sam to get him back anytime soon.

“I’m gonna marry Dean when I grow up,” Lizzie announces suddenly.

Grant grunts around the mouthful of cider he just took. He swallows quickly and then says, “Dean’s kind of taken, sweetie.”

Sam glances at his brother, waiting for Dean to correct the man’s assumption, and finds Dean already looking at him. Their eyes catch and the humor bleeds from Dean’s expression. He’s still smiling, though—still relaxed and content—and Sam doesn’t know what to make of it.

Dean excuses himself soon after, taking himself back to the Impala and driving off, but Sam’s nerves don’t calm with his brother’s absence. He feels jittery and flushed all the way home. When he falls asleep that night to the fruitless rattle of his radiator, he dreams of the curve of Dean’s smile and wakes up warm.

Last year, Sam was aware that his brother ran a food cart in the park on the weekends, but he never felt welcome enough to show his face. This time around, he stays away the first week—unsettled by Dean’s silence at the truck the other day—but he can’t stop himself from drifting over on the second Saturday. He’s due at Dean’s for dinner tonight anyway, and he figures it won’t be too weird if he shows up at the park for a bit beforehand.

It’s bitterly cold outside, down in the single digits even without the wind, and he grunts when he parks and gets out of his truck. Pulling his heavy woolen cap more snugly over his ears, he heads toward the clump of people gathered at the edge of the skating pond.

And despite the temperature, there are people out today: little kids bundled up in snowsuits and scarves, teenagers doggedly pretending they’re immune to the cold, one or two adults who actually enjoy this kind of weather. And there’s Dean, buried somewhere beneath a parka that puffs him out to two times his normal size. He’s standing hunched over a metal hotdog cart, although the words on the side proclaim that there’s cider and hot roasted nuts inside. From the number of paper cones and Styrofoam cups clutched in the hands of people along the shore, he’s doing pretty good business.

“Hey,” Sam says, coming up alongside his brother.

“Hey,” Dean grunts back. His lips are pressed together and he looks decidedly uncomfortable, hands shoved in his pockets as he shivers. “What’re you doing here, man?”

“Just thought I’d come by and check out your set up. That okay?”

The question is just a formality, though, and Sam isn’t surprised when Dean shrugs. “Whatever steams your clams, dude.” Then he jerks his head in a nod at Sam’s pocket. “Hey, what time is it?”
It takes some effort, but Sam manages to get his phone out and pokes one of the buttons with his mittened hand. “Two thirty-seven,” he reads.

Dean swears under his breath.

“What?”

“I’m gonna be missing pieces when I finally get home,” Dean answers sourly. “Seriously, I’m freezing my goddamned nuts off out here.”

“Your coat looks pretty warm,” Sam offers, and then has to step back for a moment as one of the skaters comes over for a refill on their cider. He watches the transaction casually at first, and then jerks to attention as he sees Dean take his hands out of his pockets to pour the cider and accept the teenager’s fifty cents.

Fifteen below with wind-chill and his stupid, idiotic brother isn’t wearing any gloves.

Sam manages to keep his mouth shut until the kid is gone and then steps in close and hisses, “Where the fuck are your gloves?”

Dean’s jaw clenches. “I spilled cider on them about half an hour ago. Figured no gloves were better than wet ones.”

“Jesus, Dean, you’re gonna get frostbite. Here.” Sam starts pulling off his own mittens, only to be stopped by Dean’s hand—fingers already white from the cold—on his arm.

“Dude, I can’t work in mittens.”

Which is true, but also a little infuriating. Running the food cart isn’t anywhere near as important as Dean’s health, as far as Sam is concerned. He thinks for a few, precious seconds and then, with a resolute expression, grabs Dean’s wrists. The leather cuffs are an obvious, hard line even through Dean’s coat and Sam’s own mittens, and Sam’s stomach gives the same anxious half-twist it always does when he lets himself think about what they mean.

Pushing those darker thoughts away, he draws his brother’s hands closer.

“What’re you doing?” Dean demands. His voice is a little sharp, but Sam can tell that that’s mostly from uncertainty, and anyway, Dean isn’t actually resisting.

“Just let me try this, okay?” Sam urges, and then, after a quick breath to prepare himself, drags his brother's hands up underneath his coat.

Dean flinches as he figures out what Sam is after, hands twisting in Sam’s grasp, but Sam ignores that belated—and halfhearted—show of reluctance in favor of forcing his brother’s hands beneath his sweater and t-shirt. He flinches himself at the first brush of frozen fingertips against his stomach—fuck, Dean’s hands are like blocks of ice—but catches himself quickly and moves forward into the cold.

Dean has stopped trying to pull away, his eyes wide and locked low on Sam’s stomach, like he can see his hands through all the layers of clothing. Something in his expression reminds Sam that he just trampled over a whole lot of unspoken boundaries, and the muscles of his stomach twitch again—this time, for a different reason.

“This doesn’t have to mean anything,” he says, keeping his voice quiet so no one will overhear them. “Just let me warm your hands up a little so I can go buy you new gloves without having to worry
about your fingers falling off before I get back, all right?”

Dean is silent, his expression unreadable, but he isn’t pulling away. After a moment, he presses his hands flat against Sam’s skin and slides them higher, leaving a line of cold in their wake. He’s just looking for warmer skin, but it still feels like a caress, and Sam’s heart races.

“You don’t think this is weird?” Dean asks after a few minutes.

“No,” Sam lies, and then sucks in a sharp breath as Dean flips his hands over and drags his icy knuckles around to Sam’s sides. Fuck, that’s cold.

“People are going to get the wrong idea,” Dean points out, eyes still fastened somewhere around Sam’s stomach.

“Are they?” Sam asks.

Dean shifts his hands around to the small of Sam’s back, fingertips brushing against the waistband of his jeans, and doesn’t answer.

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Christmas is heralded by an increasing nervousness that settles into Sam’s bones and stomach. On the one hand, things with Dean are clearly going better than ever. On the other, lines are getting blurred faster than Sam is completely comfortable with.

His stupid attempt to warm Dean’s hands up before running back to town for gloves somehow turns into an entire afternoon of Dean feeling his way across Sam’s stomach and back and lower chest. Sam keeps meaning to go whenever Dean has to take his hands back to serve someone a cone of nuts or hand them a cup of cider, but before he can quite manage to excuse himself Dean’s hands are back on his skin. And then it’s easy to tell himself he’ll wait just a little longer, especially with the way Dean is shifting his body in close and maneuvering Sam around so that Sam’s bulk blocks the bitter wind.

Dinner that night is an awkward, mostly silent affair, made even more uncomfortable by Erica’s presence. She senses that something is off almost immediately, and then spends the rest of the meal alternating between watching Dean worriedly and glaring at Sam. Dean’s too busy staring determinedly at his own plate to notice.

Three days later, Sam is helping his brother clean up after their usual Tuesday meal at Bobby’s. He’s just started to wash some of the dishes in the sink when a hand lands on the back of his neck. Dean keeps on talking—going on about how much of a bitch it is to shop for Bobby—all the while rubbing his thumb across the nape of Sam’s neck while he stands close enough for Sam’s entire body to tingle with his brother’s heat. Sam waits for almost two minutes without moving, not sure what to do with this.

When it has finally become clear that Dean has no idea what he’s doing, Sam clears his throat and says, “Dean?”

Dean stiffens instantly. The fingers playing across Sam’s skin freeze. Aside from the running water, it’s silent in the room.

“So,” Dean says finally in a too-loud voice, taking his hand back. “How about those Cowboys, huh?”

It’s such a bad cover that Sam can’t help laughing.
Next time, it’s Sam’s fault. At dinner Thursday night, Dean’s complaining about a crick in his shoulders that he can’t work out. Before Sam knows what he’s doing, he’s sitting on the couch with Dean on the floor between his legs. He has his hands all over Dean’s upper back, hunting out knots and massaging them with both thumbs, and it isn’t until Dean makes a quiet little gasping noise that he remembers what this kind of thing does to his brother. He goes still with the memory, images of the full body massage he gave Dean in Vegas filling his head.

Dean turns his head to one side, offering Sam his profile, and there’s a long moment of charged silence. Then Dean asks, “You need me to ditch the sweater?”

Sam’s cock fills so quickly it hurts, and he drops his head back, shutting his eyes and swallowing. Erica’s just upstairs, he reminds himself. Also, this is in no way a good idea.

“No,” he answers finally, forcing his hands to lift from his brother’s back. “I, uh. I should probably be getting home.”

Dean doesn’t move, and Sam’s certain they’re going to have to talk about it. They can’t keep ignoring the growing electricity between them forever.

Except after almost a minute of tension, Dean swallows and says in a thick, hoarse voice, “Yeah. I guess you should.”

Sam tells himself he’s going to be more careful after that, but Dean’s giving out some kind of pheromone or something, and he keeps finding his hands on Dean’s bicep, or his shoulder—and once, horribly, his stomach. He isn’t the only one having a problem, either. Dean’s just as bad as Sam is at keeping his hands to himself, maybe a little worse.

Sam can’t decide if that makes everything easier or just really, really fucked.

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He spends Christmas Eve at Bobby’s—at Bobby’s insistence. Sam accuses the man of having gone sentimental in his old age and gets himself put to work cleaning and oiling all of Bobby’s firearms. Meanwhile, Bonham sleeps sprawled across Bobby’s lap while Bobby watches It’s A Wonderful Life on TV and criticizes Sam’s cleaning skills during the commercial breaks.

Sam could think of worse ways to spend the holiday.

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In the morning, he helps Bobby load up one of the salvage yard cars with presents and booze, feeling decidedly odd as he handles the brightly wrapped packages. He hasn’t had this sort of thing since Stanford and Jess, and it didn’t really feel right even then.

When she brought him home with her, that last year, there was a surreal kind of glow draped over the entire trip. Sam spent most of his time searching for the seam in the costume: the razor blade in the candy. He kept expecting to touch one of the presents under the tree and have his hand come away covered in spray paint.

He’s a little more accepting this time around—a little more used to this kind of thing after a year and a half of living in Humboldt—but it’s still difficult to believe that this is his life now. He can’t figure out how he stumbled across Normal, long after he gave up any hope of achieving it.

Sam loads Dean’s gift into the car last—in the back seat, rather than in the trunk with the rest. God, he hopes that he isn’t screwing up with this one. He hopes Dean gets the sentiment behind it—that
his brother appreciates what Sam is trying to do, what he’s trying to say. No guarantees it won’t blow up in his face, though, and he sighs as he covers the gift with a red and black flannel blanket and then shuts the door.

As worried as Sam is about how Dean’s going to receive that present, it’s the one in his pocket that’s really bothering him. The box feels hot when Sam puts a hand on it through his coat. Feels charged.

Timing is everything with this particular gift, and Sam still hasn’t made up his mind whether tonight is the right moment. Maybe he should wait a little longer.

Probably he should wait.

“You okay, kid?” Bobby asks as he walks across the yard, jingling the keys in one hand.

Not really, no, but they don’t have time to delve into everything going through Sam’s head right now. Besides, this is one of those problems that isn’t going to resolve itself any other way than jumping off the high board into the deep end. Either Sam will figure out how to swim back to the surface or he won’t, simple as that.

But that understanding doesn’t stop him from licking his lips nervously as he gets into the passenger seat, and when Bobby gets behind the wheel next to him, he asks, “You ever wonder how you got here?”

“Oh, I know how I got here,” Bobby answers. There’s a wry twist to his mouth as he starts the engine. “Mostly I just wonder how I could’ve been stupid enough to let myself get dragged here by you two chuckleheads.”

“Must be our charming personalities,” Sam returns, and tries to make his right leg stop jigging up and down in the footwall. With effort, he manages to rein in most of the nervous energy coursing through him.

Bobby snorts as he pulls down the drive. “You’re about as charming as a couple of bipolar porcupines. But you’re family—you know that, right?” The man’s voice is unexpectedly serious as he glances over at Sam, and hearing it put so bluntly dulls the edge of the anxiety tumbling around Sam’s insides.

“Yeah,” he agrees, slipping one hand into his pocket and closing his hand around the box he finds there. “I know.”

“Good. Then take an old man at his word and stop thinking about it so much. You’re gonna give yourself an aneurism.”

Sam slides his thumb over one edge of the box as his lips twitch up into a smile. “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t sass me, kid.”

“Sir, yes, sir,” Sam shoots back.

Bobby rolls his eyes and reaches over to turn up the radio.

Dean’s house is just as brightly decorated as Sam imagined it would be when he spent Christmas alone last year. Dean wouldn’t let him help set things up—that’s something he does with Erica, kind of a tradition—and now he follows Sam around as Sam looks everything over. He’s smiling, but
there’s a nervous cast to it, and it doesn’t take much insight to realize that Dean is trying to make up for all those missed Christmases—not just the years they were apart, but the others as well, when they were growing up and just didn’t have the resources to celebrate properly.

“This is great, man,” Sam offers when they’re finally standing in front of the tree.

“Erica’s got a real eye for design,” Dean replies, and Sam looks past his brother and finds Erica watching with the closest thing she ever seems to manage to a friendly expression.

“It’s great,” Sam says again, this time pitching his voice for her.

Erica shrugs and tucks a curl of hair back behind her ear. “Dean actually did all of the work,” she says. “I mostly ate cookies and directed.”

“Don’t worry, dude. I made plenty,” Dean promises. His grin has widened at the civil interaction between them, and now he claps Sam on the shoulder and asks, “You want some eggnog? I’ll get you some eggnog.”

He’s gone before Sam has a chance to respond, and Bobby is already in the kitchen putzing around, which leaves Sam alone with his brother’s roommate. Sam swallows thickly, shoving his hands into his pockets and looking around at the decorations.

“It’s really nice,” he says again after a moment.

“I thought you’d be gone by now.”

Ah yes. Here’s the Erica Sam has come to know and love. He sighs inwardly, dropping his own pretense at friendliness to reply, “I told you I wasn’t going anywhere.”

Sam waits for the scathing response that’s bound to follow, but Erica doesn’t say anything. She just stands there looking at him with a tiny furrow between her eyebrows and her lips pursed in thought. Her arms are crossed in front of her stomach, protectively, and as Sam replays her words in his head, he realizes that she sounded less angry and more ... actually, he’s not sure what she sounded like. He doesn’t know her well enough to read whatever emotion was in her voice.

She’s still staring when Dean comes back juggling three glasses of frothy, cream-colored liquid.

“Here,” he says, coming toward Sam. “The one with the nutmeg’s yours. No whisky, right?”

“Yeah,” Sam agrees, taking the glass. “Thanks.”

“I don’t get how you do it, man,” Dean replies as he heads back toward Erica and hands her one of the two remaining glasses. “Stuff’s foul without a little cheer.”

“A little?” Bobby coughs as he comes into the living room carrying his own glass. “What’d you do, dump an entire bar in here?”

Dean grins unrepentantly. “Two parts egg, one part nog, ten parts Johnny Walker.”

“Christ,” Bobby mutters as he walks over to the couch and drops down. “Anyone lights a match and the whole damn house’ll go up.”

Sam tries to laugh along with his brother at the joke, but too much of his attention is taken up by the way that Erica is still watching him—not overtly hostile, he doesn’t think, but not happy with his presence either. She watches him all afternoon, and then keeps on right through dinner. And by then,
it’s gotten uncomfortable enough and blatant enough that even Dean finally notices, gazing back and forth between them with a frown.

Sam readies himself for the inevitable confrontation, sure that Dean is going to assume he’s done something wrong. He’s surprised when Dean instead sends him out into the living room with Bobby while Erica stays behind in the kitchen to help Dean clean up. Sam isn’t sure what’s going on at first, but then there are an awkward few moments where Dean’s voice gets loud enough for him to make out, “... hell is your problem?”

He exchanges a quick glance with Bobby and, without a word, Bobby turns on the TV, flips around until he lands on TNT’s traditional A Christmas Story marathon, and then pushes the volume up as high as it will go. Dean comes around the corner a moment later, the color high in his face and his eyes snapping.

And Sam knew that his brother was having an argument with Erica, but having to actually see the effects of it on Dean’s face makes him feel even guiltier. He sinks deeper into the couch, trying to make himself small as Dean glares past him at Bobby.

“Go ahead and turn it up some more!” Dean says, yelling to make himself heard over the noise of the television. “I don’t think they can hear it over in Russia!”

Bobby continues to watch the screen as he calls back, “Yeah, well, we couldn’t hear over all the ruckus you were making in the kitchen.”

Dean goes white at that, eyes flicking briefly to Sam before sliding away again. His throat works for a few moments and then, without another word, he turns and disappears back into the kitchen.

Message delivered, Bobby immediately lowers the volume to a more bearable level. Sam gives it a few minutes and then offers, “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Bobby grunts without taking his eyes off the screen. “And don’t go beating yourself up about it, either. That’s one powder keg that’s been waiting to blow for a while now.”

That’s easy for Bobby to say, but Sam knows it’s more complicated than the man is trying to make it. Maybe the timing isn’t his fault, but he knows damn well that his continued presence is what has been packing the keg full of blasting powder. He’s noticed that things between his brother and Erica have been getting more and more strained over the last few weeks—even since that afternoon when she came home early and found Dean all but plastered to Sam’s back while he guided Sam’s hands in chopping leeks for the stew he was making.

And nothing the man can say can remove the fact that they’re fighting about him.

“Maybe I should go,” he says, fidgeting and tossing a glance toward the kitchen.

“Oh. Right.”

And that’s when Erica storms out of the kitchen, not so much as glancing in Sam and Bobby’s direction on her way to the front closet. Not that that’s enough for Sam to miss the glimmer of tear tracks on her cheeks.

“I’m going out to pick up some more wine,” she announces as she yanks her coat on, voice thick with tears, and then she’s outside and slamming the door behind her.
Sam swallows, feeling like the world’s biggest asshole, and starts to turn back around, only to freeze as he catches sight of his brother standing in the doorway leading from the living room into the dining room.

Dean isn’t looking at Sam. He’s staring past him at the front door, mouth turned down and eyes unhappy. And, Sam thinks, a little puzzled. Like he isn’t sure what just happened himself.

Then his gaze slips from door to Sam.

For a long, drawn out moment, they regard each other quietly, and then Dean lets out a slow breath and rallies, plastering a fake smile on his face.

“Okay, so who wants dessert?”

When Erica still isn’t back two hours later, Sam figures it’s time to stop not talking about it. He waits until Dean gets up from the couch to stroll into the kitchen for a refill on his eggnog and then gets up and follows his brother in. From the understanding weight of Bobby’s eyes on his back as he goes, they aren’t going to be interrupted.

In the kitchen, he finds Dean leaning next to the fridge with both hands curled around the marble countertop. Dean’s head is lowered, and although he has to hear Sam approaching—Sam’s deliberately making as much noise as he can—he doesn’t turn around.

“Dean?” Sam calls tentatively.

Dean’s head comes around a little at that, enough for Sam to see a sliver of his brother’s face as he says, “You need a refill?”

“No,” Sam answers, putting his own glass down on the island as he walks past it. “I came in here to talk.”

He half expects Dean to play stupid, but instead Dean sighs and says, “She’s coming back. She just ... needed to blow off a little steam.”

Sam is close enough now to touch, so he does—lightly at first, cautious and careful and really fucking unsure how it’s going to be received. When nothing happens, he dares to increase the pressure until he can feel the line of his brother’s spine beneath his palm.

“I’m sorry,” he offers, rubbing Dean’s lower back with slow, comforting movements. “I didn’t mean to screw things up for you.”

Dean shakes his head. “Not your fault. It’s just—for a long time, we were all we had, y’know? And now I’m still all she’s got, and you and me, we, uh—we—you and, and—”

He trails off and Sam becomes aware that he’s gone and overstepped the boundaries again; pressed up close behind his brother while his hands slide up Dean’s back to the nape of his neck and begin to knead. He should stop while he’s ahead and he knows it, but Dean picks that moment to drop his head forward in a clear request for more and Sam can’t help himself.

He digs his thumbs into the pressure points he knows are there, massaging and draining some of the tension from his brother’s muscles. The tips of his fingers brush up through the lower fringe of Dean’s hair, so soft, and his breath catches at the faint tremor that runs through Dean’s body. Sam feels flushed and light-headed, intoxicated by the sight of his hands on his brother’s skin.
“You and me what?” he breathes.

“Sam…”

It’s the only thing Dean says—nothing more than a low, reluctant exhalation—but there’s enough emotion coloring the word to drown Sam. There’s enough to drown them both if they aren’t careful, because Dean isn’t ready, no matter what sort of signals he’s sending out right now, and Sam … Sam doesn’t know that he’s ready for whatever’s happening either.

“Tell me to back off,” he pleads, watching helplessly as his right hand slides forward to curl loosely around Dean’s throat. When Dean doesn’t say anything, Sam rests his forehead against the back of his brother’s head and buries his nose in Dean’s hair. Breathes in the scent of Dean and whatever spicy, citrus-infused shampoo he’s using nowadays and feels a flare of heat unfurl low in his groin. His heart rattles alarmingly in his chest: a rollercoaster with the brakes torn off.

Dean swallows—the movement intimate and vulnerable trapped against Sam’s hand—and Sam squeezes his eyes shut. He can feel Dean’s pulse against his fingers, as agitated and out-of-control as his own, and one of them needs to stop this. One of them needs to man up and move away.

“Dean,” he begs. “Dean, please, tell me—tell me—”

Except Sam’s not sure what command he’s looking for any longer, and his whole body is trembling with the effort it’s taking not to push his left hand up underneath Dean’s shirt, get some warm skin against his fingertips. He hooks them in the chain around Dean’s neck instead, giving the medallion a tug, and Dean turns. Dean turns but doesn’t move back or push Sam away, leaving them chest-to-chest and breathing in each other’s spent air.

Dean is staring at Sam’s mouth as though mesmerized, his breathing shallow but missing that sharp, panicked edge that would snap Sam out of his warm haze. Sam’s right hand fell to his side when his brother turned, but his left is still tangled in Dean’s chain, and he can’t figure out how to let go.

Dean’s eyes are too bright, too intent. When Sam licks his lips—they’re too dry, like his throat, feels like he’s in danger of catching fire at any moment—Dean’s hand comes up, blindly groping for Sam’s shirt and bunching the fabric up by his collar.

“Sammy,” Dean says, soft and yearning, and Sam can feel himself falling toward his brother’s mouth when the front door slams.

Suddenly, Dean is pushing instead of tugging at Sam’s shirt, and Sam wastes no time in getting his own hand untangled from his brother’s medallion and stepping back. He smoothes his hair down, certain that she’s going to know, that she’ll take one look and call out a lynching party, and then Erica is rounding the corner and coming into the kitchen. She stops almost immediately, looking back and forth between the two of them and holding a bottle-shaped paper bag in her hands.

When Sam chances a glance at Dean, his brother is flushed and guilty looking.

“Oh,” Dean says. “Erica, hey. Sam and I were. Uh. We were just washing some dishes.”

Sam resists the urge to slap a hand over his face—or possibly over Dean’s mouth before his brother can dig them a deeper hole. Dean hasn’t been this bad of a liar since he tried telling Dad a Jabberwocky scratched the Impala up after Dean miscalculated how much room he had to get past a slow-moving truck on a narrow side street in Philly. He waits for Erica to say something scathing or flare up again, but she just cuts her eyes to the side and lifts the bottle in her hands.

“I found us some wine.”
“Great!” Dean replies, too loud and overly hearty, and then claps his hands together. “You hear that, Sam? Erica found us some wine! How about we all go into the living room with Bobby and have a drink. Yeah? Okie dokie, then!”

And he’s striding past Sam and Erica without waiting for a response, rubbing at the back of his neck with one hand. He shoots Sam a quick glance once he’s past Erica and safely out of sight, wide-eyed and spooked, and then disappears around the corner.

Erica shifts her grip on the bottle, paper bag crinkling, and then takes a deep breath and looks directly at Sam.

“How about we all go into the living room with Bobby and have a drink. Yeah? Okie dokie, then!”

She hesitates for a moment, looking for the hidden barb in the request—he and Dean were just the complete opposite of smooth and convincing, after all. Even though nothing actually happened—nothing Sam can define or quantify, anyway—Erica has to be imagining all sorts of indiscretions. Sam’s surprised she isn’t throwing the bottle at his head right now.

But Erica is just standing there waiting, somehow looking even smaller than usual, and Sam realizes that she’s lost some weight over the last few months. She’s slender now, and it should look good on her but it doesn’t. She doesn’t look as healthy and vibrant as she did when she was carrying those extra pounds—instead, she looks drawn and tired. She looks defeated.

It doesn’t make Sam feel triumphant like he wants it to.

Somberly, he goes over to the cabinet he knows contains all of their glassware and reaches inside. One by one, he takes the wine glasses down and sets them on the counter—could grab all three at once, but he wants the extra time to collect himself. Even moving at a snail’s pace, it doesn’t take him long to finish, and then he’s shutting the cabinet door again and turning to face Erica.

“I’m not sorry about coming back,” he says, trying to keep his voice gentle. “And I’m not sorry I’m getting along better with Dean. But I’m not—Erica, I’m not taking him away from you.”

Because that’s what this is really about. It has to be.

Erica’s eyes glitter in the bright kitchen lights, and Sam feels a faint, surprising stab of pity as she blinks quickly in an attempt to keep her tears at bay. She turns away after a moment, giving him her back, and clutches the wine closer to her chest with a crinkle of paper. The whisper of her parting words as she heads out into the other room is almost too soft for Sam to catch.

“You already have.”

Sam’s sure that the rest of the night is going to be unbearably awkward after his short but brutal conversation with Erica in the kitchen, and it is pretty bad for a while. No one seems to know what to say in the living room, and Sam keeps expecting Bobby to get fed up with the mess and call the three of them out on it. But Bobby is staring at the flat screen like his life depends on it, exchanging glass after glass of wine for whisky-laced eggnog. When A Christmas Story ends its current run and loops around to the beginning again, his fingers don’t so much as twitch where they’re resting on the remote.

Just when Sam is actually beginning to consider walking home after all—losing a couple fingers to frostbite seems preferable to enduring the tension in the house—Dean mutters something under his breath. From the glower on his face, it isn’t anything complimentary, and Sam jumps a little where
he’s sitting on the couch next to Bobby as his brother surges to his feet. In her own armchair, Erica’s head comes up, but she doesn’t unfurl from her hunched over, knees-to-chest position. Her eyes are wide on Dean as he comes toward her.

Dean is moving with deliberation, jaw set in a determined line that Sam is all too familiar with, and a moment later he grabs Erica out of her chair and hoists her up onto his shoulder in a fireman’s carry.

“Dean!” she shouts, flailing her arms in a belated attempt to push him away. “What are you—put me down, damn it!”

Instead, Dean heads in the direction of the front hall, tossing a casual, “Excuse us,” in Bobby and Sam’s direction as he passes. There’s the heavy thud of his tread on the stairs as he carries her—still struggling and protesting—up to the second floor, and then, a moment later, the sound of a door slamming.

“About time,” Bobby mutters next to Sam, finally picking up the remote and turning off the TV. “I think my brain just melted outta my ears. Shoot your eye out, my ass.”

Biting his lip, Sam shifts on the couch and cranes his neck around to glance back at the stairs. “Should we leave?” he checks.

But Bobby just shakes his head and settles back against the couch with a sigh, closing his eyes and tipping his cap down over his face. “Naw. Just given ‘em a few minutes. They’ll sort it out.”

Sam isn’t so sure of that, but it turns out Bobby’s right as usual, because less than half an hour later, the unseen door opens again. Erica looks a little embarrassed as she follows Dean downstairs, but then Dean pauses in the front hall to hook his arm around her shoulders and the embarrassment smooths out.

Sam watches his brother turn his head, lips moving close and intimate beside Erica’s ear, and for the first time there’s no accompanying stab of resentment or jealousy. Erica actually laughs at whatever Dean is saying, getting a hand up and pushing at his stomach. Grinning, Dean lets himself be moved back a step and then follows close behind Erica as she comes over to stand by the couch and ask, with a shaky smile, “So, you boys up for some Grand Theft Auto?”

Sam raises an eyebrow—more at the fact that Erica actually seems to be trying than at the proposed distraction. Five minutes later, though, when he’s watching Dean’s thumbs mash down the buttons on the remote, he has to admit that the whole thing feels pretty surreal. It always hits Sam like this, when he’s least expecting it: how normal his brother’s life has become.

Dean used to hotwire cars when they needed an extra ride, now he’s playing at it for kicks. The path from point A to point B just doesn’t seem to line up easily in Sam’s head.

Dean’s just as good at this play version of the activity as he was at the real thing, of course—he’s always been almost eerily talented when it comes to anything involving hand-eye coordination. And he’s just as obnoxious as ever when he wins, too.

During Dean’s second impromptu victory dance in front of the TV, Sam actually finds himself exchanging a glance with Erica—an unexpected moment of shared, fond exasperation. Erica quickly looks away, lips pursing, but it’s still more than Sam has ever gotten out of her before. He wonders what Dean said to her upstairs.

Whatever it was, most of the high-strung emotions that were filling her earlier today seem to have settled now. If she doesn’t look precisely happy with the situation—with Sam’s presence—then for
the first time, she seems resigned to it. When it comes time to open presents, she actually hands Sam his with something approaching a smile. The expression looks a little strained, true, but Sam will take what he can get.

“Thanks,” he says, surprised she bothered to buy him anything.

“It isn’t much,” she warns, hugging her stomach as she returns to curl up in Dean’s lap where he’s sprawled with his legs hanging over the side of his armchair. The arm Dean slings around her waist is casual and easy and Sam quickly looks away.

Okay, maybe he isn’t quite as okay with the whole Dean and Erica thing as he thought.

Erica’s gift turns out to be a bright red and green scarf, which she apparently knit for him herself, and which makes his own offering—a Best of John Coltridge CD (Dean’s suggestion)—seem paltry in comparison. But Erica seems pleased enough with the present, and her, “No candle this time?” almost feels like a friendly joke.

Sam watches with interest as Bobby opens his own gift from Dean and Erica—Dean refused to tell Sam what they were getting the man. It’s reassuring to see the familiar lines of a pistol when Bobby lifts his gift from the box: a reminder that their old life was real and not just some dark fever dream. Bobby handles the gun reverently, rubbing his thumb over the pearl-embossed grip and beaming like a kid with a shiny new toy.

Dean opens Bobby’s gift next—an incomprehensible tumble of bulbs and seeds, as far as Sam can tell, but Dean seems thrilled. He spends a while poking through the box and double-checking the identity of some seeds with Bobby, and then, finally sets everything aside and glances at the tree. There’s one package left beneath the boughs, and Sam’s insides squirm uncomfortably at the thought of having to open it.

“I’ll go get yours,” he says before Dean can suggest anything else. “You gotta close your eyes, okay? It’s not wrapped.”

“What, couldn’t figure out how to work a tape dispenser?” Dean teases.

Sam gives his brother the finger and then pushes to his feet and heads for the front hall. He hesitates by the closet, still undecided about the all important package in his coat pocket, and then bypasses that door for the front one, jogging down the path and over to Bobby’s car. His breath fogs out into the air as he pushes the flannel blanket on the floor and takes Dean’s gift out, holding it gingerly by the neck.

Sam isn’t outside for long, but by the time he gets back inside, his face and hands are stinging with the cold. His heart is pumping fast, though—adrenaline—and it won’t be long before he’s warm again. After taking a moment to glance at the closet door once more, Sam gives his head a slight shake and gets moving.

He isn’t ready to hand over that particular gift. Not yet.

He forces a smile on his face as he strides back into the living room, trying to hide his nerves, and then comes to an abrupt halt.

Dean is right where Sam left him, hands resting lightly on his thighs and eyes shut. Bobby and Erica are missing, though, and something about the stiff way Dean is sitting tells Sam that their absence isn’t accidental—that Dean asked them to disappear for a couple minutes. Sam’s gift isn’t under the tree anymore, but waiting for him on the coffee table.
Suddenly, Sam’s heart is beating faster than ever, deafeningly loud.

He’s pretty sure that’s what Dean hears when his brother tilts his head blindly toward the front hall and calls, “That you, Sammy?”

“Yeah,” Sam makes himself answer. Another bit of concentrated effort brings his left foot forward, and then his right. He swallows, trying to work some moisture back into his dry mouth, and then asks, “Where is everyone?”

“The washer’s been acting up the last few weeks. Bobby’s taking a look.”

“And Erica?”

“Erica’s making sure a look is all Bobby’s taking—she doesn’t want water all over the basement floor.”

“Ah,” Sam says, carefully not pointing out all the holes in that particular story—starting with the fact that Dean is more than capable of fixing mechanical problems himself, and ending with how implausible the timing is.

This is one lie Sam is more than willing to let slide, because as much as an audience might help diffuse some of the tension running through him, he prefers this. He’s been craving this all day, actually. Just the two of them, just him and Dean.

The way it used to be.

“Hold out your hands,” he says, coming to stand in front of his brother.

“You better not be about to dump a cooler of snow in my lap,” Dean says as he complies.

Sam’s too nervous to laugh at the joke, voice trapped in his throat as he gently places his gift in his brother’s hands.

Dean grunts at the unexpected heft and size of it, and a moment later—as the feel of polished wood registers—he sucks in a breath. His eyes open, immediately fastening on the battered shape of the guitar in his lap. He shifts his grip on the instrument, holding the neck with one hand and the body with the other. There aren’t any strings on the guitar at present, but Dean is running his fingers over the place where they should be, following the tune of some unheard music in his head.

“It’s not the prettiest, I know, but the guy at the store played it for me, and it sounds fine,” Sam says. “And anyway, I thought—”

“I know what you thought,” Dean interrupts, voice not exactly unfriendly but holding enough of a warning that Sam immediately shuts his mouth. He can’t stop looking back and forth from the guitar to his brother, though, and the instrument looks as right in Dean’s arms as he knew it would when he first saw it.

Both are worn; both are battered around the edges. And both are more than capable of shining with nothing more than a few new strings and some polish.

From the tension in Dean’s body, the message is coming through loud and clear.

Sam clears his throat, pulling a flat package out of his back pocket and holding it out. “I, uh, also got you lessons. Mac Harrelson plays, and he said he’d show you how to put these on, tune it up and stuff.”
But Dean still won’t look at him. Instead, his eyes are locked on the guitar as he traces over its worn surface with his hands.

“I didn’t think you remembered,” he says softly, after Sam has finally given up waiting on him and put the strings down on the edge of the coffee table.

“Yeah, well, I do.”

They were only in Clearview, Idaho, for a few months—just long enough for Sam to get used to the routine of waiting for his brother by the back door of the high school band room. He had to wait there because Dean—newly a junior and less than half a year from dropping out—spent forever fooling around inside before he’d walk Sam home. First it was Dolly Beckerson, the second saxophone in CHS’ jazz band, claiming his attention, and then, after Dolly caught him making out with Pam Shields behind the gym, Gabe and Tony Reyers.

Sam still isn’t quite sure how his brother ever connected with those two—both honors students and already bound for one Ivy League school or another—but something about the combination worked well enough for Dean to spend half his afternoon hanging out with them while messing around on one of the school Gibsons.

And Sam isn’t ever going to forget the day Dean stopped spending so much time there—the day that spooked his brother so badly that Dean avoided that entire end of the building until they picked up and moved again two weeks later. He remembers listening to his brother’s halting attempts to pick out Stairway to Heaven on the Gibson—remembers the notes coming to a jarring, surprised halt when the band director unexpectedly stepped out from his office.

“How long have you been playing?” Sam heard the man ask, and it wasn’t Dean who answered, but one of the Reyers’ brothers—Tony, maybe. Tony who said this was Dean’s fourth time picking on the strings.

“Your fingering’s a little clumsy, but you’ve got strong hands and an instinctual feel for the instrument,” the band director replied. “Why don’t you switch into Introduction to Guitar? We’re always looking for new talent.”

Dean did say something then—too low for Sam to catch—but Sam read Dean’s abrupt departure from the room clearly enough.

Back then, it was just another thing to be pissed at Dad about—Dean shutting down on something Sam could tell he enjoyed just because it had the potential to take his attention away from hunting. Away from what he saw as his God-given duty to Dad’s crusade. Over the years, Sam has come to understand that Dad’s approval isn’t the main thing Dean was worried about, but it doesn’t make the memory sting any less.

“You didn’t have to stop just because you were getting noticed, Dean,” he says now, sitting on the edge of the coffee table and trying to catch his brother’s eye.

“Sure I did,” Dean answers. “We were supposed to be flying under the radar, not drawing attention from do-good assholes who could call CPS on Dad. It wasn’t safe, you know that.”

Sam does, but that doesn’t mean he has to like it. Still, it isn’t the conversation he wants to have—this isn’t about the unchangeable past, but the tenuous present—so he lets it go and points out, “It’s a Telecaster. Just like Jimmy Page.”

“Maybe even the same year,” Dean jokes, thumbing one of the deeper gouges marring the body.
Sam starts to stiffen—underlying message or not, he’s a little self-conscious about the fact that he couldn’t afford to get the new instrument his brother deserves—but the humor glinting out from Dean’s eyes as he finally looks up soothes the sting of embarrassment almost immediately.

“So,” Dean says, smiling as he glances back down at the guitar in his hands. “Some of my lessons in Classic Rock 101 stuck after all.”

“What can I say? After the hundredth time you hear something, it gets kind of hard to shut it out.”

Dean snorts, but the noise has a soft, fond feel to it, and the second look he gives Sam isn’t anything but warm and appreciative. “Thanks, Sammy,” he says.

There’s a little too much weight to the words for Dean to mean just the guitar, and some of the tension in Sam’s chest eases as he sees that his brother gets it—that Dean understands everything Sam needs the guitar to say so that he doesn’t have to.

There are some things that Sam’s pretty sure he can’t ever put into words, and the way he feels about Dean—about what Dean has built for himself here—is one of them.

The shared moment draws out a shade too long—long enough for the air in the room to heat and charge—and in the end, it’s Dean who looks away first, clearing his throat and jerking his chin at the package on the coffee table.

“Go on,” he says, carefully not looking at Sam. “Open yours.”

He seems anxious suddenly, and Sam’s own nerves jump in response to his brother’s as he moves to sit back down on the couch and picks up the package. There’s a book inside—he can tell that much just by handling the gift. What he can’t figure out is why Dean is acting the way he is, breath coming fast and light as he clutches the guitar close, half-hiding his face behind the instrument’s neck.

Heart hammering, Sam peels back a strip of brightly colored paper and then stills. Dean didn’t. He can’t have.

Except when Sam can get himself moving again, he sees that Dean did.

There are two books actually, both oversized paperbacks with bold lettering across the covers. On top is an LSAT prep book. Below that is a second study guide devoted to the GREs. Sam balances them in his lap and tries desperately to follow whatever convoluted thought process led his brother to buy these.

From his armchair, Dean says, “I, uh, wasn’t sure. If you still wanted to do the law thing. But I told the chick at the bookstore you were, like, some kind of genius or something, and she said you’d probably want to go to some kind of grad school when you finish undergrad.”

“Dean,” Sam chokes out as his vision blurs. His own gift seems stupid suddenly, insignificant next to what Dean is offering.

“I called Stanford,” Dean continues, his voice too loud and falsely cheerful. “They said you could transfer credits. If, y’know, you wanted to take a few more courses at Dakota State. I mean, I know it’s not exactly top of the line, but, uh, they don’t enroll until spring, so you’ve got time to make up your mind.”

“Dean,” Sam starts, and then has to pause to clear his throat before haltingly continuing, “I can’t—I can’t afford this.”
“It’s free. Kinda. I mean, you got a scholarship.”

From somewhere outside his shell-shocked bubble, Sam hears his brother put the guitar down and stand up. There’s a crinkle of paper and then Dean is standing next to him and thrusting a handful of papers into Sam’s field of vision. Sam can’t make out much of the writing with his eyes watering as badly as they are, but he knows a college acceptance letter when he sees one.

“What—how—when—”

“Bobby helped,” Dean says, sounding a little embarrassed by the admission. “I couldn’t figure out what they were asking on some of the questions. And, uh, I may have had Erica hack into Stanford’s system to get hold of your original application letter. All I could come up with was ‘Emo nerd seeks same.’”

He falls silent, obviously waiting for a response, but Sam can’t—he just can’t process this right now. He’s too staggered by what it means. Too stunned by the depth of faith Dean is showing—faith that Sam means what he says when he promises to stay. Faith that Sam is in this for the long haul. Faith that he isn’t leaving this time.

Faith in them.

“Dude, say something.”

Sam’s body unlocks at the unveiled nerves in Dean’s voice, shooting him up to grab his brother and pull him into a tight hug. The books tumble to the ground at their feet, and the covers are probably getting bent all to hell, but Sam doesn’t care. He’s too busy pressing his flushed cheek to his brother’s, one hand tangling in Dean’s hair and holding fast. He’s fisting Dean’s shirt with the other, knuckles pressed between Dean’s shoulder blades and forcing their chests together tightly enough that he can feel his brother’s heartbeat pounding out a rapid counterpoint to his own.

Dean is resistant and stiff for all of a second and then his arms come up and grip back. He tilts his head slightly where it’s resting against Sam’s, laying his forehead along Sam’s temple and exhaling a shaky breath over Sam’s cheekbone.


When Dean’s lips brush his jaw lightly, Sam thinks they might be tipped up in a smile.

“Guess some things never change,” Dean says. “Should’ve gotten you a Barbie, you fucking girl.”

Sam laughs and holds on tighter.
Chapter 59

Sam spends New Years at Bobby’s, away from the fuss and hubbub that’s likely overflowing from the Municipal Bar and into Main Street. Dean is there with the guys, and he asked Sam to come along, but there was something unsettled in his eyes as he asked, and all Sam could think about was the midnight kiss tradition associated with the holiday, and it seemed safer to plead off.

Sitting on Bobby’s couch with Bonham in his lap might not leave his chest as warm as spending the night with Dean would have done, but at least here he knows he isn’t going to do anything stupid.

Bobby wanders into the room to watch the ball come down with Sam and then, from his place in the doorway, grunts, “How much longer are you two gonna keep pussyfooting around each other, anyway?”

Sam keeps his eyes glued to the flickering TV screen and doesn’t answer.

A couple of days before Dean’s birthday, Sam straightens from tidying up the bottom shelf of matte paints and finds Erica standing at the end of the aisle. There’s no question that she’s here to find him—not with her eyes already locked on Sam and her mouth set in such a determined line—but he does his best to postpone the inevitable anyway, tilting his body away from her and reaching up to fiddle with the brushes hanging just at eyelevel.

It works for all of thirty seconds, before she walks up to him and says, “Sam.”

Crap.

Forcing a cheerful smile, Sam turns to face her and replies, “Erica, hey. What can I do for you?”

“Do you have a break coming up soon?” she asks, and something about her voice—or maybe her defensive body posture—catches his attention. He looks at her more closely, noting the tiny stress lines around her eyes and mouth, and his own nerves flare.

“Uh. I guess I have lunch in about half an hour, but—”

“Can we talk?” she interrupts. “It won’t take long, I just.” She flushes then, dropping her eyes and shaking her head. “You know what, never mind. I don’t want to bother you.”

“Is everything okay?” Sam asks, his heart beating faster at the uncharacteristic civility. “Is it Dean? Did something happen to—”

“Dean’s fine. Nothing’s wrong.” But Erica’s smile isn’t quite convincing when she raises her eyes—hell, the fact that she’s smiling at him at all is enough to set off a whole lot of alarms. “I guess I just wanted to make sure you’re coming on Sunday. Dean would—he’d want you there.”

It’s a flimsy excuse for a conversation—Sam RSVPed on his brother’s birthday party weeks ago, when Erica first sent out the invitations. He knows he RSVPed because he distinctly remembers the dreamlike feeling that took him when he was putting the card back into the mailbox. He thought Christmas had reconciled him to the foreign normalcy of his new life, but it looks like it’ll still be hitting him when he’s fifty—how odd it is that they somehow fell down the rabbit hole and into a life where people actually do things like send out invitations for birthday parties.
Or where people have birthday parties at all, for that matter.

But maybe his response got lost in the mail. Stranger things have happened. Even if Erica’s ‘still’ implies otherwise.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” he says. “Didn’t you get—”

“Great. I’ll see you on Sunday, then.”

And she’s gone before Sam can say another word.

*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

On the day of the party, Sam shows up at Dean and Erica’s almost an hour late. There’s a line of cars stretching down the block and onto the next street over, and two men standing around on Dean’s porch smoking cigarettes—Erica doesn’t allow that kind of thing inside. One of the men is Winston, and he tips Sam a nod as he trudges up the driveway.

“Sam!” he calls. “What the fuck kept you? Hair curler crap out or something?”

Sam did actually spend at least two hours trying on everything he owns in front of his bathroom’s tiny mirror, and then another hour fighting with his hair, but he knew when he got up this morning that it would take him some time to get ready, and he budgeted appropriately. No, he’s late because he somehow managed to lose his birthday present for Dean in the mess, and it took him almost forty-five minutes of frantic searching to remember that he tucked it safely into his coat pocket last night before he went to bed.

But it isn’t like he can say any of that to Winston, so instead he does what’s expected and tosses out a crass, “No, man. Had to stop and give your mom a lube job.”

It’s possible that Dean’s friends—*their* friends, Sam reminds himself—are having a bad influence on him.

Winston and the other guy—Freddie Vaughn, second baseman on the Humblebees—burst out laughing at that, and when Sam gets close enough, Winston reaches out and claps him on the shoulder. Sam feels himself being tugged in and pauses with one foot on the front step, letting Winston pull him close.

“Watch out, buddy,” Winston offers in a low voice. “The women are gunning for you.”

“What women?” Sam asks, even though a sinking feeling in his chest tells him that he already knows.

“Irene Gibson,” Freddie supplies from his other side. Smoke curls from his mouth with the names. “Shirl. Cindy. Frannie.”

“Oh fuck,” Sam mutters, running a hand through his hair. As if he weren’t already nervous enough about today. “What do they want?”

“Shirl’s carrying around some mistletoe,” Freddie announces, and then snickers at the look of horror on Sam’s face.

It’s times like these that Sam really wishes Humboldt was a little less accepting of Dean’s assumed proclivities.
“It’s almost February!” he exclaims.

“Guess she figures it’s close enough to Christmas to still count,” Winston says pragmatically. “Anyway, just thought you should have some sorta warning before you went into the lions’ den.” And then he claps Sam’s shoulder again with a grin, pushing him toward the front door.

Sam’s actually considering turning around and coming back later, once everyone else has gone—Dean will forgive him once Sam explains his reasoning—but before he can manage his retreat the front door swings open and Frannie pokes her head out.

“Sam, you’re here!” she exclaims, looking him up and down. “And don’t you look handsome today!”

Sam manages an awkward smile and shoves his hands into his coat pockets. His palms are sweating, and the small box bumping up against the knuckles of his right hand isn’t settling his stomach any.

“Hey, Shirl! Sam’s here!” Frannie shouts over her shoulder as she takes Sam’s elbow and pulls him inside—for such a frumpy looking woman, her grip is surprisingly uncompromising.

Inside, the house is a blur of commotion—kids racing up and down the stairs; women moving in packs around the living room; the younger men playing Texas Hold ‘Em around a couple of card tables set up in the den; another crowd of Dean’s friends huddled close around the flat screen with beers out and a football game on. Sam spots Tex and Bull sharing Dean’s armchair—Tex on one arm, Bull on the other—and tries to catch their eyes in a desperate bid for help as Shirl detaches herself from the people she was talking to and comes toward him.

And then, thank God, Bobby’s there.

“Sam,” the man says loudly. “Good thing you’re here. Could use your hand with the keg. ‘Scuse us, Francine. Shirley.”

Without missing a step, he flashes around that smooth, conman’s smile of his and eases Sam out of Frannie’s grip, herding him toward the less crowded environs of the dining room. Sweat trickles down the small of Sam’s back—he’s still bundled up in his outside clothes, and it has to be at least ninety degrees in here—but he could care less. The breathing room Bobby bought him won’t last long.

Fuck, he’s got to figure out how to get Shirley to back off before the whole mess explodes and sends Dean running for the hills.

“Bobby,” he says as soon as they’ve gotten far enough away from the women. “Shirley has—”

“I know what she’s got, kid,” Bobby says grimly. “Hell, the whole goddamned town knows. I’m taking care of it, and you and Dean can thank me properly later. Now get in there and say hi to your brother before he sends the cops out to look for your dead body. Christ, did you forget how to find the place or something?”

Winded and not at all prepared for any of this, Sam finds himself shoved into the kitchen.

He sees Erica first, perched on the counter with her head tilted back against the cabinets, and then follows her gaze and finds Dean bent over and poking around in the oven. From the mess on the island and in the sink, his brother has been hard at work in here all day.

“Sam,” Erica greets him as he stumbles to a stop.
At the sound of Sam’s name, Dean pops up with alarming speed and narrowly misses knocking his head on the top of the oven. His eyes are wide as they scan the kitchen—anxious—but when he locates Sam most of the tension runs out of him and he grins.

The welcoming expression should calm Sam, but instead his heart beats even faster and his head spins. He feels dizzy, knees going weak. As his vision swims, he sees his brother stiffen again with alarm.

“Sammy? Hey, man, you okay?” Dean is at Sam’s side in an instant, cupping his elbow and guiding him over to the kitchen table. “Sit down. Water? Do you need some water? Erica, can you—”


“Why the hell didn’t you take your coat off when you came in, dude?” Dean demands.

All of the worry that was in his voice before has bled to annoyance, and the hands that were patting Sam down (checking for wounds) grow brisk and efficient. He has Sam’s coat unzipped and is pushing it off Sam’s shoulders before Sam realizes what’s happening and just whom it’s happening in front of. Flushing, he catches his brother’s hands in his own.

“Dean,” he says, glancing over to see how Erica’s reacting to her roommate basically stripping Sam in the middle of their kitchen. Her stiff expression is impossible to read. “Dean, it’s okay. I’ve—I’ve got it.”

Dean glances over at Erica as well, following Sam’s eyes, and Sam sees his brother figure it out. The tips of Dean’s ears go red and he bites his lower lip as he lets go of Sam’s coat and backs up.

Sam uses the moment his brother takes to turn away and compose himself to slip the box from his coat into his back pocket. It isn’t comfortable, but untucking his shirt hides the bulge quite nicely and Sam doesn’t exactly want to let this particular package out of his sight.

Not with so many people in the house. Not today, when he’s finally worked up enough nerve to give it to Dean.

“This is, uh,” he says as he finishes taking his coat off and hangs it off the back of the chair. “This is a lot of people. I didn’t expect everyone to be here. What’d you do, invite the whole town?”

“Dean has a lot of friends,” Erica says from her perch atop the counter. “People care about him. They want him to be happy.”

The hidden warning beneath her words shouldn’t be difficult to read, but Sam can’t shake the feeling that he’s missing something. Fuck, it’d be nice if just for once around here, someone would actually come right out and say what they mean.

“People want the free food,” Dean counters, but Sam can tell from the pleased glow on his brother’s face that Dean knows Erica is right.

His chest constricts as he thinks about all the celebrations Dean missed—all the friends he never got to make because he was too scared about attracting the wrong kind of attention to form any real connections. Or maybe he was too frightened that they’d look beneath the surface and see the fuck-up he always believed he was. Maybe he was too terrified of the inevitable rejection to try at all.

Dean is more than trying now—the clamor coming from the front of the house is a testament to just how well he’s succeeding—but Sam feels a tiny surge of his old bitterness toward their father anyway. Maybe Dad was doing his best when he raised the two of them, but that doesn’t change
what he did to them. What he did to Dean.

Not that Sam’s hands are clean on that count either.

Sam glances around, looking for some way to distract himself from the dismal tenor of his thoughts, and spots a brightly wrapped package sitting outside on the back porch railing. It isn’t very large—about the size of a shoebox—but it’s bright, shiny red and surely Dean must have noticed it perched on top of the snow like the cherry on a sundae.

“Dude, why is there a present on your porch railing?” he asks. His misstep immediately registers when Dean’s face closes off and his eyes shut down. Erica pushes off the counter and comes over to put an arm around him, and the look she gives Sam isn’t pleased.

“Dean, I’m sorr——”

“No,” Dean interrupts, voice hoarse and low. “Go ahead.” He jerks his chin at the sliding door in a choppy movement. “Bring it in.”

Sam would actually like nothing more than to forget he ever saw the damned thing in the first place, but there’s an undeniable command in his brother’s words. Dean has made up his mind, and he isn’t going to let Sam backtrack now. Still, Sam hesitates for a moment before getting up and doing as he’s asked.

The package doesn’t weigh much. There’s no note attached; nothing to say who it’s from. It can’t have been sitting out there for long, though, because it’s cold but it didn’t stick to the snow when Sam picked it up to bring it inside.

“Open it,” Dean says, his voice and eyes dull.

At this point, Sam’s not sure what he’s expecting. A bloody heart, maybe. A taunting note from one of Yellow-Eyes’ friends. Maybe even a human-sized collar with Dean’s name on the tag.

He’s definitely not expecting a cell phone.

The box has been opened and then taped shut again, and when Sam pulls the phone out he can see why—it’s already charged and activated. Frowning, he brings up the contact list. There’s only one number listed, but the familiar digits take his breath away.

When he looks sharply up at his brother, Dean is staring past the back porch into the yard. His jaw is tight; his body tense despite Erica’s comforting hand on his chest.

“This is from Dad,” Sam says, just putting it out there.

Dean’s throat works and he gives a short, curt nod.

“I thought,” Sam starts, and then stops again, not sure what to say. He gives himself a moment and then tries again. “Dean, I thought you and Dad haven’t—I mean, he left. Has he been—do you guys talk?”

“No,” Dean says—just that—and then he turns away from the sliding door. “I’ve got to check on the mini-quiche.”

Erica doesn’t look happy with Dean’s behavior, but she doesn’t follow him back to the oven the way Sam can tell she wants to. Instead, she bites her lip and shoots Sam an expectant look. He can’t figure out what she wants from him, though—hell, he’s lucky his brain is still working after the
bombshell Dean just dropped—and after a minute she makes a frustrated little motion with her hands and goes over to stand next to Dean, close enough that their arms are brushing.

Offering comfort, Sam guesses.

He watches them together for a few minutes, vaguely envious through the numbing layer of shock, and then has to ask, “Does he do this every year?”

The look he gets from Erica for daring to pursue the subject is about as scathing as they come, but Dean just shrugs and mutters, “I guess.” There’s a brief pause where Sam tries to digest that and then his brother adds, “He swings by once a month.”

Sam grips the table in a reflexive attempt to keep from tipping over as his entire world-view is swept out from under him. “He what?”

Dean nods, attention still focused on the stove while Erica rubs small circles across his back. “Makes sure I get a look at him and then splits again.”

“And you haven’t—Jesus, Dean, why haven’t you called him?”

“And say what, exactly? Huh?” Dean demands, turning around abruptly.

He’s keeping his voice low, aware that there’s a whole shitload of civilians one room over, but there’s fire snapping in his eyes, and he actually shoves Erica’s hand away when she reaches for him again. She takes the hint, staying where she is as Dean steps toward Sam, closing the distance between them.

“Go ahead, Sammy,” Dean challenges. “You’re so good with words, you go ahead and tell me what I’m supposed to say. Cause ‘Hey, Dad, thanks for stopping the son of a bitch before it shoved your cock up my ass’ just doesn’t seem to cut it.”

It’s the closest they’ve come to discussing what happened, and Sam’s breath catches. They’re standing on the edge of a precipice, he realizes—unexpected and deep—and the name of the precipice is John Winchester. Dean is doing better these days—he’s figured out how to handle his past well enough to stand on his own two feet—but when it comes to Dad, it looks like there are still active fault lines running below the surface.

“Dean,” Sam breathes, although he isn’t sure what to say next. He doesn’t think there’s anything he can say.

Dean shakes his head, slumping slightly as the anger runs out of him. “Never mind,” he says, lifting one hand and pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m just—I can’t talk to him, Sam.”

“Not yet or not ever?” Sam asks hesitantly. He’s not sure why he’s even pushing this, except maybe it has something to do with how broken Dad’s eyes were when he sat Sam down at Bobby’s kitchen table all those years ago. Maybe it has something to do with how weary he seemed in that diner near the border.

Sam isn’t sure whether the man keeps coming back here to keep an eye on Dean or out of some sick, masochistic desire to punish himself.

“Honestly?” Dean says, and then shakes his head. “I don’t think I’ll ever be ready to talk to him. But hey, if you’d asked me two years ago if I was ever gonna give you the time of day, I would’ve said no, so who the fuck knows?”
Sam chews on that for a moment, not sure whether it’s a promising response or not, and then asks, “Does Bobby know?”

“What, about Dad’s little visits? I don’t know. Maybe. Fuck, probably. Look, do we have to—do we have to do this now, Sam?” Dean asks, expression plaintive as he runs a hand through his hair. “I just. I don’t want to deal with this today.”

Sam doesn’t need Erica’s warning glare to know what to say.

“Okay,” he agrees. “What do you want me to do with the phone?”

Dean’s silent for a moment, a muscle jumping high in his cheek, and then he turns back to the stove and bites out, “Chuck it.”

That can’t be mistaken for anything but an order, but Sam doesn’t move. He doesn’t move because, if he so much as twitches, he’s going to end up over by the stove wrapped around his brother. Whether or not Dean wants to admit it, he’s clearly in need of some reassurance right now, and Sam knows—he fucking knows—that it would help if he went over there and pulled Dean into his arms.

Except Erica is standing right beside Dean, watching Sam with that anxiety-inducing, expectant expression, and Sam doesn’t know how Dean would react to being touched like that by his kid brother with her in the room. Or in a house full of their friends and neighbors, for that matter.

As the moment drags out, Sam shifts uncomfortably under the weight of Erica’s gaze. He can’t shake the feeling that she’s once again waiting for him to do something—something aside from throw the phone in the trash the way Dean told him to. It’s almost as if ... as if she wants him to follow those impulses he’s having and see to his brother.

But Sam isn’t quite stupid enough to buy into that sort of wishful thinking, and finally Erica turns away from him. Draping herself over Dean’s back, she wraps her arms around his stomach and rests her chin on his bicep while she peers around his body at whatever he’s doing on the stovetop.

Now that no one’s looking at Sam—now that Dean at least has one pair of supportive arms around him—Sam takes the moment to obey. His chest aches a little for their father’s sake when Dean relaxes at the sound of the phone going into the trash, and he makes a mental note to call Dad later. Give him an update on Dean on the off chance Bobby isn’t already doing as much.

It takes a while for the mood in the room to lift again, but Erica is persistent, and Sam has to admit that she has a knack for distracting Dean. He can see why his brother likes her.

“You know, other people do know how to cook,” she points out when she finally has a tiny smile playing over Dean’s mouth. “You could, I don’t know, let one of them take over and go hang out with your friends.”

Dean hitches his shoulders in a shrug. “I’m good here.”

Erica glances over her shoulder at Sam, frowns a little, and then says, “How about Sam? He can stay in here while you—”

This time, Dean interrupts her with a full on laugh. “Yeah, no. Sam tried to make me scrambled eggs once. He set the kitchen on fire.”

“I did not!” Sam protests, rousing.

“Only cause I dumped, like, a gallon of milk on the mess.” The glance Dean throws him is almost
normal, teasing and warm, but in the silence that follows, the mood sobers again, and after a moment Dean adds, “Besides, it’s quieter here.”

Erica’s shoulders bunch as she tightens her hold on him in a quick hug that makes Sam’s gut tighten enviously. He wants to be the one doing that—wants to be able to distract Dean with a joke and a touch. He damn well knows he could if he were given a chance.

“Bad day, Sugar?” Erica asks, her voice pitched low enough Sam almost can’t catch the words. “You want us to get rid of everyone?”

Sam is surprised enough to be included that he almost misses the glance Dean slants back toward him. Not that catching it does much good, since he can’t read his brother’s expression. Then Dean shakes his head.

“No. They’re already here. I’ll be fine.”

But as the day goes on and Dean finally ventures out into the front part of the house, Sam keeps careful watch over his brother anyway. He doesn’t think any of the locals notice, but it’s clear enough to Sam that his brother’s smiles are getting more and more forced. He’s turning pale and quiet—is terse when he speaks, even to the kids, whom he’s normally great with. And in the end, he spends most of the party in the kitchen, cooking way too much food for everyone to eat and then repeatedly washing dishes.

Sam can’t help but think it’s his fault—and not just for poking at the whole Dad mess. Because every time he tries to talk to his brother, even about the most inconsequential things, Dean stiffens and shifts away awkwardly. Like he’s worried Sam is going to jump him at any moment. It gets bad enough that Sam wonders if he accidentally got stuck in some kind of time warp and has been sent back to last year, when he and Dean were so estranged they might as well have been on different continents.

The only good thing about Dean’s mood is that Shirley is sensitive enough to the undercurrents between them to have given up on the mistletoe idea. Instead, she spends her time trying to shove as many of her gingersnap cookies as possible down both of their throats. Like homemade baked goods are going to fix whatever went wrong between them.

By the time most of the guests have cleared out, Sam has the beginnings of a tension headache building behind his eyes. He moves through the living room, tossing paper plates and used napkins into a trash bag while Erica stands by the door bidding goodbye to the last few stragglers. No one asked him to help clean up, but he needs to do something with his hands while he tries to figure out where he stepped wrong with Dean—and what it’s going to take to put things right.

As he dumps yet another empty plastic cup into his bag, he glances toward the front door and sees Bobby shrugging into his coat while Erica hurries off toward the kitchen. The man has been impossible to get a hold of all day—running interference between Sam and Frannie mostly, although once or twice Sam got the distinct impression that Bobby was avoiding him. Now he’s edging toward the door while shooting cagey looks toward Sam.

He’s trying to sneak out, the son of a bitch.

Sam drops the garbage bag and hurries over, catching Bobby’s sleeve in one hand and trying to drag him back into the house. Bobby shakes him off with a muttered curse and then grunts, “I can’t help you, Sam. You got yourself into this one. Now you gotta handle the repercussions.”

“What repercussions?” Sam demands. “What the hell did I do? Did Dean—did he say anything to
The flicker way down deep in Bobby’s eyes answers that question with a big fat ‘yes’, and a moment later the man lets out an exasperated sigh.

“I’m too old to get mixed up in this shit,” he mutters, rubbing his eyes with one hand. “And I don’t want to hear about it either. If you two want to—” Bobby stops short, mouth pursing around whatever he was about to say, and then continues, “—I ain’t gonna be the one to get in your way, but that don’t mean I want any details. So just suck it up and shut up about it already.” Then he turns away, shaking his head disgustedly. “You two are as bad as a couple of teenage girls. Christ.”

He’s gone before Sam thinks to try stopping him, pulling the door shut and leaving Sam standing alone in the front hall.

Sam hesitates, wishing he could just duck out after Bobby and chalk the whole day up as a colossal mistake, but his coat is still in the kitchen.

Maybe if he’s very, very stealthy, he’ll be able to sneak in and get it unnoticed. He can always call Dean when his brother’s feeling better—Tuesday, maybe. They can talk this over then.

Feeling a little better about his decision, Sam eases into the kitchen.

Dean is sitting in one of the wooden chairs by the kitchen table. He’s leaning forward in his seat, forehead resting against Erica’s stomach while she strokes his hair. Her own head is bent as she speaks to him, words too quiet for Sam to catch.

He starts to back out of the room—screw the coat; he’ll come back for it some other time—but of course Dean chooses that moment to lift his head and his eyes catch on the movement.

A moment ago, Sam was all but certain that his brother was crying, but Dean’s eyes are dry and clear as they meet Sam’s. There are still nerves in his expression, but he isn’t running from Sam this time. He doesn’t drop his eyes or look away.

It takes Erica a few seconds to realize that Dean is looking at someone, but then she steps back and lets her hands fall to her side. Her expression is tight and strained as she focuses on the floor somewhere between them.

Yeah, this isn’t awkward at all.

“Sorry,” Sam says finally. “I just. I need my coat. I didn’t mean to interrupt you guys.”

“You didn’t,” Erica says before Dean can even open his mouth. “I was just going to get something.”

Sam kind of wants to follow her out as she hurries past him, but Dean is still watching him—his face as impossible to read as it ever has been—and somehow, Sam finds himself moving closer to his brother instead.

“Hey,” he says. “How, uh. How are you doing?”

Dean’s mouth twitches up on one side. “I’ve been better,” he answers, sitting back in his chair. The kitchen lights glint off the Saint George medallion around his neck and pool across the warm leather of his cuffs, giving them a burnished glow. Looking at his brother now, it strikes Sam again how beautiful Dean is, and he can’t help taking another step closer.

This is probably how moths feel when they flutter around open flames.
“Can I—Dean, can I do anything?”

“What?” Dean deadpans. “You gonna kiss it and make it all better?”

He means it as a joke, that much Sam is sure of, but it doesn’t quite come out that way. Dean’s eyes are too serious. There’s too much tension clogging the air.

They’ve been dancing around this for far too long.

After a few moments, Dean shifts in his chair, cutting his eyes to one side and grimacing. “Sorry,” he apologizes. “I’m a little nervous.”

“You—” Sam’s surprised into a laugh. “Why the hell are you nervous?”

“Because I—I have to talk with you, and I don’t—”

And then Dean clams up as Erica’s footsteps clatter on the tile behind Sam. His eyes slip to Sam’s left and sharpen: what was clearly meant as a casual glance turning into a concerned stare as Dean surges to his feet. Alarmed by his brother’s response, Sam turns around.

Erica’s wearing a coat. She has a scarf wound around her neck and a hat pulled down on her head. There’s a suitcase in one hand, an envelope in the other.

“Hey,” she says, voice quaking a little.

“What is this?” Dean asks. His own voice is uneven—slightly panicked—and Erica seems to find strength in the face of his fear, drawing herself up.

“I should have the rest of my stuff out before the end of the week,” she announces. “Frannie’s putting me up, so you don’t need to worry, and I’ll be just down the street if you need anything.”

“I don’t,” Dean says. He takes a step forward and then stops again, frowning.

Sam stays where he is, trying to hold very, very still and not breathe.

After a few moments of an inner struggle that plays across his face like ripples over water, Dean adds, “I don’t understand.”

The smile Erica gives him is soft. Putting down her suitcase, she moves past Sam and goes up on her tiptoes so that she can wrap her arms around Dean’s neck and hug him tight. Sam probably isn’t meant to hear her whispered words, but the kitchen is quiet enough for him to make them out anyway.

“I’m not screwing this up for you, Sugar. I love you too much to do that.”

Then, with a kiss to Dean’s cheek, she steps back again.

“Anyway, here,” she says in a louder voice, pressing the envelope into Dean’s hand as he continues to stare at her uncomprehendingly. “Don’t open it until I’m gone, okay? And don’t think you’re going to refuse it either, because I’m not going to let you.”

She starts to turn away at that, back toward Sam, and Dean shakes himself out of his stupor and grabs her left hand with his empty right. “Hey!” he calls.

Sam can hear the beginnings of anger in his brother’s voice. Sees it coiling just beneath the fear in Dean’s eyes.
Erica looks at him for a long moment. She doesn’t say anything. Doesn’t struggle. Sam can’t see the expression on her face from where he’s standing, but whatever it is, it’s enough to make Dean release her hand.

Now that Dean isn’t grabbing at her, Erica turns back to face him fully.

“This isn’t goodbye, Sugar,” she tells him, reaching up to touch his chest lightly with her fingertips.

“Yeah, well it sure as hell feels like it,” Dean snaps. He’s really starting to lose control of his emotions now, anger and panic bleeding off him in alternating waves, and Sam can see Erica’s shoulders shaking beneath her coat.

He doubts Dean is thinking clearly enough to notice the effect he’s having, though, and Erica’s voice is as calm and rational as ever as she points out, “I’m moving down the street, not across the country.”

“I don’t understand why you’re moving anywhere!” Dean yells, throwing the envelope on the floor.

Erica flinches, but Sam’s pretty sure his brother doesn’t catch it.

“I mean, what the fuck!” Dean shouts, working himself up even further. “Did I do something? Say something? What? And don’t—goddamn it, don’t you fucking make me choose between you and Sam, because I already told you, I—”

“That isn’t what this is about.” Erica shouldn’t be able to disrupt Dean’s tirade, not with her voice so soft, but somehow she does.

Dean stares at her for a moment, breathing in short, harsh pants, and then demands in a lower, but no less emphatic voice, “Then what, huh? Tell me what’s so fucking important that you have to—tonight, of all fucking nights!”

And just like that, he’s yelling again.

Sam expects Erica to answer this time—to say something in her own defense—but she doesn’t. She only says, “Happy birthday, Sugar,” and turns away.

Dean stares after her for a moment, his eyes too wide and hot, and then turns away and strides over to the other side of the room. Sam can read intent in the stiff line of his brother’s shoulders, and he moves to try and stop him, but Dean has already slammed his fist into the cabinets before Sam has taken more than a single step.

Erica flinches at the sound, and the eyes she lifts to Sam’s are red and suspiciously wet, but she doesn’t stop walking and she doesn’t look back. Sam tries to find the words to fix this, whatever it is, and comes up blank. All he can do is watch as Erica approaches him and draws herself up as straight as she can.

“Don’t fuck this up, Sam,” she whispers fiercely, looking up at him. “You hurt him, and I swear to god, I will spend the rest of my life making sure you regret it.”

Then she’s gone, leaving Sam alone with his brother and the discarded envelope on the floor. Dean stands unmoving by the cabinets until they hear the front door shut, and then his shoulders start to shake. This time, Sam doesn’t hesitate before allowing instinct to carry him across the room.

“Dean,” he says, getting a hand on his brother’s shoulder and tugging.
“Fuck off,” Dean spits. He’s resisting, and sending out about as many ‘don’t touch me’ vibes as a rabid dog, but Sam has seen Dean do this before. And for the first time in years, he feels like he knows his brother well enough to know how to respond.

“Dean,” he repeats, more firmly, and this time when he pulls Dean does turn. Dean turns, his right hand clenched into a fist and trying for another punch—Sam’s jaw for a target this time. The attack is pitifully easy to evade.

“Get out!” Dean yells, giving up on Sam’s face shoving at his chest instead. “Go ahead! What the fuck are you waiting for, huh?”

Sam stands passively for a few minutes, letting Dean smack his chest and swear at him while avoiding one or two more serious attempts to punch him, and then, finally, catches his brother’s wrists and holds him still. If anything, Dean gets more violent at that, shaking as he kicks and snarls at Sam.

“Dean!” Sam shouts for a third time as he struggles to restrain his brother without hurting him. “I’m not leaving. I’m not. I’m not going anywhere.”

Dean makes a muffled, choked noise at the promise and then he’s groping for Sam’s shirt with his trapped fingers and crying—messy, helpless tears that are fucking up his breathing and making him cough.

“Easy,” Sam murmurs, taking a chance and releasing his brother’s wrists so that he can get his arms around Dean completely. Dean falls into him, all the resistance run out of him, and buries his face against the side of Sam’s neck.

“She left,” he chokes out between sobs. “She fucking left.”

Sam wonders what Frannie would do if he broke into her house, grabbed Erica, and carried her kicking and screaming back here for his brother. Because right now he’s seriously tempted to do so, kidnapping charges or no.

“She didn’t leave,” he says, trying to keep his own voice calm. “She’s right down the street, Dean. It’s not the same.”

It isn’t, and he’s pretty sure Dean will understand that it isn’t. Later. Once the shock and the hurt have had time to wear off.

It takes a while for Dean to calm down. It takes almost an hour, actually, and by the time Dean’s mostly himself again, Sam is more than ready to go home and crawl into bed and not come out for a week. He forgot how exhausting it is to hold onto someone when they cry—especially when that someone is Dean, whom he’s always cared about more than he knows is healthy.

Dean doesn’t look any more comfortable than Sam is with how he just reacted, and Sam knows that if his brother isn’t embarrassed yet, he will be soon. Which means that the quicker he moves them both past Dean’s little explosion, the better. Dean gets vicious when he’s embarrassed.

Silently, Sam helps Dean over to the kitchen table and sits him down. Then, without asking, he pours them both some water, gets the envelope Erica left behind and joins his brother.

“She left,” he says, sliding both the envelope and a glass over.

Dean fingers the envelope without really picking it up and then wraps both hands around his water glass.
“Dean,” Sam sighs, and Dean scowls, trying to look pissed off. The tear tracks drying on his face make the expression kind of difficult to swallow.

“Whatever it is, I don’t want it.”

And whatever else Dean might be feeling right now, that isn’t true. Sam’s sure it isn’t.

“You’re being an asshole, you know that?” he says, pitching his voice at just the right, scornful level to goad his brother into compliance. “Just open the damn envelope already.”

Dean rolls his eyes and huffs out a short, annoyed breath, but he also picks up the envelope. Now that he’s holding it, he only pauses for a moment—faintest flicker of fear in his eyes—before tearing it open and pulling out the single sheet of paper folded up inside. From his place across the table, Sam can see that there’s a lot of writing on it—and that it looks like some kind of legal document—but that’s it. So he watches Dean’s expression instead, searching for an echo of meaning there. His stomach pulls tight as the blood rapidly drains from his brother’s face and leaves him pale.

“Well?” he asks when Dean has had more than enough time to read the whole thing through twice. “What does it say?”

Wordlessly, Dean passes the piece of paper over and then rubs a hand across his mouth. “I need a fucking drink,” he mutters, ignoring the water in front of him in favor of getting up and going over to the fridge.

Sam skims through the first paragraph of the document before letting his eyes skip over the rest and focusing on the signature line at the bottom. Where his name and Dean’s are listed as the co-owners of the property in question. His skin flushes hot and then cold before his emotions shut down on him and leave him numb.

“I don’t understand,” he says, putting the paper down on the table.

“Join the club,” Dean mutters from the counter, which he’s using to pop the cap off a beer. He takes a deep pull from it before setting the bottle down on the countertop. His eyes flicker up to Sam and then away again.

“Why would she—” Sam starts.

Dean shakes his head. “Why the hell do women do anything?” Except the way he’s gone fidgety and awkward is more than enough to tell Sam that his brother isn’t being precisely truthful with him.

“Dean, come on, man,” he urges, getting up and walking over to lean against the counter on the other side of the stove. “Talk to me.”

“We are talking, Sam.”

“Not like that, I mean—fuck, Dean, you know what I mean!”

Dean does, too—Sam can read it in the way his brother is looking up at the ceiling as he chugs his beer. He reaches over—has to really lean to do it, but his arms are just long enough to bridge the intervening space—and nudges Dean’s shoulder with his fingertips to get his brother’s attention.

“Why would Erica do something like this?”

Dean glances at him, then takes another quick sip from his beer before admitting, “I told her I was going to—tonight. I was going to talk to you.”
Yeah, Sam remembers Dean mentioning something of the sort before Erica made her announcement and everything went to hell.

“What about?”

“Us, okay?” Dean mutters, sounding irritated at having to say it.

Sam’s chest constricts, sending a single pulse of unidentifiable emotion through his body. “Oh,” he says.

“My roommate signs over her half of my house to you and that’s all you’ve got? ‘Oh’?” Dean demands, slamming his bottle down on the counter. The remaining beer fizzes up and over the side, but Dean doesn’t seem to notice or care, eyes locked on Sam.

“Well, what were you going to say?”

“I don’t know, Sam,” Dean snaps, agitatedly pacing away across the kitchen to lean on the island with his back to Sam. “Does it even matter now?”

“Yeah, Dean, I think it does.”

Dean makes an incredulous noise and turns his head sharply to the side just far enough for Sam to see his brother’s nostrils working. Far enough for him to watch the muscles in Dean’s jaw jump.

“Dean,” he prods finally.

“What?” Dean bites out.

“What were you going to say?”

For a long moment, Dean is silent. Then the hostile set to his shoulders eases and he sighs. He turns around, hands twisted back behind him and clinging to the edge of the counter, and looks at Sam.

No walls.

Left naked without the mask he was wearing a moment ago, Dean isn’t angry at all. He isn’t even irritated. Instead he’s afraid, and vulnerable, and so goddamned desperate that it catches at Sam’s ribcage and digs tiny, jagged hooks into his heart. When Dean speaks, his voice isn’t much more than a hoarse rasp.

“Stay tonight.”

Suddenly, Sam isn’t quite sure how to breathe.

“Sure,” he manages after a few tries. “You don’t mind me crashing on the couch, right?”

But Dean shakes his head.

“No,” he says resolutely, and steps forward.

Sam’s breath quickens as his brother approaches. He has plenty of space to run, but he still feels trapped. Hemmed in. And then Dean is standing right in front of him, close enough to touch—close enough for Sam’s entire body to ache with the ghostly impression of warmth.

Dean’s gaze is fixed low on Sam’s stomach, and the tilt of his head is strange—vulnerable and verging on shy. There’s nothing uncertain in the way he reaches out and rests his hand on Sam’s hip,
though. Nothing hesitant about the heated, longing expression in his eyes when he lifts them to Sam’s.

“Stay with me, Sammy,” he says. “And I’m not—I’m not asking because Erica left. I was going to ask anyway. She knew I was going to ask.”

Sam doesn’t know what to do. Doesn’t know how to respond.

Repercussions, Bobby said before he left, and this is what he meant. This is the place that Sam has been struggling to reach, that he’s been yearning for. This place right here, where the ground drops away beneath their feet and it’s either fly or fall.

“You—” His voice cracks and he has to swallow before trying again. “You have to be really clear here, Dean. With expectations. I need to know what you want from me.”

“Not sex,” Dean answers bluntly. “I’m not—I’m not ready for that. But I’m tired of pretending I’m okay without you.”

He sucks in a deep breath then, shutting his eyes. When he opens them again, Sam doesn’t think he’s ever seen anything so green.

“You said I don’t need you anymore,” Dean whispers, “But that’s not true. That’s not ever going to be true.” His hand slides into place around Sam’s hip and tightens in entreaty. “Stay.”

And there’s only one thing Sam can say to that.

“Yeah,” he breathes, nodding. “Okay.”

Later, lying with Dean pressed up against his chest, shoes off but the rest of their clothes still on, Sam feels whole for the first time in six years.

As tired as he was when he followed Dean up here, he can’t sleep. He doesn’t even want to shut his eyes to blink, not if it means taking them off his brother’s peaceful face. Dean was matching him stare for stare at first, which was pretty intense, but he dropped off sometime around two, his lids first drooping and then closing with a sweep of his lashes.

Now, as the window behind his brother starts to warm with the sunrise, Sam gives in to an impulse that’s been hounding him all night and runs a hand through Dean’s hair. He keeps the brush of his fingers light, wondering at how soft those spikes are, and then pauses when he comes to the swath of white above his brother’s ear. The hair here feels different—coarser, almost like the bristles of a brush—and he runs his thumb across the discoloration a second time, more firmly.

Sucking in a breath, Dean opens his eyes.

Sam stills, ready to back off at the first sign his brother wants him to, but Dean relaxes almost instantly, letting his eyes fall shut again and sinking back into his pillow.

“Sammy,” he slurs. ‘Mornin’.”

“Morning,” Sam answers, and then takes Dean’s passivity as permission to go back to stroking his brother’s hair.

One corner of Dean’s mouth pulls up in a smile and he tilts into the touch, bringing his hand up
between them to hang onto the front of Sam’s shirt. Encouraged, with his heart beating so loud he’s surprised it isn’t shaking the bed, Sam pets his brother’s hair once more before dragging his knuckles across Dean’s cheek and then rubbing his hand up and down his brother’s arm. Dean’s smile widens and his grip on Sam’s shirt tightens, pulling him closer, and then Sam runs his hand a little lower than he means to on his brother’s forearm and freezes.

Dean’s eyes flutter open again—more awareness there this time—and the smile slips off his face.

Sam sort of hates himself for ruining the peaceful moment, but he can’t move his hand up. Instead, he shifts it lower, and his palm tingles at the hard, smooth feel of leather.

He doesn’t quite understand what he’s asking until Dean gives him a barely perceptible nod and says, “Go ahead.”

It takes Sam a few minutes to figure out how to work the clasps on Dean’s right cuff, and then longer to get it off—the leather is stiff and his fingers are shaking. But finally—finally—the last buckle comes loose and he eases the leather away from his brother’s wrist.

Dean’s revealed skin is almost porcelain white—he’s paler than usual in the winter, but Sam’s pretty sure that this particular swath hasn’t seen any light at all since Dean first buckled the cuffs into place. Worse than the color, though, is the moist feel of his brother’s skin—like flesh that’s been submerged in water for too long. Everywhere else, Dean is smooth and healthy, but the human body was meant to breathe and he’s been suffocating himself here for years.

Sam doesn’t waste time looking for scars, instead grabbing his brother’s other arm and forcing the buckles open on that cuff as well. Dean watches Sam’s face as he works, silent and unresisting, but Sam can’t return the gaze until the second cuff is off and has been tossed on the floor with the first.

“You don’t wear those again,” he says then, his voice shaking with horror at how clammy his brother’s wrists feel beneath his fingers.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do,” Dean answers. He doesn’t sound angry, though—just determined—and he continues to lie quietly while Sam finally takes Dean’s right hand and tilts his wrist up.

Even in the dim, early dawn light, Sam doesn’t have any trouble finding the scars. There are multiple slashes—on each wrist, he finds, when he hastily checks Dean’s left—thin, raised lines that are puckered slightly where some ER doc stitched him back together. Sam traces over the scars lightly with his fingertips—counts four on Dean’s left and three on his right—and then, carefully, lays his cheek against the inside of his brother’s right wrist.

It isn’t until Dean’s other hand curls in his hair a few minutes later that he realizes he’s crying.

“Hey,” Dean says softly. “Hey, man, c’mon. I’m okay. I’m right here. C’mon, Sammy, don’t, all right?”

But Sam can’t help it, any more than he could help it the night he bared his soul at Bobby’s, and he ends up with his face buried in Dean’s chest while his brother holds him and rocks him back and forth with gentle, soothing movements. The storm doesn’t last as long this time—partially because Sam’s sick of crying, but mostly because it’s difficult to feel bad for long when Dean is solid and warm and alive in his arms.

“I don’t like them,” Sam says when he’s quieted again. Dean starts to stiffen and, following his brother’s train of thoughts, Sam hastens to explain, “The cuffs, you—you shouldn’t have to hide
anything, Dean, and they—it’s not good for your skin, man.”

For a long moment, Dean is silent. Then, quietly and honestly, he says, “I don’t want people staring.”

And Sam gets that, he does, but ...

“If you got a little more sun on your wrists, the scarring wouldn’t be as noticeable,” he offers. “And do you really think anyone would think less of you if they knew?”

Dean sighs. “I’m pretty sure they already do. Small town America, y’know? There aren’t a whole lot of secrets around here. But that doesn’t mean I want to play freak show. Besides, it’ll scare the kids.”

Sam’s pretty sure it would take more than a few raised lines on Dean’s skin to scare the children in this town away from his brother, but it’s clear that this isn’t an argument he’s winning anytime soon.

“I’m not giving up on this,” he points out.

“Of course you aren’t,” Dean replies wryly. Sam doesn’t think his brother sounds too put out by the warning, though, and a moment later Dean’s hands are back in his hair, stroking. Sam shuts his eyes and settles in, shifting his head so that it’s pillowed more comfortably on his brother’s shoulder.

“We should probably get up,” Dean says eventually.

Sam grunts an affirmative and doesn’t move.

A few minutes later, Dean shifts and gives a small groan. “Okay, I actually have to piss now.”

Reluctantly, Sam rolls onto his own side of the mattress while Dean climbs out of the bed and pads into the bathroom. Lying with his head below the pillow is awkward, so he shifts up, listening to the familiar sound of Dean pissing and then brushing his teeth.

The ceiling over Dean’s bed has a stray streak of sunlight cutting across it, and Sam watches as he listens, lazily happy and not paying much attention to the fact that his blinks keep getting longer and longer.

The next thing he knows, he’s opening his eyes to find Dean inches away, watching him.

Sam takes stock of his situation—lying on his side with a pillow scrunched up under his head, still fully dressed; Dean beautiful and amused in front of him—and then says, “I fell asleep.”

“No shit,” Dean says, adjusting his head where it’s resting on his own pillow. “You snored, too.”

“Did not.”

“Like a motherfucking chainsaw. When the hell did that start?”

“How am I supposed to know?” Sam asks, rubbing his eyes with one hand. “It’s not like I can hear myself, you know?”

“Freak,” Dean accuses, but Sam knows even before he drops his hand again and opens his eyes that his brother will be smiling.

Sure enough, Dean’s expression is warm and fond as he watches Sam yawn. He’s close enough for Sam to count the smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. Close enough for Sam to smell the toothpaste on his brother’s breath.
He smiles himself then, looking back, and feels something deep inside of his chest relax. “So,” he says.

“So,” Dean agrees, smile widening, and then they’re kissing.

The pressure of Dean’s lips has only begun to register when his brother pulls back, grimacing. Memories of Dean reaching for his temple with his face twisted up like that flicker through Sam’s head at the sight.

His stomach lurches and he sits up, blurting, “Oh crap, Dean, I’m sorry!”

But Dean seems more annoyed than upset, shaking his head as he flops over onto his back. “Dude, what the fuck are you apologizing for? I kissed you.”

Which Sam’s pretty sure is true, but then again, he was ready to chalk that one up to wishful thinking.

“This is so fucked up,” Dean mutters as he drapes his forearm over his eyes.

Sam picks at the bedspread for a moment, confusion twining through his stomach, before asking, “Do you want me to go?”

“No.”

Sam can’t help the relieved little flutter in his chest at how quickly that answer comes.

Then Dean drops his arm from his eyes, draping it over his stomach instead as he adds, “But can we pretend I didn’t just do that?”

Sam hesitates—it hasn’t even been a few minutes and the only thing he can think about is doing it again; how the fuck is he supposed to pretend it didn’t happen at all?—and then says, “If that’s what you want.”

Dean nods. “Yeah, it is.”

“Okay.”

Silence falls between them then, not so much awkward as uncertain, and Sam thinks again about leaving. Except he doesn’t really want to go, and he doesn’t think Dean wants him to either.

So after a few minutes, he reaches out and brushes the medallion lying on his brother’s chest. Dean watches him do it, relaxed and easy, and the trust in his brother’s eyes sends a warm flush through Sam’s body.

“St. George’s medal,” Dean says without having to be asked.

“I know,” Sam admits. “I was sort of wondering where you got it.”

“Bobby,” Dean answers, propping himself up on his elbows and looking down at his chest as he picks up the medallion between two fingers. “He gave it to me when I moved out.”

“Moved out to where?”

Dean gives him an amused look, releasing the medallion as he falls back down on the bed. “Little early in the day to be grilling the witness, Sammy.”
“Sorry,” Sam apologizes. “I was just curious.”

“Why? It’s just a necklace, dude. And I kind of had an opening, since the hospital lost my amulet.”

Sam jumps at his brother’s words, pulse racing, and Dean’s eyes sharpen.

“What?” he demands.

Now that the moment is before him, Sam still doesn’t feel ready, but it also doesn’t seem like he has much of a choice. Dean isn’t going to let this go now that Sam has given himself away. Besides, it isn’t like he’s going to get a better opening. Shifting up, he wrestles with his jeans a little as he works the package free.

When Dean sees the Christmas paper on the box, he lifts one eyebrow. “Are we early or late?”

“I was going to give it to you at Christmas,” Sam explains awkwardly, “But uh, it didn’t feel right, so happy birthday, I guess.”

Snorting, Dean takes the package and tears off the paper. The black jewelry box revealed beneath the Christmas trees makes him pause, and he shoots Sam a stern look.

“This better not be a ring, dude.”

Sam can’t make himself speak, so he just gestures instead, indicating that Dean should finish opening it. With one last, wary glance at Sam’s face, Dean does.

And then stares down at the golden, horned head nestled inside, expressionless.

“The hospital didn’t lose it,” Sam offers, his voice coming more freely now that the moment’s over. “They gave it to Dad, and Dad gave it to me, and I, uh. I meant to give it back to you, but one thing led to another and I never really got around to it.”

Dean looks at him, face still blank, and then looks back down into the box.

“Dean?” Sam says, fidgeting anxiously. “Dude, say something.”

Instead, and without looking, Dean punches Sam in the arm. Hard.

“Ow!” Sam yells, leaning back and rubbing his sore bicep. “What the hell, Dean?”

“You can’t double gift something, jerkwad,” Dean grumbles, but he’s smiling slightly as he says it. As Sam watches his brother warily, Dean fits the amulet back into place over his neck and looks down at it with a satisfied expression. Then he looks back up at Sam, smile widening to a grin, and their eyes catch.

Sam’s fingers slow and then come to a complete stop on his sore arm. Dean’s grin slips into a more serious expression. His eyes darken and heat. This time, there’s no doubt in Sam’s mind that Dean is the one closing the distance between them because he’s being very, very careful not to move.

Their second kiss is longer—slow and deep and almost lazy. Dean tastes like mint—toothpaste—and his mouth is wet and warm against Sam’s. His hand comes to rest on Sam’s hip, thumb skirting up beneath his shirt, and Sam gently cups the side of his brother’s face with his own hand. When Dean finally breaks away, he doesn’t move back: just rests their foreheads together and breathes.

“Did that one happen?” Sam asks after a few, shaky moments.
“No,” Dean answers, but he still isn’t moving away, and when Sam cautiously tries to kiss him again, he opens for it eagerly.

This time, it’s Sam who breaks the kiss, easing back when he realizes what he’s doing. Dean chases his mouth for a few seconds before falling back against the bed. Sam isn’t sure whether the noise that comes out of his brother’s mouth is a laugh or a swear.

“Sorry,” Dean grunts after a moment, tilting his head as he looks up at Sam. His mouth is wet and red and really, really distracting.

Sam makes himself look away, clearing his throat before offering, “I’m not. But, Dean, I need to know if this is what you want. Because I can’t do this again, if you—”

“I’m in love with you.”

Anything else Sam was going to say gets swallowed with his stilled breath. He’s staring at the door to Dean’s room—ripped Zeppelin poster on the back, the only decoration in the room aside from a picture of Dean and Erica laughing together on the dresser by the far wall. The floor is a mess—Dean’s clothes strewn everywhere, no telling what’s dirty or clean—and Sam doesn’t know where to look but he knows he can’t look at his brother.

He’s too terrified he might find a lie in Dean’s face.

Beside him on the bed, Dean sighs and continues, “I don’t know if—if I feel this way because of what that sick son of a bitch did to me or not, and I don’t care because it doesn’t matter. You hear me, Sammy?”

The mattress moves beneath Sam and a moment later Dean’s hand closes around his forearm, demanding his attention. Slowly—unwillingly—Sam turns his head.

Dean’s eyes are forest green and as transparent as glass. There are still shadows there—might always be—but the love is stronger, illuminated by the clarion brilliance of certainty.

“It doesn’t matter,” Dean repeats, voice firm as iron. “What matters is that I love you now, and I—I want this. I want you.”

Sam can read the truth in his brother’s eyes, but after so many years of wanting—so many years of telling himself that he could never have this—he’s having a hard time understanding.

“You’re sure?” he checks.

“What do you want, a signed affidavit?” Dean snorts, grinning. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

It’s everything Sam has ever wanted, laid out in front of him. Everything. But it feels too quick, too soon, and Sam’s ribs have pulled tight around his lungs, making it difficult to get a breath.

“I can’t,” he whispers, and then silently curses himself as Dean’s face falls. “I don’t—it’s not no, Dean. I swear it’s not no. I just.” He pauses, searching for the right words, and then asks, “Can we go slow?”

Dean’s forehead furrows with confusion. “I said no sex, dude: how much slower can you get?”

“No, I mean. With the other stuff.”

“What other stuff?”
“Well, what are you doing on Friday?” Sam asks, still working through the logistics of what he’s proposing in his head. It isn’t going to be easy, and Sam for one is going to be frustrated as hell for the next few months, but it feels like the right decision. For both of them.

“Working?” Dean answers, clearly still having difficulty figuring out what Sam is talking about.

“Call out,” Sam tells him.

“What for?”

“Because I’m taking you to dinner.”

Dean’s face scrunches up. “What, like on a date?” he asks, sounding skeptical.

Sam nods and then has to bite back on a laugh at the look of horror that spreads across his brother’s face.

“You can’t take me on a date,” Dean protests. “Do you have any idea how much crap we’re gonna get for that? You only have to deal with Shirley once a week, Sam; I see Frannie every day down at the MB, and she’s gonna talk my goddamned ears off. That woman’s worse than the Spanish Inquisition!”

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Sam says, unable to help the grin that breaks out across his face.

“Over my dead body, you’ll take that as a yes!” Dean exclaims, and then frowns. “Dude, Erica just gave you her half of the house. Why the hell can’t we just skip to the part where you move in and get out of that shithole you call an apartment?”

In answer, Sam grabs his brother by the back of the neck and hauls him in for another kiss. Dean resists for a second before folding, and the feel of Dean in his arms, Dean willing and wanting—and fuck, loving—him is almost enough to make Sam forget that he has a plan here. Almost.

But he finally draws back, stroking his fingertips over the faded, hooked scar at his brother’s temple and then down the side of Dean’s face.

“Because this time,” he promises his brother, “We’re doing it right.”
Epilogue

It’s late when Sam gets home—well past midnight and verging on three a.m. He’s been up since seven, but he still feels wide awake—almost wired. Might be the coffee he’s been mainlining for the past eight hours. Or maybe it’s the company he’s keeping these days.

Second year medical students don’t tend to keep the most normal hours. Neither do hunters, for that matter.

Dean and Bonham usually greet him at the door, but Dean was up even earlier than Sam this morning—out the door and down at the construction site before the sun tipped the horizon—and Bonham isn’t about to leave Dean’s side to come down and greet Sam on his own. Next time they get a dog, Sam’s going to make sure to give it as many table scraps as Dean; at least then he’ll have a shot at his fair share of affection.

Or maybe they could get another dog now—Dean’s been thinking about it; Sam can tell from his brother’s seemingly casual comments about the house feeling a little too empty and Bonham needing someone to play with.

It isn’t a bad idea, actually. Another dog might keep Bonham away from Sam’s textbooks and out of his sock drawer. Christmas is only a couple of months away. Maybe he should start asking around town, see if anyone’s dog has a litter about to drop. Frannie would probably know, and she’s actually damned good at keeping secrets for the short term, so he wouldn’t have to worry about his search getting back to Dean.

Grinning to himself, Sam hangs up his coat in the hall closet and then brushes a stray leaf from the mud caked on the bottom of his jeans—a memento picked up during field training at Bobby’s earlier tonight. He picks the leaf up immediately—Dean will give him hell if he comes down and finds it on the floor in the morning—and then starts for the kitchen. He can throw the unwanted passenger out and then fix himself an early morning snack before heading up to join his brother in bed.

Maybe he’ll wake Dean up for a couple of minutes of lazy kissing before they both settle in again. Dean will grump about it in the morning, but he never seems to mind during, and Sam’s going to have to kick Bonham off his side of the bed anyway. That particular task usually causes enough of a commotion to wake his brother even when Sam’s trying to be stealthy.

In the refrigerator, Sam finds a Tupperware container with his name scrawled across the top in Dean’s messy handwriting. Leftovers from Dean’s dinner with Erica last night. Sam opens the container and then makes a half-surprised, half-thoughtful noise as he regards the revealed food.

Dean never slouches when it comes to cooking, but Sam’s pretty sure that’s Peking Duck, which is Erica’s favorite. Also jasmine rice and a couple of homemade spring rolls. Dean only ever breaks out these recipes for special occasions—or when he wants a favor.

After a quick glance up at the ceiling in the direction of his sleeping brother, Sam shrugs the mystery aside and goes about heating up the food. He’ll just have to ask Dean what’s up tomorrow morning. Or maybe he’ll call Erica and get it straight from the horse’s mouth, so to speak. He has to set up their next study session anyway.

Thank God Erica enjoys quizzing him about obscure medical terminology. The one time he tried getting Dean to help, his brother spent half an hour making grossed out faces and fake retching noises at the illustrations in Sam’s textbook. Like he never stitched up worse on Dad.
Sam takes his time eating—mostly because he’s not ready to go to sleep yet, and if he gets Dean up when he’s this awake, he’s probably not going to be content with a few kisses. Dean isn’t going to complain about the blowjob tonight, but it always takes him forever to get back to sleep after he comes, so Sam will have to deal with his cranky, sulky attitude all day tomorrow.

As amazing as his brother is when he’s squirming underneath Sam’s hands and mouth, an overtired Dean is something Sam would really rather avoid, thanks.

Finally, though, he can’t delay any longer, so he rinses his dishes off in the sink and loads them in the dishwasher. With one last glance around the kitchen to make sure he didn’t leave anything out on the counters, he shuts off the lights and heads back through the dining room toward the stairs. And then hesitates as he catches sight of his brother’s sleeping form stretched out on the couch.

As he stands in the doorway leading from the dining to the living room, part of the shadow on the couch lifts up as Bonham raises his head. There’s a muted thumping from the dog’s tail hitting the back of the couch, and then Bonham makes a low whine and begins shifting around excitedly.

“Shh,” Sam says, moving forward quickly. “Hey, boy, calm down, shh.”

But it’s too late. Dean’s already stirring and blinking his eyes open. He hauls himself up slightly—one hand on the back of the couch and the other trying to settle Bonham where the dog is moving around on his chest—and then grunts as Bonham finally uses Dean’s body as a springboard to launch himself to the floor.

“Sorry,” Sam apologizes, eyes on his brother as he crouches and scratches a hasty hello behind Bonham’s ears.

“Time’s it?” Dean mutters, pushing up onto his elbow and rubbing his face with the hand that was clinging to the back of the couch a moment before.

“Around three thirty. What’re you still doing down here, anyway?”

Letting out a yawn, Dean swings his legs off the side of the couch and sits up. “Waiting for you,” he answers, which makes Sam’s stomach coil tightly.

Dean only ever waits up for Sam when he’s on a hunt and Dean can’t come along, or when he’s had a bad day. And since Sam hasn’t been hunting in months ...

“You should have called,” he says, leaving Bonham where he is and going over to sit down next to his brother.

But Dean’s body posture is relaxed as he shakes his head. “’M fine,” he says. “Just didn’t think you’d take so long.”

“Sorry,” Sam apologizes again. “Bobby and Dad—” He stops, censoring himself too late as usual, and Dean sighs beside him.

“Bobby and Dad what?”

“We were talking about the camp, that’s all,” Sam answers, and then—mostly because Dean still looks half asleep and might be off guard enough to actually give a little ground this time, he adds, “We could really use your help, man.”

It isn’t a line. Dean’s always had a way with people and, after Dad, he’s the best hunter Sam knows. The fact that he’s retired—minus a couple of easy, weekend hunts that Sam’s been easing him into
over the last year or so—doesn’t change that. And Dean has always had a mind for logistics—a way of thinking around corners that’s somehow both practical and creative at the same time.

Half of the issues that they’re grappling with would probably be solved in an hour if Sam could just get his brother to sit down at the same table as Dad.

Only problem is, Dean hasn’t been within ten miles of Bobby’s ever since their father moved in and started working on the task of turning the Salvage Yard into a hunter’s retreat and training camp. The most annoying thing is that it was really Dean’s idea—well, Dean’s and Andy’s. If there’s anywhere Dean can begin reconnecting with Dad, it’s on this project, but Dean is just as stubbornly resistant to the idea as ever.

It’s strange, having a decent working relationship with their father when Dean won’t talk to the man.

“Yeah, thanks but no thanks,” Dean grunts now. “One project at a time’s enough for me. You guys can handle Hogwarts on your own.”

“We’re not calling it that,” Sam says, needled both by the name and Dean’s continued obstinacy regarding Dad.

“Hey, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck,” Dean replies, and then leans forward and grabs a stack of papers off the coffee table. He’s more awake now, Sam can hear it in his brother’s voice—can see it in the crispness of his movements.

Their conversation about Dad and Hogw—the training camp—is clearly over, and Sam lets it go. He knows better than to push Dean too hard on either of those subjects.

“What’s this?” he asks instead, and then leafs through the documents his brother drops in his lap.

“Paperwork for the diner.” Dean leans back against the couch with a sigh and shuts his eyes before adding, “Paperwork’s your department.”

“You could figure out how to do these if you tried, you know,” Sam tells his brother, still glancing through the stack and wondering how he’s supposed to find time to wade through all of this red tape for Dean, run training exercises for Bobby and Dad, and study for the microbiology exam he has coming up next week.

Thank god the diner will be open (and hopefully running smoothly) by the time he has to seriously start studying for the USMLE.

“Eh,” Dean says, which is an off-handed refusal if Sam ever heard one.

“You’re lucky I’m addicted to your cooking,” Sam mutters, dropping the paperwork on the table. He’ll deal with it tomorrow.

“Yeah, cause that’s all you’re addicted to,” Dean says, shifting closer on the couch and giving Sam’s neck a playful bite.

And yeah, Sam’s suddenly not annoyed about having to fill out paperwork.

“You, uh. May have a few other redeeming qualities.”

Dean grins where his face is still pressed up against Sam’s throat. “A few, huh?” he asks, dropping his hand to Sam’s knee and running it up the inside of his thigh.
With a soft groan, Sam shifts his legs open further, giving his brother room to press the heel of his palm against his cock. The air in his lungs feels overheated as he tilts his head to the side, letting Dean mouth at his neck.

And then Dean pulls back, the blueballing son of a bitch.

“Oh my god, Dean, you did not just do that.”

Dean snickers to his left, and then the couch moves beneath Sam as his brother climbs into his lap and sinks down. Sam sucks in a sharp breath, hands fluttering briefly above Dean’s ass before settling on his brother’s hips.

Dean’s come a long way as far as sex goes—and from the amount of handjobs and blowjobs Sam’s been getting lately, his brother has actually rediscovered his hedonistic side—but there are still a few triggers they have to be careful of, and Sam going anywhere near Dean’s ass is one of them. They’re working on it together, slowly, but that’s a daylight activity. When they’re both wide-awake and sure of what they’re doing.

“Oh, I’m planning on following through,” Dean says, grinding down firmly enough to drive a grunt from Sam’s throat. “Just had something to tell you first.”

And Sam can’t take any more of that self-assured smirk on his brother’s face. He shifts his hold on Dean, putting his hands around his brother’s back and pulling him close. Gets his mouth on Dean’s throat and bites down briefly before sucking a bruise into the skin there—high enough that Dean’s going to have to endure catcalls from the guys when he goes in to oversee construction on the diner tomorrow.

This time, when Dean shudders in his arms, a low swear slipping past his lips, it’s Sam’s turn to chuckle.

“Tell me quick, dude,” he advises, blowing the words across the damp, sensitive patch of skin on his brother’s neck, “Cause you’ve got about ten seconds before I put you on your back and blow you.”

Dean squirms against him—hard to say whether it’s the warning or the way Sam immediately goes back to nipping at his throat—and then gasps out, “She said yes.”

Wait. What?

Sam makes himself pull back, dropping his head against the back of the couch so he can look up at his brother. Dean’s eyes are blown in the dim room—all pupil with only a thin line of iris—and fuck, but Sam just wants to get his brother naked and shuddering.

Except he’s missing something here. And the odd, fluttering sensation in his chest tells him it’s something big.

“Erica?” he checks, and Dean nods, moving in for Sam’s mouth.

Sam ducks his face away. “Dean, wait. Wait.”

“Christ, Sammy,” Dean grunts, but he settles a little—less like lightning in Sam’s arms and more like the low hum of static electricity. “And you call me a cockblock.”

“Erica said yes to what?” Sam asks, ignoring his brother’s complaint.

Dean scoffs, like he thinks Sam is joking, and then he takes another, closer look and his eyes widen.
“You’re serious,” he says, and his face goes stiff and more than a little mortified. “Let go,” he says, pushing at Sam’s chest and trying to get up.

Aw, crap.

“Dean—hey, man, c’mon.”

“Let go, Sam!” Dean insists, and there’s enough strain in his voice that Sam does.

Dean gets up immediately, pacing from one end of the living room to the other. He isn’t wearing his cuffs—usually doesn’t when he’s home, these days—and normally Sam would be happy about that, but Dean also has a nervous habit of rubbing his thumb over the scars on his left wrist, which is too close to his old habit of worrying at the scar on his temple for comfort. He’s rubbing the inside of his wrist now, clearly agitated, and Sam pushes forward to the edge of the couch, desire forgotten.

“Dean, what’s wrong?” he demands.

“I thought—we talked about this, Sam. I thought you were on board.”

“I’m not not on board,” Sam points out. “But it’d help if I knew what we were talking about.”

Dean just shoots him a glance—two parts pissed off and one part unhappy—and keeps pacing. Which means Sam gets to piece this one together on his own. Great.

He runs a hand through his hair and thinks back over the last few weeks, tries to locate any conversations he might only have caught half of. The only thing he can come up with is Dean’s repeated hinting that he wants another dog, and there’s no way that would be serious enough for this kind of reaction, and anyway, they wouldn’t need Erica to—

“Oh my god,” Sam breathes as it hits him. “You asked Erica to have a baby.”

The look Dean gives him at that isn’t anything but scathing. “Welcome to the conversation, Doctor.”

Still mostly numb with the shock of realization, Sam says, “You don’t want another dog. You want a kid.”

Their kid. As in, his and Dean’s.

Dean has stopped pacing now, looking at Sam through narrowed eyes. After a few seconds, his hands fall to his side. “You really thought I was talking about getting a dog, didn’t you?” he says.

“I was gonna ask Frannie to find a puppy,” Sam admits, and then leans forward and puts his head in his hands. “Fuck, Dean. You couldn’t have just asked?”

“I did ask!” Dean shouts, and when Sam glances up his brother’s jaw is squared belligerently. “Not my fault you weren’t paying attention!”

Sam’s about to point out that most couples have this sort of conversation in plain English instead of speaking in code, when something occurs to him. “She said yes?” he checks.

“Does it fucking matter, Sam?” Dean snaps. “I mean, clearly you don’t think we should—”

“Dean,” Sam says, sharply enough to shut his brother up.

Dean does close his mouth, but he’s still breathing hard and his eyes are flashing as Sam pushes to his feet and moves closer.
“She said yes,” Sam says again—a statement this time. “Yours or mine? No, stupid question. Did you make a deposit at the sperm bank yet?”

Dean squirms, embarrassment leaking through his anger. “That’s a little personal, Sam.”

“Did you?”

Dean’s mouth works for a moment and then, sourly, he answers, “No.”

“Why not?” Because Dean isn’t the type to move forward on something like this until he has all the pieces in place.

Dean looks at him mulishly and doesn’t answer, which means he’s embarrassed by whatever the answer is. And there’s only one surefire way to get Dean to talk when he’s behaving like this.

Sam expects to have his hand slapped away the first time he reaches for Dean, and his brother doesn’t disappoint him. Dean slaps at him the second time too. The third time, though, he lets Sam catch his wrist—rough pattern of scar tissue beneath his fingertips—and reel him in. He’s unyielding in Sam’s arms—tense and still angry—but Sam ignores that and starts kissing the side of his brother’s throat. He keeps his touch gentle this time, and soft, and after a few minutes the tension in Dean’s muscles eases.

“Why not, Dean?” Sam asks again, kissing his way up to his brother’s jaw and running his fingertips up and down Dean’s back and arms.

“Wanted,” Dean rasps, and then grips Sam’s bicep in a firm grab. “Wanted it to be you getting me off.”

It’s ... probably the most romantic thing Dean’s ever said to him.

Sam’s chest expands in a painful rush and he pulls Dean more firmly against his chest. “You got a specimen cup somewhere?”

“B-bed.”

“Okay, then,” Sam whispers, and kisses his brother’s scarred temple.

Dean jerks slightly in his arms—Sam usually tends to avoid that spot—and then stiffens for a different reason. “What?”

“In case you missed it,” Sam says, keeping his voice light and teasing as he draws his brother back toward the stairs. “This is me saying yes.”

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