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**Brother's Blood**

by diana_lucifera, stormageddon

**Summary**

When Dean goes missing on a hunt in New Orleans, John picks Sam up from Stanford to help look for him. (Pilot AU)
On the morning of October 22\textsuperscript{nd}, Sam wakes up to the sound of someone pounding on his front door. He squints blearily at the alarm clock over Jess’ bare shoulder and is able to make out \textit{3:48 am} in glowing green letters. For someone who was raised to be a hunter, a knock on the door at this time of night is already enough to make his hackles rise. He slips from between the sheets as quietly as possible and pads softly into the kitchen towards the door, pulling one of the butcher knives from the knife block just in case. The knocking hasn’t let up since it woke him, though its sound is more demanding than panicked.

“Sam?” Jess’ sleep-fogged voice comes from behind him. “What is it?”

“Shh,” Sam tells her as gently as possible, but she spots the knife glinting in his hand and her eyes grow wide. So much for not freaking her out.

He hadn’t been able to spot anyone through the window next to their front door, and before he can get a good look through the peephole, he hears a familiar voice from the other side.

“Sam!” the voice commands. “Open up, Sam!”

A strange feeling washes over him as one part of him relaxes while a whole different part tenses up. Setting his jaw, he unbolts the door and opens it only as far as the chain lock will allow.

“Dad.”

If John Winchester is perturbed by Sam’s less than welcoming tone, he doesn’t show it. His expression is grim, firm but maybe a little soft around the edges, like he’s trying for tender.

“Sammy. It’s been a while.”

Sam swallows down a burst of emotion, some confusing mixture of rage and resentment and love and fear, with an audible \textit{click}.

“What do you want?” he asks, not bothering to mask the hostility.

“We need to talk.”

“So talk,” Sam shoots back, unmoving.

He can feel Jess behind him now, peering over his shoulder. Her fingers encircle his wrist significantly, and Sam realizes that he’s still clutching the knife in a white-knuckled fist. He loosens his grip, and she takes it from him gently and sets it on the sill of the window. Sam isn’t sure if he’s grateful for her comforting presence at his back or terrified to have her within any sort of proximity to the patriarch of his profoundly fucked-up family. Her hand rests on his lower back, warm and supporting.

“Let me in, son,” John says. “And I’ll tell you all about it.”

“No,” Sam says. “Whatever it is you want, no.”

“Sam,” his father says meaningfully. “I need your help.”

Sam clenches his teeth, shoots a puff of air out of his nose.
“I’m done helping you,” he says. “I’m done with all of that.”

Done with the hunting, done with the fighting, done with crappy hotel rooms and cheap diner food and credit card scams. Done with never making roots or friends. Done with never feeling normal or safe.

“Just leave me alone,” he says and starts to close the door.

“It’s about Dean,” John says.

And Sam’s blood runs cold.

He doesn’t have to think about it, not even a little bit. He slams the door shut, tugs off the chain lock, and throws it open.

“Where is he?” he asks, because it hadn’t even occurred to him until now that Dean might not be standing just out of sight behind Dad or downstairs running the Impala, that Dean might be hurt or even, God, no—

“I don’t know,” John says, pushing past Sam and Jess and into the apartment.

Sam hears blood rushing in his ears.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” he demands, following John out of the entryway and back into the kitchen.

He hears Jess shut the door and then she’s back at his side again, a thin line of concern between her brows. She shouldn’t be here for this, shouldn’t be around John at all, but Sam can’t care about that right now.

John sighs and turns to face Sam.

“He was on a hunting trip down in Louisiana,” he says significantly, cutting his eyes a little at Jess. “He’s been out of contact for almost a week.”

“You let him go hunting alone?” Sam demands, trying to process what John has just told him.

“You let him go hunting alone?” Sam demands, trying to process what John has just told him.

“Your brother’s twenty-six years old, Sam,” John says. He tugs open the fridge and pulls out a beer, twisting off the cap. “He doesn’t need me to go with him on every hunting trip.”

Sam strides across the kitchen and snatches the beer from his father’s hand, slamming it down on the far counter.

“Except now he’s missing!” he says accusingly. “What—?”

“Sam,” John says firmly. “This conversation doesn’t need an audience.”

Sam follows his gaze to Jess, who’s still standing on the other side of the room, arms crossed awkwardly over her thinly clothed chest, looking between them with wary eyes. She hasn’t spoken since John showed up, Sam realizes, and thinks suddenly how bizarre this must all seem to her.

“I’m Sam’s girlfriend,” she says now. “I’m not going anywhere.”

And Sam’s grateful for her support. He really is, but—

“Maybe he’s right, Jess,” he says. “Could you give us a few minutes?”
Jess’ lips form a thin line.

“Sam, can I talk to you for a second?”

Sam excuses himself to follow her into the bedroom, where she tugs on her robe and turns to fix him with concerned eyes.

“Sam, is it okay for him to be here?”

He doesn’t blame her for asking. The personal history he’d given her had been accurate, but only the barest of bones: Dead mother, big brother he’d been close with until a few years ago, a controlling father with a drinking problem who’d moved them around a lot. He’d been so cagey about the rest of the details that, for all he knew, she thought his childhood had been some sort of abusive nightmare that he just wasn’t ready to talk about.

“Yeah, it’s okay, Jess. It’s just—”

He sinks down on the bed, brushing a hand over his mouth. She sits beside him and curls a palm around the nape of his neck.

“You think your brother’s really in trouble?” she asks. “I mean, a week isn’t that long to go without calling, right?”

“You don’t know Dean,” Sam says. “If it were my dad, sure, a week would be nothing, but Dean? It’s bad, Jess.”

His voice cracks a little at the end. He hasn’t spoken to Dean for almost two years, and yeah, the last time they’d talked, Sam had been pretty pissed, but Dean is still Dean, and the idea of something happening to him makes Sam sick in his gut.

“Okay,” Jess says soothingly, squeezing his hand. “Okay, Sam. Why don’t we both go back in there and find out all the details from your dad. If he hasn’t called the cops already, I’ll go with you right now, and we’ll file a missing person report. They’ll sort it out. It’s going to be okay.”

Her thigh is pressed tight against his, her fingers scratching lightly at the hair behind his ear, and for a single, crazy moment, he wants to tell her everything.

“I think he’s right. Maybe it’s better if you’re not involved in this,” he says instead, avoiding her eyes.

Jess opens her mouth to protest.

“I just. I don’t want you mixed up in my family crap,” Sam tells her. “You know?”

“Sam,” she says warningly.

“Please, Jess,” Sam implores. “Just, let me deal with this.”

She wants to fight him, he knows, but he’s not in a relationship with Jess because she’s the sort of person who clings and pries and wants to know every detail. He remembers the first time they’d ever really talked, out on the balcony at some party, halfway to buzzed, and she’d told him about her dad’s own drinking problem.

“It wasn’t all bad,” she’d said. “I had a good childhood. But something like that, you can’t really talk to anyone about it, you know? It’s like you’re keeping this big secret from the world. Like there’s
this whole part of you that you can’t share with anyone.”

And Sam had thought, God, yes, I know.

Jess understands that part of him. Jess gets that Sam can’t be an open book, so even if it frustrates her, she brings her hand down from his neck and says: “Okay, Sam.”

She leans in, kisses him lightly at the corner of his mouth, gives his hand one final squeeze.

“Just let me know if you need me, all right?”

~

Jess trusts Sam, she reflects, as she watches the boyfriend in question snag a dull, faded black duffle bag from underneath their bed and start throwing clothes in it.

Really, she does trust him. If he wants to take care of this on his own, he can, and will, but this is Sam. Sweet, dorky, awkward, gorgeous Sam, the boy she took one look at, leaning against the patio railing outside a no-name house party, hands stuffed in his pockets and hunched as if he were trying to make himself smaller, practically apologizing for taking up so much space, waiting for someone to come over and show him how this whole 'having fun' thing worked.

He can take care of this on his own, but he shouldn't have to.

And now, like then, Jess steps in to help the sweet, too-tall bookworm she loves get through this. He'll find his brother. She know this in the same way she knows her shoe size, or her address, or the way Sam's hair looks in the morning, tousled and downy, going every which way as the sun spikes it with caramel and gold.

He’ll find Dean, then come back to her. In the meantime, there’s work to do.

She picks up a legal pad from the jettisoned contents of Sam's backpack.

“Give me your SUNet ID and password,” she prompts, swiftly replacing the hoodie and jeans in his hands with pen and paper, folding the clothes as she keeps talking. “I can run interference for you with your professors and keep tabs on your law school applications while you're out looking for your brother.”

“Jess,” Sam starts, looking a little dumbfounded, and still holding the legal pad and pen without actually making a move to use them.

“If this thing takes more than a couple weeks, I can buy you time with the Stanford interview, talk to your professors, all that.” Jess supplies, still folding and packing the clothes Sam had jerked from their drawers and placed haphazardly on the bed next to his bags. “Any longer than that and we might run into some issues, but I can keep them on their toes, especially if you have the police department send me a copy of the missing persons report.”

“Jess,” Sam breathes, gratitude and worry and terror all welling up in his stupidly expressive eyes, and before Jess can hold him and tell him it'll be alright, before she can try and comfort him, take away the hurt in any way she knows how, they're interrupted.

“Son, we're on a timeline here!” John booms impatiently, pounding abruptly on the door.

Sam's lips thin and a muscle tics in his cheek as he rolls his eyes.
“Can you let him in before he kicks in the door?” he asks Jess, turning back to the bed to stuff a few lingering essentials in the duffle.

“Anything I can do to help,” she smiles wryly as she turns and misses Sam stuffing a pistol from behind the headboard into his backpack.

~

It burns at Sam that even after four years at Stanford, four years of the most apple pie-normal life a person could want, four years away from his dad and hunting and training and killing, he still can be packed and on the road in ten minutes or less. He can still shrink his life to a couple of bags in the back of a car, staring down two lane asphalt with guns in the trunk and a wrinkled map in his lap, like nothing ever changed.

Like he never left.

Except the Impala is a truck now, a black, four wheel drive behemoth that, if Dean weren't missing, Sam would snark about being his dad's way of compensating for something. He hates how their elbows can't help but touch in the narrow cab, how his legs actually have room to almost unfold in the floor well. How a jealous spike of ooh-pretty-want hit him hard when Dad unlatched the tailgate to reveal the arsenal in the bed, oiled and organized to lethal perfection.

Most of all he hates how even if they find Dean, he'll never fit in here with them.

So now the Impala is a truck and instead of Sam in the back, playing army men or doing his calculus homework, he's in the front, scouring maps and timelines not for monsters or ghosts or ghouls, but for Dean.

Dean, who could have been kidnapped, who could by lying somewhere beaten and bloody, who could be—

He can't force himself to talk about it with Dad for the first couple hours. He can only sit and watch the mile markers tick by, remembering every reason he left this life and hating John Winchester for sending Dean out into it alone.

Luckily for Sam's boiling rage, John's new truck is a gas guzzler.

~

John expects the anger. He expects the resentment, left simmering for four years and still hot as the day he told his youngest to leave and never come back. He expects the door slammed in his face and the bitter contempt at the very idea of hunting, just as he expected that it would all cease to matter the second Sammy heard that Dean was missing.

Missing. Not gone, because if there is a twenty-six year old on the planet that can survive the things that go bump in the night alone for a week, it's his eldest, who's twice as cocky as John was at that age and easily three times as lethal.

He expected everything he got from Sam in Palo Alto. The right hook he gets from Sammy at a fill-up two hours into the journey, however, is something of a surprise.

Probably didn't want his girl to see him beating up on the old man, John reflects as he blocks a respectable jab from Sam, only to have the wind knocked out of him by a merciless elbow to the ribs, the elbow in question every bit as razor sharp as it had been when he was fifteen and growing every which way but muscle, all big feet and lanky limbs and bitter sarcasm. Probably waited this long to
start throwing punches because Sammy knew John would expect violence for the first hour at least. The fill-up station was considerate. They didn't waste time they could be driving fighting, and if one gets knocked out, the other can drive.

Good to know some things didn't change.

“Alright Sammy, that's enough,” John announces, catching his youngest in a headlock when he notices the gas station clerk getting a little too interested in their tussle.

“A week!” Sam spits, still swinging furiously, getting in a few decent blows on John's kidney, “Nothing from Dean for a week and you don't do anything about it?” he demands, using his body weight to slam John hard against the side of the truck, “Dean, who has picked up the phone for you during gunfights, maulings, and sex! Dean, who obeys every stupid, suicidal order you give? For all you know, he could be dead right now, and it's your fault, because you couldn't get off the job or out of the bottle long enough to fucking look for him!”

It stings.

Not because it’s true, at least not exactly. John knows he had his reasons, good reasons, just like he has reasons for everything he does. Of course, he’d been worried about Dean. Hell, the fact that Dean had gone out of contact was the only reason John had stuck around to finish that job in Jericho, just like it’s the only reason he’s spending thirty some-odd hours driving cross country with his angry, willful youngest instead of chasing leads in the opposite damn direction. But Sam’s never exactly been one to give John the benefit of the doubt, and John’s never been one to explain himself. It’s a big part of why he and Sam drive each other so crazy.

John has Sam pinned face-first against the cab, long arms pulled tight behind his back, before Sam can spit his next insult. The truck rocks a little under the blow, and John knows he used more force than was strictly necessary. Hopes the clerk doesn’t take it as a sign that they’re escalating.

“All right, Sammy,” he says in a low voice. “You’ve said your piece, now get back in the truck and cool off.”

“No!” Sam spits out, face all crammed up against the window.

He struggles against the hold, but John’s got experience and muscle on him and Sam’s about four years out of practice.

“I said get in the truck, Sam,” John grits out, digging his fingers in.

“And I said NO!”

Sam’s really getting loud now, bucking harder against John’s hold, and John’s forced to let him go when another car pulls into the fill station. They don’t need this kind of attention. Sam’s knows better than to try to get another hit in on John, though, just draws himself up and lets out an angry huff through his nose. There’s an angry red mark on his cheekbone.

“I don’t get you,” Sam says lowly. “How can you just act like it doesn’t mean anything to you? How the hell could you wait a week to go looking? Do you just not care?!”

No one can push John’s buttons like Sam.

“I’m acting like I don’t care?” he says in voice like steel. “I haven’t talked to Dean in a week. When’s the last time you talked to him?”
Sam draws back; his eyes go wide, then narrow.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I’m not the one who walked out on Dean,” John says. “If you’d stuck around instead of being so damn selfish, maybe Dean wouldn’t have had to go on that case by himself!”

Sam’s nostril’s flare, the way John knows they do when Sam’s about to lose his mind.

“Don’t you put this on me,” he snarls, and then, amping up the volume: “Don’t you DARE try to put this on me! You just don’t want to admit that you screwed up! You did this, Dad! Not me!”

John’s feels that familiar rush of rage rush through him, speeding up his pulse, making his head go a little fuzzy. He’s been doing this dance with Sam since he was a teenager, and he knows that, without Dean there to step between them, they’re about five seconds away from full-on punching each other’s lights out, civilians or no.

The gas pump gives a loud click, signaling that the tank is full, and it’s like the bell on a boxing match. Sam glares at him for a moment longer and then turns without a word, wrenches open the door to the truck, and then slams it shut behind him. John knows what it means. This argument isn’t over, but Sam isn’t going to waste any time on John that he could be spending on Dean.

John gets that. They owe Dean that much.

*At least* that much.

He gets in, slams his own door shut, and angles the truck back toward the highway.
Chapter 2

The first and last case John and Sam every worked together without Dean had been in Orlando. Sam had been about sixteen, shooting up like a weed and just starting to hit that stage where he’d wanted to pick at John’s every move. John would catch him looking at him sometimes with accusing eyes, like he was cataloguing perceived insults and criticisms for future use; maybe just waiting to pick a fight. It was growing pains, John knew, and Sam was going to have to get over them sooner or later anyway, so he’d sent Dean off with the Impala for five days on his own while John tested out Sammy’s abilities as a hunting partner.

Sam was a decent enough hunter. That wasn’t the problem. The problem was Sam’s damn lip and his ability to get under John’s skin with the absolute minimum of effort. By the end of the week, it felt like John had spent more time and effort fighting Sam than he had fighting the banshee.

They’d made it through the case, salted and burned the thing’s corpse, tied it all up enough that John had started to feel like they’d somehow, miraculously made it through without doing too much damage to each other, when it had all blown up in his face. One second they were sniping at each other in a diner parking lot and, the next second, Sam was laying into him for everything from John’s music to his over-reliance on Sam’s research to their whole damn lives and John was giving it right back to him. Hell, John had never pretended he didn’t have a temper, and Sam had been working on his nerves for nearly five days straight.

Sam had said something – John doesn’t even remember what it was, just one toe too far over the line – and John had snapped and popped him right in the mouth.

It was the first time he’d laid a hand on Sam like that – not because he was training him or as a punishment meant to teach Sam a lesson but just because he was angry. Still, it hadn’t been a hard hit, not compared to the blows he’d seen his son take on hunts, and Sam had been practically begging for it. John’s daddy had been a Marine, too, and Lord knows, he’d done a lot worse than that for a hell of a lot less.

Sam had retreated to the library, shoulders still stiff with anger and, in spite of the split lip and purpling cheek Sam was sporting, John was still left with the feeling that he was the one who’d lost that fight.

Dean had come back that night. John could hear him whistling all the way from the parking lot, and he’d breezed in the door looking about four years younger and ten pounds lighter, really happy in a way John hadn’t seen him in much too long of a time, and John had hated himself for the way that had all fallen away the second Dean took in the sight of him hunched over his third slug of Jack, the fight with Sam written all over him.

“Where’s Sammy?” he’d asked warily, dropping his duffle onto the bed furthest away from the door.
“Library,” John had said shortly, and Dean had just nodded and gone after his brother, falling back into his role like he’d never left at all.

John had cleared out before Dean came back, left a note that he’d gone chasing a possible werewolf in Palm Beach. He’d told himself that he was moving onto the next case, just like always. That he was just giving himself some time to cool off.

Told himself that it wasn’t because he didn’t want to know what Dean was going to do when he saw what John had done to Sam.

As it turned out, Dean didn’t do anything. He never even mentioned it. But sometimes John thought he looked at him different after that, like he didn’t quite trust him – didn’t trust him with Sam – and that was maybe worse.

~

After the gas station, they spend the next hundred miles in dense, vicious silence.

The black, grudge-holding part of Sam that has kept his tongue still and thoughts violent for the last hour and a half is content to let John stew in the silence, to just sit there and let the accusations eat John alive until he has no choice but to speak up, to tell Sam exactly what he’d sent Dean into that Sam’s brother couldn’t come out of.

But then Sam sees a guy in his twenties come out of the Seven Eleven on the corner in a beat up leather jacket, tearing into a Ding Dong like it's manna from heaven, and his hands are reaching for his computer before his head even knows what's going on. The questions that were too hard and heavy to ask in Palo Alto are suddenly falling out of his mouth, just another step in finding Dean. Or whatever's left of him, the hopeless corner of his mind whispers sharply, cutting into the fragile focus Sam has only just been able to muster. He flinches at the thought, pushes it quickly from his mind.

“Where was Dean when you heard from him last?” Sam stares at the boot screen on his laptop, refusing to flick his eyes to the left and see John's reaction to his breaking the silence. Whatever it is, satisfaction, anger, resentment, will only set them off again.

The pulsing progress bar of the loading screen becomes his only focus in life. It's that, or look over at John as he clears his throat.

“New Orleans.” John gravels. “There was a string of deaths, smelled like voodoo.”

The brittle shield of purpose Sam has drawn around himself shatters like glass, fractures into news clips and death tolls and a fetid soup of death and debris where a city stood two months ago.

“Where?” Sam bites out, clipped and cold and disbelieving, because no one, no one, in their right mind would just walk into New Orleans now, less than two months after Hurricane Katrina tore through the city.

And then he finally cuts his eyes to the left, and sees the grim set to his dad's shoulders, jaw clenched, white-knuckling the steering wheel so hard that the leather creaks in the heavy silence of the cab.

His dad would. If there was a hunt, if people were dying, John would go. It's part of his crusade, to go on every hunt, to kill every shadowy, evil thing out there. But he was on a job already, so he sent the next best thing.
His gun hand.

Dean.

Dean, who has disappeared into the heart of the biggest disaster zone in a decade, who has done the completely insane, who has just waltzed in, because Dad told him to. Because people were dying and orders were orders and there was something that needed to be hunted.

“You're unbelievable,” Sam spits out, rage and disgust curling his lip and narrowing his eyes.

“Son,” John begins, but Sam doesn't let him get far.

“No,” he shouts, louder than the cramped cab demands because someone has to. Someone has to say 'no' to John Winchester, and it sure as hell isn't gonna be Dean.

Dean's gone.

So Sam says 'no' for him, rejects the idea that sending your son into the devastated, festering shell of New Orleans, to pick and dig at whatever was left of the city's shadow players looking for one monster, one among thousands, for any reason could be right.

“You're not going to 'son' me dad,” Sam persists, “Not until you go back to the part where you sent Dean into NEW ORLEANS. What, there wasn't a case in an active war zone, so you had to send him right into the middle of the biggest disaster area in the continental US? Hell, Dad, half the city is still evacuated!”

“He's got a Marshal's badge.” John graves, voice just close enough to dismissive to make Sam's hands clench around the computer still in his lap, his arms itch to slam it against his father's head until he either stops being a soulless bastard (which would, undoubtedly, take a while) or the stupid too-small truck he's driving crashes.

Sam keeps his arms still and John unconcussed by reminding himself that it would be hard to explain to California State Troopers how laptop giblets and several near-perfect impressions of the Dell logo became inexplicably, accidentally embedded in his father's skull in the course of the crash.

“That's not the point!” he continues, still burning with anger at John's indifference, his own father's nonchalance at sending Dean into the wake of disaster to chase a rumor. “They're keeping people out for a reason, Dad! There's no power, no food, no clean water! I mean, the place is still flooded, for Christ's sake!!”

“Your brother didn't seem to have a problem with it,” John remarks obdurately, eyes never leaving the highway.

“Of course he didn't!” Sam, sick of ramming his head against the brick wall that was John Winchester's will, erupts. “This is Dean we're talking about! He would jump off a bridge if you told him to!”

His mind leaps to every reckless mission, every half-cocked plan, every time he and Dean had gone charging in on a hunt half ready and underprepared simply because John had said “go.”

“You know he would follow any order you gave him, no matter how stupid or suicidal, and you took advantage of that!” Sam goes on, beyond furious.

“People were dying, Sam,” John shoots back, voice raised a half-tone below shouting, but far from civil, far from calm or cool or collected.
Pressing his advantage, shoving the anger and frustration and hatred and a deep, crippling fear that he will never see Dean alive again into his next words, Sam snarls, “If he dies from this, if he's gone already, you killed him! Not this thing, not the hurricane, YOU!!”

“You THINK I DON'T KNOW THAT?” His father shouts back, anger finally breaking the dam and bursting through to the surface, eyes finally leaving the road and finally meeting Sam's, cold and dark with fury. Sam gets a lightning quick hit of satisfaction before laying into his father anew, intent on stringing him up for his every crime against Dean, whose only sin was loyalty.

“I THINK YOU DON'T CARE!!” Sam roars, rough and hateful. “Anywhere else, ANYWHERE would have been safer! But no, your stupid crusade calls and you send Dean to answer, just like always!”

“Oh, and what would you have me do, Sammy?” John challenges. “Stick my head in the sand and just let people die?”

“You could be a father for once in your life and protect your son!” Sam charges at the top of his lungs, and before he can follow up on that, John's backhands him so hard that Sam sees stars. He isn't as out of practice as his father seems to believe, though, because before John can retract his fist, Sam has his father in a rough arm bar, wrenching back and down to torture every joint he can before John jerks savagely toward the driver's side of the cab, using muscle and weight and his iron grip on the steering column to send Sam's shoulder crashing into the center console.

Then, in an instant, the world shrinks down to blaring horns and squealing rubber and John swearing violently as Sam does his best to just hold on, hoping to God and anyone else that's listening that his father knows this truck well enough to get it through this without flipping.

It's only after they straighten out, a very pissed off commuter in their rearview and the smell of burnt rubber filling the cab, that Sam realizes his father's hand had been fisted in the jacket over his shoulder, holding him safe and steady through the swerve.

~

Sam calls Jess at the next fill up station. It's ten o'clock. Sam knows for a fact that she has class. He isn't surprised when she picks up anyway.

“Sam, is everything okay?” she asks, worried.

There is only one answer to that question.

“No,” he says, and it's supposed to be flat, or matter of fact, or wry or something, but it comes out weak and cracked and broken because Dean isn't just not calling him because of a stupid fight or because he’s out on a hunt, he's missing, has been for a week, and in the world's worst place.

Dean's gone, and the last thing Sam said to him was how he never wanted to see his face again.

“Sam, what's wrong?” Jess seems to catch herself on the other end of the line, realizes that there are a myriad of answers to that question, most of which will only draw more broken, half-sobbed words from Sam. “Where are you? I'm leaving Stanford now.”

“No,” Sam cuts in, this time strongly, with no weakness or room to break. He can barely handle a world where Dean is missing, maybe dead. He can't handle the thought of Jess finding out what his life really is, of losing her and Dean all in the same day. He just can't. Better she be safe at Stanford than exposed to the salt and iron of the Winchester family business.
Better she be frustrated by secrets than horrified by the truth.

“Sam,” Jess says on the other end of the line; there’s a tone of pleading in her voice.

“I’m sorry,” Sam says, and he’s not sure if he means he’s sorry for shutting her out or sorry for calling or just sorry for being Sam Winchester. “I should go.”

“Sam,” Jess says again. “I just want to help. Let me help you.”

“You’re helping more than enough,” Sam tells her, and he means it.

It really hits him sometimes, just how much he loves Jess. Maybe she smiles at him all crinkle-eyed over dinner like she did on their first date; maybe she shows up at the library at 4:00am with a cup of coffee and a muffin; maybe she’s just lying on their couch, her pretty face all stuffed up against a throw pillow and snoring lightly – and Sam gets hit with that sucker punch of I love you I love you so much please don’t ever leave me.

Jess is everything a life as a hunter wouldn’t let him have. Jess is everything kind and normal and safe. Jess is the life he and Dean could have had – should have had – if the thing that killed their mother and John Winchester hadn’t taken it all away from them.

And when (when, not if, he has to keep telling himself) Sam finds Dean, he’s going to go back to her, back to the only person and place that’s ever truly belonged to him.

It helps, thinking like that. Maybe even more than it should.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” he tells Jess, and he hopes she knows everything he isn’t saying, and maybe she does, because Jess understands him, more than almost anyone, and he loves her so much for that sometimes it hurts a little.

When Sam nods off while the truck is rocketing down I-10, he dreams of Jess burning on the ceiling.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

We finished early this week, so we thought we might as well post it! Thanks for the kudos, etc. We hope you all enjoy this chapter, and have a great holiday season!

On a more serious note, one major factor in our wanting to write this fic was the realization that, according to the show's timeline, Dean really was working a case in New Orleans less than two months after Hurricane Katrina hit. We both grew up in coastal Alabama and not only experienced the hurricanes but also spent a good amount time in New Orleans immediately after the storm hit. The things we're describing in this and the next chapter - including the graffiti - are all things we witnessed, personally, over the weeks and months after the storm. We've done our best to portray it accurately, though we beg pardon of anyone who takes exception with our portrayal. Putting the full horror of the storm's effect on the city into words is probably impossible, but to tell this story, we had to make an attempt.

If John notices Sam waking panting and wrung out from the nightmare, he doesn’t acknowledge it, though he lets Sam take over driving at the next stop without comment. Sam relishes turning off his father’s classic rock and tuning the radio to the nearest Top 40 station. They’re going to be riding I-10 for a punishing fourteen hours, and Sam refuses to spend the entire time listening to the audio equivalent of I Love the ‘80s. Not to mention John’s got the exact same music collection he had through Sam and Dean’s childhood (though his ozone-annihilating truck has forced him to switch to CDs, which Sam would rib him for if he felt even a little bit like joking), and the soundtrack is bringing back memories he doesn’t exactly want to deal with right now.

They’re somewhere in Arizona and Sam’s finishing up his fourth cup of crappy gas station coffee when he finally gives in and asks for more information on Dean’s case, just so he has something more specific to think about, rather than just cataloguing everything that could have possibly happened to Dean and it’s probability.

“You said it was a voodoo thing?” he prompts.

John reaches over and cuts off the radio, which is currently blasting its third repetition of “Photograph.” Sam is secretly grateful.

“Right,” John says. “A string of mysterious deaths started cropping up. Six grown men over the course of a month.”

“And you think they were victims of some voodoo curse?” Sam asked, glancing at John out of the corner of his eye.

“I know they were,” John says.

Sam waits. When John doesn’t elaborate, he grips the steering wheel tighter and prompts: “Why?”

John looks peeved at the question, and Sam shoves down the desire to smack him again.
“Well, for one thing,” his father says grudgingly. “The deaths were all sudden, with no apparent outward cause. And then there’s the fact that two of the men were found with snails packed in their stomachs. A witness said he saw lizards crawl out of the second victim’s mouth, too.”

Sam makes a face. That is just gross.

“It gets worse. When Dean checked in with me after visiting the coroner, he said the autopsy had found live snakes in one of the guy’s veins.”

Sam clamps down a full body shudder.

“Okay,” he says. “Good call on the voodoo then.”

Whatever John wants to say in response to that, he manages to keep to himself.

“So, was there any connection between the victims?”

“As a matter of fact, they were all public works employees. The first victim was a member of the NOPD, two of them were National Guardsmen, and the last three were FEMA employees.”

Sam puffs out a breath.

“A hit list like that narrows it down to just about every voodoo and hoodoo practitioner native to the city, then,” he says wryly.

“When Dean checked in, he said all of the men spent time in the Seventh Ward just before they died, so odds are, whoever is doing the killings is located there. He was going to go check out the area and see what could turn up.”

“And that’s the last thing you heard from him,” Sam says.

He presses his lips into a thin line and tightens his hands on the wheel again. The leather gives a little squeak of protest under the pressure. He knows if he says anything now, he’s going to say everything, and that’s always a mistake.

John let Dean go missing in New Orleans for a week.

He can still barely think that without the rage rushing up inside him. New Orleans was dangerous enough before Katrina hit. Sam grew up with a hunter for a father; he knows all the stories about that city. The whole area is steeped in lore, from witches to monsters to just about anything in between, and while a lot of it may be played up for the tourists, enough of it is legitimate to make the Big Easy pretty damn infamous to those who are tuned into the supernatural.

Even outside of the paranormal, the murder rate in New Orleans is ten times the US average. There are plenty of stories of hunters coming back from taking out a poltergeist or a werewolf, only to find themselves meeting a bloody end at the hands of their fellow humans. The entire city is one violent death. Dad had always said that hunters who made New Orleans their territory were one of two things: crazy and bitter or just plain crazy.

Now that same city has been thrown into the chaos that inevitably follows any national disaster? Sam can guess well enough what the situation is like: creatures uprooted from their normal habitats, whether in the city or in the bayou, flooding into the rest of Louisiana and the surrounding states in all directions; a hundred or more ghosts with their resting places upturned or destroyed; things that go bump in the night taking advantage of the chaos to pick off survivors both in and out of the city. The hunters based in the area are likely scrambling to stem the tide and pick up the slack for the hunters.
who had died or left because of the storm.

And John Winchester had let Dean disappear into that.

Sam grips the wheel tighter still, pushes the truck to ninety. Once they’re in the city, he tells himself, it’ll be easier. Once they’re in the city, he’ll start thinking about this as another hunt – except they aren’t hunting for some wendigo or restless spirit. They’re hunting for Dean. And it’s different.

When he finds his brother, once he makes sure that Dean is safe and breathing and whole, Sam thinks he’s probably going to kill him.

~

Sam doesn’t have any real experience with hurricanes. Their dad had always kept them pretty well out of the way of predictable natural disasters, at least. The closest he’d ever come to something like that was a particularly bad tornado that had cropped up when he was twelve. John had dropped them in some crap motel in Athens, Alabama for a few weeks while he went after a coven of witches who were wreaking havoc a couple of counties over.

Sam was definitely tangentially aware that a tornado outbreak had been going on that month in the Central US and the Southeast, but keeping track of the weather hadn’t exactly been on his list of priorities during his pre-teen years. Apparently it was on Dean’s, though (either that or the weather bulletin had just interrupted Walker Texas Ranger, Sam didn’t know), because one second Sam had been sitting on a parking bumper, squinting over his copy of “The Outsiders” and thinking about how weird the sky looked, and the next second, he’d had Dean’s hand fisted in the back of shirt, hauling him inside of their motel room and into the bathroom.

“Well, kiddo,” Dean had said easily, stripping the comforter from Sam’s bed and grabbing a couple of pillows. “Guess we’re camping out for a few hours.”

He’d tossed the bundle into the tub before darting out of the room again to grab Sam’s mattress and shove it into the room with them, leaning it up against the tub.

“That’s right, right?” he’d asked Sam. “Tornado. Mattress. Pretty sure that’s right.”

Sam had just stared at him blankly, so Dean had shrugged and climbed into the tub.

“C’mon, Sammy,” he’d said, slapping the other side of the tub in a way that was probably supposed to be an invitation. “Get in here.”

Sam had bitched and moaned the whole way through, about how stupid this was, how Dean’s foot was digging into his hip, how Dean was getting Fritos all over the comforter he’d turned into their weird little nest, up until the point where the power had failed.


Sam’s stomach had clenched.

“No, Dean, wait,” he said, reaching out to grab at his brother and missing by a mile.

“It’s fine, Sam,” Dean told him, thumping clumsily past the mattress. “It’ll just take a second.”

He’d shut the bathroom door behind him.

Sitting there by himself in the dark, Sam was suddenly aware of the sounds he could hear filtering in
from outside: howling wind, distant sirens, the sound of something out there going thumpthumpcrash, and he’d been filled with the sudden, irrational fear that the storm would hit just then, would suck Dean right up, take him away, and leave Sam here alone. He clutched the comforter in tight fists, tried to breathe deeply, and counted the seconds. If Dean wasn’t back by the time he reached sixty, Sam was going out there, and Dean could kick his ass for it if he wanted to.

His brother came busting back into the bathroom just as Sam got to “fifty-six.”

“I totally just saw a cow fly by our window,” he joked, in a slightly shaken voice that told Sam the storm was probably getting pretty bad.

Dean had spent the next while making obscene shadow puppets on the wall and recounting episodes of Are You Afraid of the Dark? with the flashlight tucked up under his chin (as if some stupid TV show could even hold a candle to the nightmares Sam and Dean had actually experienced, though Sam was pretty sure that was part of the joke).

“You’re so lame,” Sam had told him in a long-suffering voice. “Come on, you’re gonna waste the batteries.”

Dean grinned around the mouth of the flashlight, flicking it on so that his cheeks glowed bright red from the inside. Sam aimed a kick at him, and Dean spat out the flashlight and laughed when Sam’s foot connected with his gut. They’d tussled a little, as much as they could in such a tight space, and Sam had ended up crammed between Dean’s legs, the back of his head resting on Dean’s sternum. The amulet Sam had given Dean pressed up under Sam’s ear, a pinprick of cold metal.

They’d stayed like that. Sam was pretty sure that Dean would deny that they were cuddling if Sam mentioned it. Not like he would; the Winchesters worked on a strict system that, unless you admitted to something out loud, it wasn’t actually happening. At twelve, he was only just starting to realize how flawed that system was.

The wind howled outside. The sirens had started wailing again, seeming louder this time. It was hard to tell if the crashing, snapping, thumping sounds they were hearing were trees giving way to the wind or debris hitting the sides of the building.

“You should try to get some sleep, Sammy,” Dean said finally, after who knew how much time had passed, the vibrations from his voice reverberating through Sam’s skull. “Not like there’s anything else to do. Don’t worry, it’s all gonna be okay.”

Dean’s voice was calm and reassuring, like Sam couldn’t feel how tense his body was, couldn’t hear the way Dean’s heart was hammering in his chest, and Sam wanted to tell him to stop pretending, to stop saying things would be okay when he didn’t believe it, to tell Dean that he didn’t need to keep lying for Sam because Sam didn’t believe him anyway.

Except that one of the first things Sam had ever learned from his big brother was that, a lot of times, the only way to make someone you care about feel better was to lie, so Sam just agreed instead, let his breathing even out and feigned sleep until Dean’s pulse slowed, until he’d gradually gone loose and still under Sam, and then Sam had maneuvered his brother down deeper into the tub, pulled the mattress fully on top of them, and turned to tuck his face into Dean’s neck, soaking up Dean’s warmth and listening to the storm.

The tornado had turned out to be an F4. It had hit just north of them, and lucky for them, too, because there’s no way the motel’s piss poor construction would have held up against a direct assault. As it was, it just lost some roofing, a couple of trees, and a few windows to debris, though the power had still stayed off for a couple of days, much to Dean’s dismay. When John had come to
pick them up later that week, they’d driven out through the section of town that had taken the brunt of the tornado. Branches and whole trees lined the roads and some buildings had just been torn apart, roof first. They’d passed a couple of fields that had become nothing but a collection of litter and overturned trailers. There were billboards with the paper ripped right off, signs missing most of their letters.

Maybe he expects New Orleans to look something like that, but it really doesn’t.

It's nothing like the tornado.

In Athens, Sam saw suburbs, strip malls, houses, smashed, scattered across blocks like the work of some angry god. It was chaos, but there was a method to the madness. It was all there, just in a million tiny pieces. You could look at the debris, the smashed pieces of the puzzle, and see what the picture should have been.

This is nothing like that. At first, Sam doesn't realize what he's even looking at.

Maybe it was the grey chill of October seeping into him from the less-than-perfect seal of the truck's cab, or maybe it was the thirty-odd hours he’d just spent on the interstate, but it doesn't really register to Sam that the sea of blue plastic and broken timber before him used to be a suburb, that the twisted gnarls of damp-blackened roots reaching blindly into the air were once trees, and that everywhere a wet, shiny blue square of tarp now rests, there once was a roof.

Then they move closer, nearer to the coast, and it's not just roofs that are missing, but whole houses, some cleared to just foundations, some still, even two months later, piles of filthy pink insulation and jackstraw studs, tossed every which way on their lots like the refuse of some nightmarish carnival. There are boats, bigger than Sam has ever seen, lying upturned next to the highway, no water visible anywhere. Everywhere is destruction and in the wake of that is trash, shards of lumber and tree trunks, appliances, wrecked cars, rooftops, everything that ever comprised house or home or town, shoved and stacked into long, looming barrows. Hulking memorials to what used to be.

Sam definitely needs to lay off the gas station coffee, he notes to himself, before sitting up in the cab to take a closer look.

For the most part, the roads are clear, but that seems to be the most some places have managed. There are still flooded vehicles lining streets, silt-swamped ground scrubbed free of vegetation by raging floodwater. Businesses are limping their way back to operational, but for the most part, still shuttered or smashed, eerie ghosts of normal, of what used to be.

With the destruction and National Guard on every corner, Sam thinks the place looks like it's at war. Like it's still in a war, one that it's losing.

He keeps seeing the same symbol, on buildings, stores, houses, even the fill-ups they stop at.

The same haphazard 'x', with hasty, scrawled notations kept uniform by the hashmarks, sometimes letters, sometimes numbers, sometimes the cipher rendered almost illegible, a combination of haste and wear tearing any meaning the symbol might have once had from the cross.

It's not until John's gruff voice breaks into Sam's thoughts that he realizes he's been sketching recreations of the symbol in the margins of the legal pad spread across his lap.

“It's search and rescue tagging.” John grumbles, “FEMA's using a shitty knockoff of the standard, but it's better than nothin’.”

Sam feels a blush start at the nape of his neck for getting caught trying to apply Greek character
values to emergency search and rescue shorthand, but doesn't say anything. Best case scenario, his
dad doesn't notice the vowel pairs in the opposite margin of the legal pad and goes on a rant about
how the Corps would have done a better job. Worst case, John lights into him for his ignorance of
not only Greco-Roman grammatical structure but also urban rescue tactics, and they start punching
each other again.

“I've seen monkey shitfights at the zoo more organized, but nine times out of ten, the top's the date,
then, counterclockwise, hazards, dead, and the team who searched,” John continues, his eyes never
leaving the road as they begin the final stretch of highway that will take them into what's left of the
Big Easy.

On the last overpass, sprayed across the side of a bridge in violent, uncompromising black, Sam
reads “WE WILL NOT GO QUIETLY INTO FEMA CAMPS” and begins to realize that no
tornado could have ever prepared him for this.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

This chapter continues with the New Orleans we encountered in the last installment, so if detailed descriptions of the city post-Katrina are a turnoff, maybe skip the first portion of this update.

Again, all we can say is that we took what we experienced at the time, the sights and sounds and smells of the coast, completely devastated, and put it in to words as best we could.

It's inadequate. Incomplete. But what Sam and John see here is what we saw there, and it's the best we've got.

They're stopped at a roadblock on the way into the city.

Sam takes the US Marshal badge John passes him and snatches a hasty look in the rearview mirror, thanking anyone who's listening for the circles stress and lack of sleep have put under his eyes, and the fact that he hasn't shaved once during their trip. It adds years to his face, but even then, he can barely pass for being in his late twenties.

Luckily, the exhausted National Guardsman manning the block takes one look at John's badge, hears his authoritative grumble about following intel on federal fugitives, and waves them on through, already intent on the next vehicle approaching the city.

It's times like these that Sam is very quietly thankful for his dad's “Give me what I want or get the hell out of the way” attitude. It's the sort of stubborn arrogance people expect out of a federal investigator, and where Sam has the tenacity and control issues that fit the role, he knows that it would take a pretty out of it person to believe him as anything other than a rookie. John on the other hand, has decades of hard living on his face, in his voice.

Sam can count on one hand the times he remembers his father looking genuinely happy. The air of struggle, of a war long fought and far from over, follows John Winchester like a thunderhead. He could have told the National Guard he was God Almighty, come to straighten out this shit show, and they probably would have believed him.

Once they pull through, John carefully steering the truck through waterlogged streets, the task of getting into the city accomplished, Sam begins to really notice the details of the city proper, the pocket of New Orleans where they last heard from Dean.

Devastation doesn't cover it. No one word can sum up the catastrophe laid out before him.

It's the smell that hits first, a hot, sticky, swollen stink of rotting wood and refuse, the trash and filth of the city spread into every nook and cranny by floodwater and let to moulder uncombated for nearly two months. There's another scent in there, too, lurking underneath the others; unmistakable, subtle and horrifying in its implications.

Sam is inside. He is inside a truck on an empty street, and he can smell the distinct, claying rot that
only belongs to human bodies.

The sheer number of abandoned dead it would take to... Sam's stomach is turning in disgust and horror before he can finish the thought.

He has to swallow hard to keep from retching into the center console, instead clamping his mouth shut and gritting his teeth, focusing on the slums around them to try and distract himself from the smell.

Once he does, he wonders if maybe he should have just puked into his dad's box of fake ID's and be done with it.

The destruction is... complete.

There isn't a place the acrid scent of smoke and pungent stamp of decay haven't invaded. There isn't anywhere they go that Sam can't hear the sharp chop of helicopter blades or insistent wailing of sirens. There isn't a square inch of the city that he can see that hasn't been flooded or smashed or burned. It is everywhere, as far as the eye can see in all directions.

Street after street, neighborhood after neighborhood. A whole city, dead.

Houses have swollen with floodwater to the point of breaking, been torn apart by wind or debris, or have simply burned in the aftermath, the city's fire department too broken or busy to do anything but let the flames have their way with whatever they can reach. Sam has no way to tell what was smashed by the hurricane or torn apart by the survivors in the aftermath, but the picture isn't pretty. He begins to realize after the third “YOU LOOT WE SHOOT” sign, that as soon as Katrina dissipated, once the most immediate of dangers was over, the city turned on herself. Quickly, viciously, and with a thirst for blood.

They move through the neighborhoods of the Seventh Ward in a silence reserved for funerals, neither Winchester moving to disturb the sepulchral hush of the abandoned streets.

Part of Sam wants to turn to John, to ask if anything he saw in Vietnam, in over twenty years of hunting, was ever as bad as this, as big. The rest of him, the him that opened the door without question in Palo Alto thirty some-odd hours ago, the part that will always belong with Dean, crammed in the back of the Impala, is assessing, getting ready for the grim task that will be unearthing his brother in all this chaos.

Sam is quickly realizing that the usual Winchester hunting method of badgering witnesses to point them at the weird thing in the room will need to undergo heavy revision to work in this situation.

Rationally, Sam knows that there are people here.

In the short amount of time they've traveled through the city, they've been stopped enough times and listened to enough irascible National Guardsmen wanting to kick them the fuck out to know that the people who stayed are still here. There are signs of habitation on every street. Rubble shoved to the curb, rotted-out refrigerators duct-taped closed and left abandoned. Angry, defiant graffiti, freshly scrawled across rubble and standing structure alike, doing everything from searching out loved ones to directing survivors to shelter to simply shouting “FUCK YOU FEMA”, it all had to be left by someone, but whoever they are, wherever they are, they're staying put, out of the way of the troops that patrol the city.

From the cab of the truck, everything is damp and empty. Cold and unforgiving in the anemic October sun.
It's as if the city is circling the drain. Logically, Sam knows that sometime between August and October it had to have stopped raining and dried out the place a little, if only for an afternoon, but after the drearily, chilled drizzle that's followed them through Louisiana and persists throughout the city, Sam can't help but suspect the place has been wet, filthy, and miserable for the whole two months since the hurricane. Everything is ripped and waterlogged, the refuse of an already unclean basin left to molder in a filthy soup. The flood water that still lingers in the low places, the dead parts of the city, is black. Not blue, not grey. Not brown, but black. Sam is almost afraid to look into the depths, to try and see what lies just below the grimy, oily surface of the flood that has only just receded.

Everywhere he looks there is debris and destruction, piled in yards and on corners, waiting for someone to finally haul it away, to clear away the choking blanket of filth and destruction and finally, god finally, let the city breathe again.

“Keep an eye out for veves, protective symbols, anything voodoo or hoodoo,” John orders, eyes scanning the ruined shotgun houses that line the streets.

“This guy's got six kills already,” Sam remarks, unspeakably grateful for a break in the dead silence. “Packing that much mojo, their place should be more or less intact.”

“Solid theory,” John nods, still scanning the streets. “Watch out for covered cars, too. No way your brother would leave the Impala in the open.”

Sam snorts, “Seriously?”

“We are still looking for your brother, Sam,” John retorts, flicking a mild glare at Sam.

“I know that,” Sam shoots back. “But Dad, Dean would cut off his own foot before he brought the car here. It'd get swiped in a heartbeat, or flooded, or impounded, and even if none of that happened, he winces every time he drives over gravel. There's no way he'd take the thing somewhere half the roads are flooded and the other half are filled with debris. Dean would take one look at the city, turn around, find a hotel with covered parking, and steal something crappy and innocuous.”

“Your brother would stay close to the case, Sam,” John insisted. “There are hundreds of empty buildings—”

“Dad,” Sam interrupts. “The job is one thing, but Dean's love for that car is obsessive, enduring, and borderline erotic. He'd save more time getting it out of the city and then going to work than worrying about turning around and it being stolen or crushed by a falling house every time he leaves to investigate. Also, Dean's dedicated to the job, but he's not an idiot. Half these places are kindling and the rest'll go over with stiff breeze. I mean, he's not exactly Mr. Luxury, but he's not going to share a bed with rats and toxic flood water, either. Plus, you've got whatever is left of the population, armed, desperate, and competing for limited habitable space? No way Dean bedded down here.”

John's face is thundercloud black at hearing Sam's argument, but he keeps whatever objections or disapproval he clearly has to himself. They've got work to do, and time spent fighting is time they could have spent looking for Dean.

Sam looks back to the road and begins to notice that this part of the ward isn't as damaged as the other sections they've visited. Largely residential, it seems to have escaped the majority of looter's eyes, and the flooding seems to have only reached a few feet, leaving some of the more elevated homes in… well, not good shape, but better.

“That one,” Sam says suddenly as they turn down a narrow, angled street. “Fourth on the right.
“No major structural damage, roof more or less intact, no bars on the doors or windows,” John notes, pulling up to the curb in front of a small, two story white house, larger than the shotgun houses that peppered the ward in long rows, but nothing that stood out in the shabby, rundown neighborhood that surrounds it. Its only distinguishing feature, aside from being largely untouched by the devastation that surrounds it, is a hand painted black and red sign propped against the front porch to face the street.

“Mama Nicey's Voodoo, Hoodoo, Spells, and Potions. 10am-6pm or by appointment. Nicey Carter, proprietress,” Sam reads, “Well, I think we found the place.”

“Looks like,” John remarks, eyeing the symbols carved into the urns of herbs lining the short walk and tiny porch of the house. “Follow my lead, Sammy.”

Sam rolls his eyes and strides to the screen door, knocking authoritatively before John can clear the steps.

The blue painted door opens with squeak of protesting hinges, charms on the handle clinking merrily.

“Alright,” the young woman standing inside the threshold remarks casually, looking over John and Sam with a cautious, but unalarmed eye through the screen, clearly expecting an answer.

“Um… I've been better,” Sam offers, not able to keep the question out of his voice at the odd greeting. As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Sam hears his father's irritated exhale, a lifetime of disappointment expressed in a single huff of breath.

“US Marshals,” John flashes his badge through the screen. “We're looking for a Nicey Carter.”

“It's 'Nee-see','” a voice crackles from the shadowed hallway of the house as an older woman makes her way to the front door. “And you can put that crackerjack badge away right this minute. US Marshals,” the woman laughs, slapping open the screen door. “US Marshals my ass. Get your Yankee behinds in here before the mosquitos get in. We got business to tend to.”

“That so?” John raises an eyebrow and crosses the threshold, Sam a cautious two paces behind, both taking in the details of the living room of the small house. The place is a curious hybrid of home and storefront, with the usual array of coffee table, chairs, and couches augmented by shelves and counters stocked with herbs, bottles, charms, and a truly impressive array of animal bones.

“Well, you're John Winchester, aren't you?” she demands. “Got another boy, 'bout ye high,” She gestures to a space roughly a head above her own, “Mouthy, blonde, thinks he's god's gift to vigilante justice?”

“You've seen Dean?” Sam asks, stunned, hope flaring in his chest.

“Of course I have!” she tossed back. “He comes chargin' into the city last week, darkening' my doorstep with the same fake marshal bullshit, wantin' to know if I'm voodoo'n people to bust out in snakes.”

“… I take it you're not, then?” Sam asks, just to cover all the bases.

She promptly and sharply cuffs him on the head. “Bite your tongue, boy!”

Sam rubs at his skull, frowning a little; out of the corner of his eyes, he can see his dad studiously
trying to look like he didn’t find that funny.

“You think anyone in this house is working with both hands, you must be outside yo’ damn mind!” She fixes Sam with a stern look. “My family has been working this neighborhood since it was mud and sticks. You best believe we know better. Get one toe outta line in this city and some crazy ass hunter’ll come bust down your door and burn you out.”

“I’m- I’m very sorry, Mrs. Carter – I—I—” Sam stuttered.

“Well don’t wet yourself over it, sugar, that rug’s an antique,” she dismisses, making Sam blush and John work to hide another chuckle at his expense. “Now, both of you sit down. Make a body nervous, just loomin’ there like that.”

She turns to the back hall where the young woman had disappeared to in the course of their conversation.

“Belinda! Get these gentlemen some sweet tea, would ya? They stupid, but they mean well.”

John glares at her a little at the corner of his eye.

“Yes, Maw Maw!” comes a voice from what Sam assumes is the kitchen.

“So,” John grits out. “Dean’s been talkative.”

Nicey turns her scornful gaze on him, now.

“You really think your boy told me your name?” she scoffs. “Come on, now. He's special, but he ain’t stupid.”

John opens his mouth, but she cuts him off before he can make a sound.

“You got some big fish after you, honey. You say the name ‘Winchester’ into the void, you better believe your name comes back.”

Sam glances over at his father, wrinkling his brow. John steadfastly avoids his gaze.

“So, when exactly was Dean here?” Sam asks, desperately trying to get the conversation back on track.

“Little over a week ago,” she says. “Think it was a Friday afternoon.”

October 14th. That was only a few hours after Dean had last checked in with John. Sam tries to push down the feeling of disappointment. It’s the start of a trail, at least.

“After we had firmly established that I am not killing people, we had a nice chat,” Nicey continues. “Had some tea, cookies; I apologized that I couldn’t serve him any pie. I like to keep some around, but you know, power’s been out.”

She pauses, smiling a little.

“Boy almost cried when he saw my blue ribbons. Best pecan pie in the parish.”

Sam is torn between annoyance at Dean for being so completely unprofessional and a sudden rush of fondness at the thought of his brother being so, well, himself. Meanwhile, John just looks like he’s fighting the urge to roll his eyes.
“Did he ask for anything other than your pie recipe?” John asks flatly.

The young girl – Belinda – arrives then with the tea.

“Thank you,” Sam says, taking the glass gingerly.

“Don’t worry, you’re not gonna get E.coli,” the girl says, seeing his speculative look. “That water’s been purified.”

Sam sits up a little, interest peaked.

“Really?” he asks. “You know, that could be useful. What, is there a spell or some herbs for that or —?”

“You boil it,” she says. “For about ten minutes.”

Clearly Belinda Carter had inherited her grandmother’s critical glare. John tries to hide a chuckle unsuccessfully in his glass, barely avoiding getting a shirt-full of tea in the process.

Sam glowers at him before turning back to Nicey.

“Okay, but after the pie talk,” he says, trying to hide his impatience. “Were you able to point him to anyone who could be doing these killings? Maybe someone in the area?”

He takes a sip of tea and immediately regrets it. “Sweet” tea, he thinks, is something of an understatement. It’s like getting punched in the mouth with corn syrup, a slug of cane sugar quickly eroding at least a year of Stanford-sponsored dental care. Sam forces himself to swallow, trying not to make a disgusted face.

“As a matter of fact, I was,” she answers, smiling a bit at Sam’s difficulty, “If you’re looking for someone who can work that kind of mojo more than once and who don’t mind gettin’ their hands dirty, there’s not a lot who stayed. But of those that did, one name does come to mind.”

Sam scrubs his tongue around his mouth, swallowing reflexively to try to get rid of the sickly sweet taste lingering there. Dean had probably had seconds or thirds of this stuff, then asked if she would leave the pitcher.

“And that is?” he says.

“Georgina Moret,” She puts down her glass. “It’s a small community; I’m sure you know. I don’t like to name names. But listen: I am a business woman. Georgina? That woman is crazy!”

Sam frowns.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘crazy?’”

“I mean, she works with forces I would not dare to tamper with,” Nicey replies. “She don’t advertise it. She don’t need to. Word gets around about the kind of stuff she does, the kind of stuff she can do to you.”

“And you think she’d use her mojo to kill these men?” John asks, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

Nicey looks solemn.

“Georgina’s an angry woman,” she says. “Lost a lot of her people to that storm. Nobody around
here’s happy with the way they’re treatin’ us; not me, neither. But Georgina? Yeah, she coulda killed those men. Wouldn’ even’a flinched.”

“And that’s what you told Dean?” Sam asks. “Did you talk about anything else?”

Nicey gives him a probing look.

“Mind if I ask why y’all are askin’ me all this? I hadn’t heard a peep outta Georgina all week. Didn’t think there’d been any more of those killin’s, either.”

She looks like she kind of knows, already, but Sam still needs to say it out loud. He sucks in a breath. His heart clenches in his chest.

“We haven’t heard from Dean in about a week,” John tells her, instead. “So far, you’re the last person we know of who saw him.”

“Oh, honey,” Nicey says gently, her eyes still trained on Sam. “Can’t say I wasn’t afraid it was somethin’ like that. Seen a lot of people in here since the storm, wantin’ me to help ‘em find the people they lost. You got that look.”

She smiles at him at him, and the crinkles at her temples show a little deeper.

“You’re Sammy, aren’t ya?”

He blinks.

“I’m… Sam, yeah,” he says, confused. “What, did you… hear my name from the void, too?”

Next to him, he feels John sit up ram-rod straight.

“Didn’t need to,” she says. “Heard it from your big brother.”

Sam is bewildered.

“Dean… talked to you about me,” he asks, incredulously. “I mean, why?”

“Well, why not, sugar?” Nicey counters, still smiling.

Sam’s gaze skitters away from hers without his consent.

“It’s just— we haven’t really… spoken in a while,” he says. “I don’t get why he’d—”

“That amulet he wears,” Nicey tells him. “Asked where it came from. Said he got it from you. Let me tell you, there’s a lot of power in that.”

“Yeah,” says Sam, meeting her gaze again. “It’s a protection amulet. Pheonician, I think, or maybe Mesopotamian. We never really nailed down which.”

Her eyes twinkle, like maybe she’s in on a joke that he isn’t. He thinks she’s going to tell him what it is, but instead she turns, addressing her next comment just to John.

“I told your boy just what I told you,” she tells him. “Seemed like he was going to head over to Georgina’s next. That’s all I can tell you.”

“All right, Mrs. Carter,” John says gruffly. “Well, if you could get us that address, we’ll be out of your hair.”
She nods.

“Belinda can do that,” she says, standing up. “If you’ll just excuse me, I got some business to take care of.”

She excuses herself from the room, and Sam can hear her slowly ascending the stairs. Nicey’s granddaughter draws them a crude map of the ward on the back of an envelope, noting her instructions in ball-point pen alongside it. Sam wonders if she did this for Dean, too. He wonders if Dean even made it from here to Georgina Moret’s home, and if he did, what happened to him there.

They thank her and make their excuses. Sam knows that neither one of them feels like sitting around having tea time when they could be chasing a lead.

“And where do you boys think you’re going?” Nicey Carter demands, bustling down the stairs, as John reaches to open the front door. “Leavin’ without even sayin’ goodbye. Honestly.”

She strides up to them, reaches out to grab Sam’s wrist and turns it so it’s palm-up.

“Here you go, sweetheart,” she says, plopping a small, red flannel bag in his hand.

It’s a gris-gris bag, Sam knows, a mojo bag that basically acts as a portable charm.

“Gave one of these to your brother, too,” she says. “Protection against evil magic. Yours is a little different, though.”

She smiles again, softer.

“Keep that close to you now,” she tells him. “I hope it’ll help you find your brother.”

Sam clutches the bag tight, feeling emotion well up inside of him.

“Thank you,” he says, finally. “I— How much do I owe you for this?”

She chuckles.

“Sugar, I may be a businesswoman, but you’d best believe I’m not chargin’ for much these days, and most certainly not for things like this.”

John clears his throat from behind Sam.

“Well, we’re very grateful for your help,” he says, pulling open the door. “Let’s go, Sam.”

Sam nods, following him, but pauses and turns in the doorway.

“Listen, do you need anything?” he asks. “Food, water, anything like that?”

Nicey pats him on the arm with a wizened hand.

“Tell you what, sweetheart,” she says, eyes twinkling again. “I ever need somethin’ from you, I’ll give you a call.”

“That sounds fine,” Sam says. He doesn’t ask how she’s going to get the number – figures she’s got the power to pull it off if she needs to. “Oh, hey, one more thing: When you saw Dean, did you notice what kind of car he was driving?”

“Some piece of shit Camaro,” she says. “Blue. Think one of the doors was grey, though.”
So he’d been right about the Impala. Sam tries not to feel smug but doesn’t really succeed.


“Anytime,” she says. “Now get off my porch and hunt down that brother a’ yours.”

They pile back into the truck. He’s pretty sure John’s sour look is due to revelation about the car, but whether he’s more annoyed at Dean for not doing the case the way John would have or at Sam for being right isn’t really clear. As they pull out, John holding Belinda’s map with his thumb at the top of the steering wheel, Sam opens his inner jacket pocket and tucks the gris-gris bag next to the picture of Dean that he’d grabbed from his sock drawer at the last minute, in case they needed witnesses to ID him.

“Hey,” he says. “Why do you think she gave me a mojo bag and not you?”

John shrugs one shoulder, squinting out the windshield.

“Who knows?” he says. “Maybe she figured you needed more luck than me.”

He means it as a joke, but Sam thinks it comes out sounding a little strained. His dad’s been acting strange all day, though Sam can’t put his finger on why. He wants to bring it up, but it seems stupid to start a fight when they’re onto Dean’s scent like this. He pushes the thought down and concentrates his attention once again on his brother.

~

If John had to guess, he thinks he knows exactly why Nicey Carter gave a gris-gris bag to Sam and not to him. That’s not something he can tell Sam, though. It’s better to keep Sam from realizing what John’s planning until John can’t keep it from him anymore. Sam will be pissed off enough, come this time tomorrow, provided they don’t find Dean before then. No need to get into it now.

Belinda Carter’s instructions aren’t based on street names or landmarks, for obvious reasons, so he looks down at the map in his hand and back at the road, counting the left turns as they pass.

He lets his unconscious mind take over the numbering and turning while he takes a quick inventory of the information they have and the relevant ammo he’s packing, coming up with a plan of action.

It’s more likely that whatever’s kept Dean out of contact happened while he was on this case than not, but John’s not too thrilled about that. The fact is, there aren’t a lot of reasons he can think of for Georgina Moret to keep Dean alive for this long. The absolute best they can hope for is that, for whatever reason, she chose to keep Dean around as a zombie, and that’s not something John relishes hoping for. Sure, he’d come prepared for that possibility, could turn Dean back if he was still even a little alive, but then there’s the aftermath... If that’s what’s happened, it means Dean’s spent over a week with his soul in a jar and some crazy voodoo bitch plying him with who knows what kind of toxins, doing God knows what else to his body. Dean’s a tough boy, but John’s seen older, stronger hunters who couldn’t come back from something like that.

Don’t get your hopes up, he tells himself.

He wants to tell Sam that, too, but he knows that if he does, he’ll never be able to convince his youngest son that he’s not saying to give up on Dean or that John doesn’t care. More likely than not, Sam will start punching again, and God, John will never get used to having to choose between protecting Sam and keeping his son from hating him.

It’s always been easier with Dean, and he’s not sure which son he’s being more unfair to with that
thought.

*One*, he counts. *Two, three*...
Chapter 5

Georgina Moret’s house is a simple double-barrel shotgun with a bone white paint job that has stayed mostly pristine, in spite of the flooding. Aside from that, there isn’t much to distinguish the building from any of the surrounding houses. Just as Nicey had said, there’s no sign advertising Georgina’s services; no indication that anything of interest could be going on inside at all. There’s a white, lace curtain drawn over the only front-facing window, and a red door closed up tight behind the screen door. No sign that the adjoining tenants are home, either, at least that Sam can see.

There’s no point in parking a block over and sneaking up on foot. The sun will be down in half an hour, but even if they waited, the neighborhood is completely vacant and halfway to flattened on top of that. Even on the off chance that her mojo isn’t strong enough for her to sense them, she’d just as likely still see them coming. They pull up on the neighbor’s side, instead. John had pulled over before the turn-off and divvied out the ammo. With voodoo or hoodoo, there’s not too much specialization; get a shot off before they get you. That’s fine with Sam. He’s still a pretty good shot, even after four years of civilian living, and if this bitch has done anything to Dean, he’s going to relish putting a bullet in her head.

John had handed him a drawstring bag full of salt, too. He’d been his typical, cagey self as to why, but Sam isn’t stupid. He knows the basics of voodoo, remembers enough to know that a voodoo zombie can be brought back to its senses with a mouthful of salt. If the body’s strong enough, he remembers there’s a ritual to replace the stolen soul, too, if it can be found in time. If the body isn’t strong enough or if the soul’s too well-hidden, the body just dies. Unfortunately, Sam knows that’s how these things usually turn out.

Dad thinks there’s a possibility that they’ll find Dean like that. The thought’s occurred to Sam, too. Voodoo zombies are rare stateside, even if it’s still pretty common in Haiti, so Sam’s never actually seen one, but the thought of finding Dean that way sends a creeping chill down his back. But he’s been steeling himself for every possibility – save one – so that isn’t going to be enough to give him pause.

There are two doors on a shotgun house, front and back, and not a lot of other routes for escape. That’s a point in their favor, just like the straight-line layout. Sam remembers Dean telling him that shotgun houses were named because they said you could shoot a bullet from the back door all the way out the front, when they’d stayed in one in Mississippi when Sam was ten, proving it by snagging Sam’s empty Fanta can, setting it down on the front porch, and blowing it away with his shotgun through all four rooms of the house from his spot on the back stoop.

John and Sam split up, curving around the neighbors’ side of the house. Sam listens for motion inside the house and hears nothing. It seems to be vacant, which is yet another point in their favor. He reaches Georgina’s back door without triggering any hexes, counts to three, and kicks in the door. He can hear his dad to the same to the front, barely a second later. The sounds echo in the house. Sam doesn’t hear any responding movement, but he knows better than to let that relax him. He holds his gun at the ready and goes in.

His first room is the bathroom. The toilet is closed off from the body of the room, and Sam opens that door quickly, pointing his firearm inside, and finds it empty.

“Living room’s clear!” he hears John shout.

“Bathroom’s clear, too!” he replies.
Room number two is the kitchen; there’s nowhere to hide there, so he shouts his all clear to John and moves to the next room. John’s voice tells him that he’s cleared the bedroom, too.

They arrive simultaneously at the middle room, which turns out to be Georgina Moret’s workroom, which is also empty. A cursory glance reveals that the place has been wrecked. Sam smells the pungent scent of bleach clinging to the hardwood floors and, under that, the smell of decomposing flesh. Sure enough, there’s a pig carcass rotting in the corner. There are veves – sacred designs representing the Loa or spirits of the Voodoo religion – drawn on the walls, a few of whom Sam recognizes. Between the symbols on the walls and the amount of red decorating the room, Sam’s fairly certain that Georgina’s been working with the Petro Loa rather than the generally more benevolent Rada Loa, which isn’t surprising.

There’s an altar at the center of the room. It’s upturned, the contents spilled haphazardly over the floor. Candles, broken jars, coins, charms, and a whole host of other paraphernalia lay abandoned. There’d obviously been a veve painted at the center of the floor, but it’s been mostly smeared away.

“Dean?” he asks John, poking through the mess with his toe, looking for clues.

“Could be,” John says.

It certainly looks like a hunter busted this place up; even if Georgina needed to clean out quickly, there’s no way a believer would leave their worship center in this kind of state.

They scrounge around the room, looking for evidence of what went on here. Sam feels like he’s on one of those god-awful procedural cop shows that Jess loves. Even when he was hunting with Dean and Dad, he didn’t actually see a lot of crime scenes. If Sam was involved in the actual hunt, they were usually the ones making the crime scene, and he certainly knows how to cover up after something that’ll send the cops after them, too. The bleach is a classic for getting rid of DNA evidence. He crouches down. Sure enough.

“I’ve got blood on the baseboard over here,” he tells John.

It’s almost a whole room’s length from the animal carcass, so it probably doesn’t belong to the pig. John crouches next to him, regarding the flecks of blood.

“Could be a week old,” he says. “Sloppy, Dean.”

“So you think it’s hers?” Sam asks.

John frowns.

“We can’t know that for sure.”

Sam knows they’re thinking the same thing: Where the hell do they go from here?

And then they hear voices.

They both whip around at record speeds. The noises are coming from behind the wall, inside the home that shares a wall with this one.

“I thought they weren’t home,” Sam says in a low voice.

John looks thoughtful.

“Come on,” he says.
They exit through the front door, walk down Georgina’s front steps and up to the neighbor’s door. They’d been loud enough with their search. If these people had wanted to flee, they’d have done it already, Sam reasons. No need to split up.

John pounds on the door.

“US MARSHALS! OPEN UP!” he hollers.

There’s a moment of complete silence. The house still feels empty and dark. Sam frowns in confusion. And then the door clicks open, a sliver of light peeking out. A middle aged woman stares at him through the screen door. Sam can see several family members gathered at her back – a younger woman, a boy in his teens, and a little girl. They stare at Sam and John with terrified eyes.

“Yeah?” the older woman asks tentatively.

They’re probably worried that they’re being kicked out of their home, Sam realizes. There isn’t a car in the drive. It’s possible they don’t even own one, couldn’t evacuate easily when Katrina hit and ended up riding it out in the city. A lot of the people who didn’t evacuate are afraid to leave now, knowing what looters or residual storm damage might do to their homes in their absence.

“We need to ask you some questions about your neighbor, Ms. Georgina Moret,” John says, undeterred. He flashes ID and Sam follows his lead. “Have you seen her in the past week?”

The woman doesn’t meet his eyes.

“No, I ain’t seen Georgina for about a week,” she says.

“Do you know what happened to her?” John presses.

The woman shakes her head; Sam’s got the read on her instantly – she’s lying.

“Ma’am,” he interjects; he can practically feel John bristle. “My partner and I couldn’t tell that you were home at all from outside the house. That’s some kind of hoodoo protection spell, isn’t it?”

The woman’s eyes widen. She nods jerkily.

“Did Georgina do that for you?”

She nods again.

“Georgina’s people’ve been livin’ next door since my grandma was a girl,” she says. “Georgina’s always taken care of us.”

“I see,” Sam says kindly. “Can you tell me, Mrs—?”

“Bernard,” the woman supplies.

“I see,” Sam says kindly. “Can you tell me, Mrs—?”

“Bernard,” the woman supplies.

“Mrs. Bernard, did something… bad happen to Georgina?” Sam asks.

She pauses, looking wary.

“Y’all are gone think I’m crazy,” she says.

“I promise,” John says. “There’s nothing you could tell us that would sound too crazy.”

She still looks suspicious.
“Please, Mrs. Bernard,” Sam says sincerely. “We just want to know what happened.”

She stares at him for a long moment, takes a deep breath.

“Georgina… she’s not— wasn’t a bad person, you know? She just wasn’t scared of getting’ what she wanted. Some people don’t like that,” she says. “But lately, she started getting’ mad, just spittin’ mad ’bout everything. And then the storm came. Her son’s family got caught in their house when the levees broke. All of ’em, even her little grandbaby…”

She draws a deep breath.

“Think it was too much for her,” she tells them. “Think she started cursin’ people. Killin’ em. That’s what that man said.”

“Man?” Sam prompts, excitedly. “What man?”

“Dunno,” she says. “Didn’t get his name.”

Sam digs into his jacket pocket, pulls out that stupid photo Dean had sent him during Sam’s freshman year, of Dean mugging in front of the South Carolina “Peachoid.” It’s not the best photo for something like this, but it’s the only photo Sam had of him on hand. (This thing isn’t that big, his brother had scrawled across the corner in blue ink. But the peach cobbler’s good. See ya soon, Sammy. –Dean)

“Is this him?”

Mrs. Bernard squints at the photo.


She pales at the mention of Saturday.

“What happened Saturday night?” John presses.

“She wanted us to help her summon a Loa,” she says. “Said she needed help, needed advice, that there was a ‘hunter’ after her. So she wanted us to help her call him.”

“Who?”

She stares, still pale-faced. Sam remembers the half-painted veve on the floor, flips through his mental encyclopedia trying to remember who it could belong to. A circle, four points, four stars….

“Kalfu?” he suggests.

Kalfu, if Sam is remembering correctly, is a Petra Loa, known for controlling crossroads and the passing of evil and malevolent spirits. Kalfu is closely linked with black magic and can be called upon by sorcerers, but Sam’s read about how violent and hard to control the Loa is. Apparently, voodoo ceremonies are supposed to fall silent if Kalfu mounts one of the people present, because he’ll allow evil Loa to enter.

If Georgina wanted to summon Kalfu in a cobbled together ceremony like this, she must have been at least as crazy as Nicey said she was and twice as desperate.

“Yeah,” Mrs. Bernard breathes. “I think she wanted him to mount me. But he mounted her.”

“So, the Loa possessed her, and then what?” John prompts.
“Then that man came bustin’ in,” she says. “Started tearin’ up the place, tryin’ to kick us all out.”

Good old Dean, always with the subtlety.

“So what did Georgina do?”

“Nothing,” she says. “It was him. That man must have said something, must have pissed him off, ‘cause he just… killed her.”

Sam frowns. It’s not usually like Dean to take out a civilian unless he’s literally given no other choice.

“Was she threatening him or—?”

“No,” Mrs. Bernard corrects. “No, the man didn’t kill her. He killed her. Kalfu.”

“The Loa killed Georgina?” John asks.

“Yeah,” she says, looking sick. “God, it was awful. There was so much blood and… and pieces. After that, the man made us leave, told us he’d come back for us if he ever found out we were usin’ voodoo to hurt people. Dragged Georgina out in a tarp and put her in his trunk.”

It’s the best information they could have asked for.

“Did you see which direction he went?” John asks.

She points in the direction they came.

“That way, I think.”

“All right,” John says. “Thank you, ma’am. You’ve been very helpful.”

“You’re not gonna make us leave, are you?” she asks. “I know it’s almost time for curfew but—”

“It’s fine,” Sam tells her gently. “As long as you’re safe.”

She looks grateful.

“Thank you for your time,” John says gruffly, cocking his head to Sam, a nonverbal order to get a move on.

“Do you know Mama Nicey? She lives a couple of blocks over,” Sam says, before he follows his dad back to the truck. “If you need anything, she’ll help you out. You can tell her Sam sent you.”

The woman smiles a little at him.

“Thank you, honey.”

“Sam!” John says warningly from the driver’s seat.

Sam walks briskly toward the truck and climbs into the passenger seat.

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Relief floods through John the second he hears that Dean left that damn voodoo woman’s house alive, deafens him to whatever the hell Sam said to the witnesses, makes his limbs numb and his hands clumsy as he steers the truck onto the road and out of the neighborhood. Relief that Dean
wasn't dragged to the other side, didn't have his soul ripped away from him, left to moulder in a jar while his body was used and abused by a homocidal voodoo queen. Dean didn't die on a job John gave him, didn't get sacrificed or swallowed or possessed by whatever Loa that madwoman decided to unleash on the city. Dean walked out of that miserable little house on his own steam, had enough time to clean up the scene (sloppily), to take the body and leave the area.

He left the hunt alive.

Now John can relax, if only a little. Now he can stop preparing himself to fight the drugged, soulless corpse of his boy. Now he can stop checking and rechecking the bag of salt in his pocket, the bullets in his gun, hoping to a god he still doesn't fully believe in that today isn't the day he has to put one into his own son. Now he can let the images of a bloody Dean, cut to ribbons and splayed across the veve on a voodoo altar, sink back into his nightmares, let the ordinary, mundane worries about conning his son out of federal custody take precedence.

After all, while there are literally thousands of things that could have happened to Dean after leaving that house, ranging from slow acting hexes to displaced spirits to ghouls to vengeful spirits to the plain and simple pissed off friends and family of Georgina Moret, it is far, far more likely that the shitty Camaro that he was driving didn't exactly gel with the resident National Guard patrol's image of the US Marshals, the dead body in the trunk even more so, and that Dean is languishing in federal lock up.

Hell, he probably even has air-conditioning.

John sincerely hopes, for the very first time in his life, that Dean is in jail; that the chaos that reigns down here has swallowed any evidence of the arrest when John first started looking for him. He hopes that it was his eldest's sloppy trade craft that landed them all in this tangle, and not the dark, sinister something else that has been lurking in the back of John's mind. He hopes that they find Dean at the nearest lock up, and not another dead end, because if this is just another lead that won't pan out, then John has his suspicions, played deep down and close to the vest, about what could have taken a hunter, a Winchester, so quickly and quietly, not even leaving a rumor in its wake.

The big fish that Nicey Carter heard whispering in the void.

The voices that pierced the veil between worlds, clamoring for his name.

His blood.

If the Yellow Eyed Bastard or any of his ilk has Dean, has destroyed the fragile, flawed remains of John's family…

John steels himself. He'll stick to the plan, follow Dean's trail as far as he can. Once he's positive there's no hint of sulfur in Dean's wake, once he knows for sure there's nothing else he can do, he'll get back on the hunt. Chase the bastard down. It won't be long now, not with the threads that are beginning to twist together, to form a picture that he knows he's one more solid lead away from being able to see.

Through the haze of relief, suspicions, and reconfigured strategy, John doesn't consciously register Sam, tucking the photo of Dean back into his jacket, until he speaks.

"Take the causeway north," Sam commands, nodding to the on ramp adjacent to the nearest overpass.

John stops the truck in the middle of the deserted street.
“Somethin' you wanna share with the class, Sammy?” John asks archly, not a little irritated by Sam's order. As if being the boy's father isn't enough, he's a hunter more than thirty years Sammy's senior, every one of them experienced, more than twenty spent tracking the things that go bump in the night.

If anyone's telling anyone where to go, it's John.

“He finished the job. Dean would head out of the city ASAP,” Sam explains, not quite to annoyed yet, but John can see it brewing on his son's face. Right now his boy is holding on to the slightly smug, slightly condescending confidence that rankles John so very efficiently. “It's late, he's tired, he wants to get back to wherever he bedded down.”

“Are you forgetting the part where we don't know where the hell that is?” John asks, not in the mood for Sam's know-it-all attitude.

“We know enough.” Sam continues, grabbing the map of the area from the glove compartment and pointing. “East is out of the question. The hurricane demolished that stretch of I-10 for miles. Everything to the south was obliterated, and he runs straight into the Ninth Ward if he goes west. There's no getting though that. North, on the other hand? The causeway across Lake Pontchartrain made it through the storm just fine. It's been open this whole time.”

Sam folds the map and indicates the sign for the causeway turnoff, “We've been driving for what, five minutes? Ten maybe? Half the roads here take you to the Lake Pontchartrain Causeway. Dean gets on that, he's out of the city and home free in half an hour, max.”

“And the body in his trunk?” John reminds his youngest, but Sam only scoffs.

“Look around, Dad.” Sam dismisses, “There's no way he had that body on him for any longer than it took to get out of Moret's neighborhood. Hell, as soon as he was out of sight, he probably stashed her in one of those refrigerators.”

“The refrigerators?” John asks, not understanding the non sequitur at all.

Sam gestures expansively to the refrigerators standing sentinel on the curbs and street corners that dot the neighborhood, duct taped shut and already beginning to collect graffiti. According to one of the Guardsmen who stopped them on their way through the ward, few, if any, of the residents who were evacuated from the city knew they would be gone this long, their homes and businesses without power for months on end in the sticky late summer heat. The refrigerators they left behind, full to bursting with food that had been rotting for nearly two months now, had become veritable orgies of decomposition, so toxic at this point that they could only be opened by teams trained in the disposal of hazardous materials and wearing full HazMat suits.

“They're the perfect size, they're everywhere, and no one's gonna go opening one, not for a hell of a long time, at least.” Sam shrugs. “It wouldn't even have to be an actual ruined refrigerator, He could just tape any old one shut, leave it on a corner somewhere. My point is, Dean wouldn't risk trying to sneak a body past the National Guard out of the city. He's reckless, but he's not stupid.”

John raises a deeply skeptical eyebrow, and kicks the truck back into gear, digging his cellphone out of a pocket with one hand.

Sammy is rebellious, stubborn as hell, and has a knack for pushing John's buttons at the worst of times, but he’s also smart as a whip, and knows Dean like the back of his hand, even after their falling out. His little stunt with the car more than proved that. Two years of dead silence between them, running off of little more than bad coffee and bitter determination, Sammy still called every move Dean made. Still knew his big brother better than anyone.
It’s worth hedging their bets.

“Have Deacon run Dean's prints through AFIS again,” he orders, tossing the phone to Sam in the passenger seat, “No point in not making sure.”

Sam narrows his eyes, seems to be on the verge of complaining about John's inability to ever admit someone else is right, but stops when he sees that John's pulling onto the northbound, headed for the causeway.

Like Sam suggested.

~

They cross Lake Pontchartrain in uneasy, exhausted silence. At this point, Sam has been in a cramped truck cab with his dad for two straight days, running off shitty gas station coffee and whatever fitful, nightmare-riddled sleep he can snag between turns driving. He's exhausted, mentally and physically, and by the time they cross Lake Pontchartrain and make their way into Mandeville, Sam's heady confidence is beginning to bleed into hopeless frustration.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Dean didn't come this way.

After all, the tiny suburb of New Orleans is in awful shape, with the majority of buildings having taken substantial damage, most of which hasn't even begun to be repaired. The handful of hotels that are operational are full to bursting with refugees. It's clear that there wasn't a vacancy a week ago when Dean blew into town, just like there isn't a vacancy now. Hell, Sam realizes, months from now the place will probably still be full up with the lost, broken victims of Katrina's wrath.

Swallowing his doubts hard, Sam checks the map for the next most likely place Dean would have found to bed down.

Writing off any other nearby towns as being too far off the beaten path to attract Dean's attention, they push on up the 190, north to Covington. Sam notices that the bigger, more affluent town has weathered the storm much better than Mandeville, despite being only twenty minutes further from where Katrina made landfall. Here the destruction has been relegated to a few damaged roofs, the only evidence being the smattering of blue tarps dotting the neat rows of houses Sam glimpses as they near the exits leading into the city.

The wonders of stricter building codes and an improved tax bracket.

Sam can't help but be reminded of the Bernards back in New Orleans, crammed in a tiny shotgun house with no electricity or drinkable water, no guarantee they would even have a home to return to if they left. He can't help but think of the scores of refugees that choked Mandeville, swelled her hotel rooms to bursting, still living out of car trunks and suitcases because they had nothing left, nowhere else to turn.

How long will it be until any of them have anything as normal and secure as the manicured lawns and spotless homes of Covington?

Between looking for signs of hotels and checking the map spread across his knees, Sam almost misses it, but then, just in the nick of time, his eyes flick up from the notes and scribbles spread across his lap to scan the horizon, catching sight of the billboard that rises above the trees lining the highway.

The billboard is a cheesy, a neon-lettered eyesore touting Dot's Diner, which, if the sign is to be taken as a credible source, boasts the best pie in Covington, with the whole loud mess crowned by a
A gooey, glistening slice of the famed pastry.

Sam knows that Dean could say no to a lot of things. A twelve foot, glowing piece of pecan pie would never be one of them.

“Pull off here,” Sam barks to John.

~

John looks from his youngest son, to the glowing billboard, and then back again.

“How long we gonna go on guessing like this, Sammy?” John asks levelly, getting into the right lane anyway. It's late, they're both exhausted, and they haven't stopped for a hot meal yet. There's no harm in letting Sam have his way one more time. They need to regroup anyway, to bed down somewhere, get ready to go back to the last concrete lead on Dean they had.

“It's not guessing,” Sam defends hotly, frustration mounting in his voice. “There's nothing left in New Orleans for Dean, so he would get out, go back to wherever he'd holed up with the Impala. We went the fastest, most accessible route out of the city, like he would do. Checked for hotels in Mandeville and found nothing, like he probably did, and-”

“And now we've got jack shit to go on,” John interrupted, taking the Covington exit. It was as good a place to look for a motel as any, and they couldn't keep going the way they were for much longer. Not without tearing into each other, at least.

“We'll find something,” Sam grits out. “He's out there somewhere. He has to be. And we'll find him.”

There's steel in Sam's voice, in the cold, flinty glare he shoots him.

John's seen that rigid determination in his youngest before, in the months that led up to Stanford, in shouting matches and slammed doors and that last brutal fight. It's been four years, but he still knows what that look on Sam's face means, knows that Sam will scour Louisiana, will chase every lead, no matter how ephemeral, will follow every trail, no matter how cold, will knock on every door of every house in the state if that what it takes. He won't stop. Not now. Not ever.

Not until he finds Dean.

It shouldn't make John feel good. Dean's vanished without a trace. He's gone, and the odds that the worst has happened grow every second John's phone doesn't ring, every time they hit a dead end. But Sam is looking for him. There's no way John could miss the way the boy is pouring over every map, putting all of his energy into outlining every step Dean took, every person he encountered, every thing he did in the days leading up to his disappearance to try and construct some theory, some idea of what happened to him. How to get him back. Sam is putting everything into this hunt, and he'll keep at it until he either finds Dean or dies looking.

It's eight different kinds of morbid, and it sure as hell doesn't put a smile on John's face. Not now, not when things are the darkest they've been in years, and look to be getting blacker by the second. But at least in the midst of it all, between the awful things that are and the terrible things that are coming, Dean has Sammy. Sammy who will always come for him, even when all hope is lost.

It's not a peaceful thought, but then, John's not a peaceful man. It is something he can hold on to, though. The knowledge that his boys will always have each other, even when the worst happens, it gives him strength to do that has to be done.
After all, they might be apart, but they are never alone.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Now we're out of New Orleans and still no Dean in sight. Whatever will our heroes do now?

As always, we're hard at work on the next chapter and should have it finished by Sunday, so remember to comment and subscribe!

They drive in frigid silence, Sam still stewing in grim determination and John absorbed in figuring out the next step, in finding a plan in the chaos of the destruction around them.

Luckily, Dot's Diner isn't hard to find, the bright letters traced out in neon, flashing bright and loud to passersby. The place has clearly been around a while and seen better days than the neat, straight-laced businesses that bracket it. The warm, worn, chipped fifties kitsch that the diner emanates seems out of place and a little out of step with the clean, moneyminded newness that the parts of the city Sam has seen exudes, but then he steps through the door, sees the newspaper articles framed on the walls and the faded, creased photos that deck the counter supporting the clunky, outdated register. He takes in the warm, sticky sweet scent of pie, hears the low beat of the oldies playing on the jukebox in the corner, and can see why Covington would choose to grow up around Dot's instead of letting a Starbucks or TCBY erase the place from memory.

It's late, definitely past the dinner rush. Most of the chipped formica tables and cracked vinyl booths are empty, but there are a few diners scattered here and there, lingering over their food alone or in pairs. Of the two waitresses on duty, one is a blowzy, hairsprayed specimen well into her forties, filling out her worn yellow diner uniform with gusto, but the other, Sam notes, is definitely Dean's type: twenty-something, bottle blonde, busty, and a little too made up, with frosted eyeshadow and cherry red lipgloss liberally applied.

Why his brother prefers women who look like they're aiming for a role in a low-budget porno Sam will never know, but he fishes the photo of Dean out of his pocket all the same and shoulders past John to grab a booth in her section.

Christie, as her name tag reads, is along shortly, taking their order and flitting away with the practiced ease and bright smile of an experienced waitress. When she returns, bearing a half raw bacon cheeseburger for John and a chicken salad sandwich on whole wheat for himself, Sam has his Marshal's badge at the ready.

"Is there anything else I can do for you gentlemen?" Christie asks brightly.

"Actually there is," Sam replies, flipping open his badge and nodding for John to do the same, which he does, begrudgingly, and with a longing glance at his cheeseburger, as if he's more likely to find a lead on Dean in his heart attack on a bun than in the waitress. "US Marshals. We're looking for this man, he may have been in here a little over a week ago?"

Sam shows her the photo of Dean and the slow, naughty grin that licks across Christie's face when she registers Dean's face is answer enough. She knows Dean. In all likelihood, carnally.
“No way I'd forget that face,” Christie smirks coyly. “He was here a couple Saturdays ago, near closing.”

“Did you two talk at all?” Sam asks, deliberately making his tone that of polite inquiry, forcing the conversation to be an interview rather than an interrogation.

“He sat in my section, flirted his way through half my shift and, like, three pieces of pie,” she shrugs. “I gave him my number, thought we could hook up after my shift, but he never called.”

“It sounded like he was going to, though?” Sam prompts. With no call from John and nothing to hunt, there was no way Dean would skip out on a hot waitress with access to free pie. Not unless something stopped him.

“He was layin' it on thick enough, yeah. I was surprised when I didn't hear from him,” Christie answers, giving another shrug, this one carefully indifferent, clearly designed to mask the sting of rejection.

“He mention where he was stayin’?” John gravels from across the booth.

“Somewhere in town, never mentioned the name,” she answers. “Sorry, officer, but we didn’t exactly swap life stories.”

I bet, Sam thinks, taking a big enough bite of sandwich that he is in no danger of speaking that thought.

John raises a questioning eyebrow at Sam, but thanks the waitress anyway, letting her get back to the other diners in her section.

“Well, that gave us slightly more than jack shit,” John remarks as soon as Christie the waitress is well out of earshot.

“Well, that gave us slightly more than jack shit,” John remarks as soon as Christie the waitress is well out of earshot.

“Which is a hell of a lot more than we had when we walked in here,” Sam defends, glaring as John pops the cap off his beer and takes a swig. “We know that I was right, that he did come this way. We know that Dean was here the night after he finished the job, we even know what time. Don't act like this is nothing just because you didn't think of it.” Sam snaps, savagely biting into his sandwich again to keep himself from lighting into John and blowing their cover.

“I'm gonna hit th' head,” John grumbles, shoving out of the booth, “Get me another beer if she comes back. This one's warm.”

Sam rolls his eyes, but keeps quiet. The diner isn't large by any means and bitching about his Dad's drinking would hardly fit the image of Marshals on a case.

Two minutes later, when his phone rings, Sam is surprised to see his dad's number flash across the screen.

“Ask the waitress how long this Camaro's been in the parking lot,” John gravels, the sound of a door slamming ringing in the background.

“Is it Dean's?” Sam demands, sandwich forgotten.

“Same model. Local plates. Color's right. Even got a grey passenger door.”

“So it's his.”
“Be a hell of a coincidence if it wasn't,” John replies. “Ask her anyway. Try to get a better timeframe, too. I'm gonna check out the car.”

“Wait!” Sam protests, but he can hear the dead click on the other end of the line, and before he can slide out of the booth and get to the parking lot, Christie is blocking his exit, appearing seemingly from thin air.

“Somethin' wrong?” she asks brightly, thin veneer of concern overlaying her curiosity.

“What can you tell me about the Camaro in the parking lot?” Sam demands, sandwich and common courtesy forgotten as he unfolds from the booth and shoulders his way past the waitress on his way to the backdoor he assumes is near the bathrooms.

“Um, it's been there like, a week, maybe more?” Christie stammers, following Sam as he picks a likely door near the men's room and opens it, instantly gratified with the sight of John examining a beat up blue Camaro parked in one of the few, shadowy parking spaces located behind the restaurant. “My manager's been trying to get it towed, but everyone's been so busy…”

“I'm afraid if you can't tell us anything else about the car I'm going to have to ask you to go back inside,” Sam announces, herding the waitress away from John and the Camaro. “We'll handle everything from here.”

In a heartbeat, he's got the door safely shut on Christie and is back at John's side, lock picks in hand, but they turn out to be completely unnecessary. John open the door with a simple tug on the handle.

“Nothing on the outside of the car,” his dad announces, pulling a lever under the console with a quick jerk. “See if there's anything in the trunk.”

Sam flips open the trunk with an impatient slap and gets fuck all for his trouble. The trunk is spotless. No bags, no weapons, no blood, certainly no body. Nothing at all that would lead them to Dean.

Which, Sam grudgingly admits to himself, is exactly how Dean would want it if he abandoned a stolen car in a random parking lot.

Like this one.

With a sinking suspicion that the Camaro is going to be yet another letdown in a long line of dead ends, Sam stalks to the front passenger door of the car.

“Trunk's clean,” he grumbles to John, kneeling down to start rifling through the passenger's side. Under the seat, Sam finds the owner's manual, registration, what looks to be at least three years of oil change receipts, and a little air freshener shaped like a tree, but, again, nothing at all that would lead to Dean. Not unless his brother's real name is Beau Baker, and he's been secretly frequenting “Big Country's Lube & Oil” for the past three years, completely unbeknownst to Sam and John.

“Nothing here, either,” his dad announces, tilting the driver's seat forward to dig around in the cramped rear seats.

Sam joins him, only to curse under his breath when they find nothing.

“Of all the times for Dean to be thorough,” he bitches, punching the Camaro's seat back into the upright position and slamming the grey passenger door closed.

“Tough breaks,” John mutters wearily, running his eyes over the car again. “Take care of any prints and meet me back inside. We'll get started checking hotels, motels, the works.”
Sam is so absorbed in calculating the potential number of hotels, motels, and inns in a city of Covington's approximate size, that the first part of John's comment doesn't sink in until he's staring at the dull, powder blue surface of the stolen Camaro, completely covered in their fingerprints.

Fuck.

~

As it turns out, there are roughly twenty motels in Covington.

Sam had been too young to pass for much of anything before he’d left for Stanford, so when Dean and Dad went out to canvas for suspects or victims, he’d usually ended up stuck in the motel or at the library. He hadn’t realized pulling the US Marshal sh*tick over and over again could be so exhausting, especially when they’re coming up with less than nothing. The hotels in Covington are packed to the breaking point with refugees and journalists who’ve had the same idea Dean did, bedding down in the city and then commuting to New Orleans during the day to take care of their business. They go through eight hotels in the general area of the diner, and none of them have records of someone matching Dean’s description staying there during the time they know he was in town. They rule out the small handful of kitschy bed ‘n breakfast joints offhand. Even in the most desperate circumstances, Dean wouldn’t stay somewhere like that. Bedding down in what basically amounts to someone’s home makes you noticeable – and memorable – in a way hunters just can’t afford, and Dean knows that.

All told, it amounts to a little over three hours of searching with absolutely nothing to show for it. Sam feels like he’s about to come out of his skin. It’s been almost forty-eight hours since he’d found out that Dean was missing, and he’s gotten maybe five hours of sleep in that time. The rest of the time has been alternatively spent with his father, an exhausting experience in and of itself, and driving cross-country, and God, he’s starting to feel it. He can see John giving him speculative glances out of the corner of his eyes, probably trying to track how close Sam is to crashing.

Sam isn’t stupid. He knows they’re going to have to sleep eventually or risk missing something out of fatigue. Dean would have been pushing for a pause on this search a couple of hours ago, but Dean isn’t here, and even though Sam and his dad don’t have many things in common, they do share a certain obsessive doggedness. When Sam latches onto something, he has a hard time letting go – always has – and right now, he can’t imagine getting a wink of sleep with their next lead on Dean lurking just out of his grasp. He’s seen the way John gets on hunts, the way his focus narrows down so he can’t see anything or anyone but the monster he has in his cross-hairs. More than that, Sam knows all too well the intense devotion his dad still has to their mom and the search for her killer, and maybe Sam’s reflecting some of that back at him now. Maybe that’s why John still hasn’t said anything about stopping, even though Sam knows he must be thinking it.

The ninth hotel they visit turns up yet more nothing, though the desk clerk does point them toward a La Quinta Inn that they’d missed on the drive in. To reach it, they have to drive back the way they came on a parallel street, and Sam sighs, squeezing his eyes shut against the pounding headache that’s been bugging him on and off all day. They’re literally going in circles now. It’s getting hard to keep the frustration at bay.

The place doesn’t look promising when they pull up on it. It’s definitely not the kind of joint they usually pick. It’s cheap enough, sure, but the layout has everyone coming and going past the front desk, which is something they usually try to avoid. A bigger chain hotel like this means the place is probably full of families and small-time businessmen. It means better security, too - another major hassle in a line of work that might have you stumbling back covered in dirt or blood or worse. Sam’s still weighing the likelihood that Dean would overlook those inconveniences in this kind of situation.
when they pull into the parking lot.

And then he sees it.

The hint of long body and chromed rim under a tarp has Sam's heart stopping all over again. Before he even realizes what he's doing, Sam's out of the truck and at the car parked in a corner of the motel lot. Inconspicuous and out of the way, nowhere she could get nicked or dented, quietly waiting for her boys to return.

His hands are flipping back the tarp and his eyes drifting over the ink-black, gleaming surface of the Impala, quietly reflecting Sam's face back at him in the weak motel floodlights.

Sam is hit by a sudden memory, sharp and clear, of an early summer afternoon, sitting on the hard, pebbled concrete outside of his elementary school.

Caleb usually picked Sam up after school, right after he got Dean from the middle school down the road, but today they were late. Sam was sitting, gloomy and bored in the weak summer sunshine, halfheartedly flipping the pages of a book when suddenly the tenor of the loud, shouting voices around him changed, the usual energy of the crowd of kids ramped up a notch by an unseen force.

Sam looked up from his borrowed book just in time to see what had caught his classmates' attention round the last bend in the lane, the long, sleek black shape of the Impala standing out, pulling through the carpool lane with easy grace.

It's impossible, because Dad's supposed to be on a hunt in Montana and shouldn't back for a week, but he's here, smiling, and Dean is in the front seat waving and shouting his name, and suddenly everyone in the carpool line is looking at him like he isn't the weird new kid who never talks and reads too much, like he doesn't spend snack and lunch and recess alone with his nose buried in a book, but like he might be someone cool.

Someone worth talking to.

In that moment, Sam is proud. Proud of his dad, proud of his brother, proud of their life in this sleek, shiny black car, so much more exciting, so much better than the battered mini vans and sedans that surrounded them, boring and basic in the face of life as a Winchester.

“Distributor cap's missing,” John notes from under the hood, bringing Sam back very abruptly to the here and now.

“It'll be in the top drawer of the nightstand,” Sam replies faintly, eyes running over every inch of the Impala. “Behind the Bible.”

John raises an eyebrow.

“Dean will never love a woman like he loves this car,” Sam explains, realizing John doesn't understand. “No way he'd let someone hot-wire his baby.”

John produces his spare key, and they give the Impala a cursory look-over. It doesn't occur to Sam to fear finding Dean in the trunk until after they've unlocked it, but he isn't there, and there's no evidence in the car that he's been injured and no clues as to where he might have gone.

The next step is obviously to find Dean's room. From the looks of it, the La Quinta is just as full up as the other hotels in town, so they can't just count on Dean having picked the most strategically sound room in the place and are instead forced to ask the tired-eyed employee at the front desk to check the hotel's records.
“He would have been alone,” John gruffs, all business. “Probably checked in sometime between the ninth and the fifteenth of this month and refused maid service.”

“Man, they got you working some rough hours, huh?” the front desk clerk says while he types in the information.

Sam can imagine Dean deadpanning ‘The law never sleeps,’ without missing a beat, but what Sam says is: “Can you hurry this up?”

The man gives him an annoyed look, but wisely keeps his mouth shut.

“Here we go,” he says after what feels like an eternity. “Yep, Mr. John Bonham. Room 106. He checked in on October 10th. Says here he hasn’t checked out yet.”

John nods.

“We’re gonna need a key to that room,” he says.

The desk clerk hands it over with some trepidation.

“Do I need to call my manager?” he asks. “Like, is this guy dangerous?”

“No, no,” Sam assures him. “Mr. Bonham is a material witness. We just want to make sure he’s all right.”

The guy seems appeased by that. In a way, they’re really lucky that it took them so long to find Dean’s hotel. The staff members working past midnight on a weekday are pretty much assured not to be on their A game, and Sam suspects that they don’t exactly keep up the lines of communication with the day staff, either, which gives the Winchesters a certain amount of leeway.

Sam can’t help being afraid of what they might find in Dean’s room. If he’d been in there, injured or worse, it could theoretically have gone unnoticed for a week, with the chaos of a hotel packed beyond capacity with refugees and no maid to check up on the room. He swallows the lump in his throat as John slides the key card into the door, swinging it open.
Dean isn’t there.

He isn’t there, but the evidence of him is all over the room. There’s a pair of motorcycle boots lying abandoned by the doorway and mud-encrusted jeans slung haphazardly over a chair. Dean’s duffle is open, spilling boxers and socks onto the floor – not the chaos of a struggle or a sudden retreat, but the simple clutter of Dean’s everyday existence. A small stack of empty pizza boxes has accumulated next to the trash can, which is full of balled-up take out bags. There’s a warm, half-drunk beer on top of the mini-fridge, and inside, Sam finds half a case of the same beer and a takeout box from Los Sombreros.

It’s almost like Dean’s just stepped out, like he could be back at any minute, but the food smells like it’s been there for at least a week, and when they look through the case files Dean’s left spread out on the little wooden table, they find scribbled, dated notes on the hotel stationary that don’t go past October 14th, the night before he was at Georgina Moret’s house and, later, at the diner.

If Dean was planning to hook up with that waitress, and Sam doesn’t doubt he was, he’d have headed back here to shower off the grime of the hunt and grab a change of clothes. He also sure as hell wouldn’t have gone out for a night on the town without giving Dad a call to tell him that he’d finished the case, unless he got distracted by something pretty damn big.

The distributor cap is right where Sam knew it would be, but there’s no solid evidence that Dean actually came back here after the diner, and even though Sam doesn’t want to believe it, he’s starting to suspect that Dean never did.

He says as much to John.

“Could be,” his dad agrees, looking up from where he’s zeroed in on Dean’s case notes.

“We won’t know for sure until we check the security footage,” Sam tells him, even as he’s striding purposefully out of the room toward the front desk.

Hotels like this often have policies that anyone can demand to see security footage, so it’s pretty easy to get access to it. Of course, even if the hotel didn’t have a rule like that, Sam doubts they’d have any trouble. He’d had it trained into him long before his Psych 101 course at Stanford that people would believe and do just about anything if you presented yourself with enough authority.

A little under an hour spent huddled in a dim room, squinting at the security footage, confirms Sam’s fears. They can’t find any indication that Dean came back here, either Saturday night or Sunday morning.

“Damn,” John mutters from his place beside Sam. He stretches, cracking his jaw.

“We need to find out when he was last here,” Sam says hollowly.

John gives him a speculative look. There’s a sort of restless unease, a nervous tension, that’s been coming off of John since he picked Sam up from Stanford, and it’s even stronger now. Sam figured it was worry about Dean, but now he’s not so sure.

Before he can snap at John, demand to know what else their father could possibly want to be doing with his time besides scouring this tape for a glimpse of his son, John is rewinding the tape and Sam is forced to turn his attention once more to the screen.
“Stop,” he whispers after what feels like an eternity. “There.”

Sure enough, at 8:13 on the morning of October 15th, there’s Dean. Sam watches as he saunters down the hall and out the front door in a casual stroll, carrying a small duffle that Sam knows must contain a few choice weapons, maybe some spare IDs and first aid supplies – anything he might need while he’s driving his stolen wheels around New Orleans. They hadn’t found that duffle in the room or in either car. Wherever Dean is, it’s likely with him.

There’s barely thirty seconds of footage. Sam rewinds it and watches it again, leaning closer to the screen. Dean looks perfectly normal: no worry, no misgivings, just… sauntering. There’s no indication on the video that anyone or anything is paying him untoward attention, either.

Sam rewinds, lets it play again.

This is the first time he’s seen his brother in years, but Dean looks the same to Sam, all swaggering steps and casually swaying arms, his mouth relaxed into a flat line, but with a little quirk at the edge, like it’s waiting to be drawn into a smug grin. He’s still got his dirty blonde hair styled in the same Dad-approved crew cut he’s had since Sam was a kid. He’s still wearing Dad’s old leather jacket too, though Sam thinks maybe it’s a little more worn around the elbows and the collar; it’s still just a little too big for him. Sam can see the brass pendent he’d given Dean all of those years ago swinging from the leather cord around his neck. He feels like his insides have been hollowed out with a spoon.

He rewinds again, presses play.

“Dead end, Sammy,” his father says, reaching over to cut off the tape, and for a single moment, Sam hates him.

He sits back, pinches his eyes closed, and breathes through his nose. This changes things. It means they have to backtrack again, have to reevaluate their timeline, starting back at the diner. All of the hope he’d felt after finding the Impala and Dean’s room is going fast, leaving behind a bone-deep weariness.

“Come on, Sam,” John says, winding a fist into the shoulder of Sam’s jacket and giving him an insistent tug.

Sam follows him in a daze. He’s trying to think about what their next step needs to be, to turn over everything they know in his head to see what they’ve missed, but his brain is sluggish and uncooperative. The headache is back in full force, pounding behind his eyes and making him feel a little woozy.

His Dad leads them back to Dean’s room. Sam sinks into the chair, scrubbing a hand over his face and then up into his hair.

“We gotta call it a night,” John says.

Sam can’t bring himself to argue; there isn’t a lot they can do from now until sun-up.

“You take first shower,” his dad orders. “I’ll grab the bags from the truck.”

Sam lifts his head to stare at him.

“You want to stay here?”

John looks nonplussed.
“Room’s already paid for,” he points out. “We’re sure as hell not gonna find anything better in this town right now. Just have to take the bed in turns.”

Sam doesn’t know where to begin to react to that. Sure, John’s logic is sound enough, but Sam wonders if his dad has any idea what he’s asking. The remnants of Dean are all over this room, and the idea of staying here, surrounded by the ghost of his missing brother, is almost physically painful. Sam would rather stay anywhere else. He’d rather just sleep in the truck, but he knows that making his dad understand that would be like beating his head against a brick wall, and he just doesn’t have the energy.

He nods, gets up without a word, and goes into the bathroom. After a moment, he hears the click of the motel door closing. Sam turns on the shower, pulling off his clothes while he waits for the water to heat up. He balls them up and tosses them onto the lid of the toilet, then gathers up the towels littering the floor. They’re dried stiff and crunchy, and Sam knows that’s because Dean left them sopping wet on the floor, just like he’d insisted on doing his entire life, no matter how many times Sam complained about it. Sam stuffs the towels under the bathroom sink where he won’t have to see them.

He isn’t going to do something stupid and girly like sobbing over Dean’s toothbrush, but that doesn’t mean he’s going to give himself the chance to dwell on it, either.

He’d been half-hoping the shower would wake him up enough to justify pushing John into the first sleeping shift, but it really doesn’t. He’s just plain exhausted, and even as he’s trying to adjust their plans for tomorrow to this new development (backtrack to the diner, try to find out where Dean went from there, maybe check for security footage from neighboring businesses…), his vision is dipping and swimming. His head feels heavy, much too heavy to concentrate, so he finally lets go of the need to plan and just stands there under the spray, thinking of nothing.

Dean’s still using the same crappy shampoo Dad always bought, he notes absently; same toothpaste and deodorant, too. Sam is totally going to make fun of him for that later, he thinks, as he rinses out his hair.

*If there is a later.*

He pinches his eyes shut against the thought, taking a deep breath. He runs another hand through his wet, tangled hair and leans to the side a little, pressing his temple against the cool tile.

He’s been trying so desperately to tell himself that Dean is okay, that Dean is alive. If he doesn’t keep on believing that, he’s pretty sure he’ll crack up, but it’s been nine days now since his brother was last seen by anyone, and he knows what that means. If this were a case, if he were talking to someone else who’d had a loved one missing without a trace for this long, he’d be prepping them for disappointment, all soft words and tender looks and “We have to brace ourselves for the worst,” but this isn’t just anyone. This is Sam and Dean, and the only way Sam knows to keep himself together is by telling himself that he *will* find his brother, that Dean *will* be okay, no matter what Sam has to do to make sure of that.

Dean can’t die, not when he still thinks Sam meant all of that crap he said during their last fight. He can’t die thinking that Sam doesn’t want to ever hear from him or see him again. He can’t die not knowing how many times Sam wanted to track down Dean’s newest number and apologize and didn’t because he was too proud and because he just didn’t know what to *say* and maybe because deep down he was afraid of what Dean would say back to him.

He lifts his head up into the warm spray, letting it run down through his bangs and over his eyes and into his mouth. He stays like that until he has to breathe again, and then he shuts off the tap and gets
When Sam emerges from the bathroom, John is sitting hunched over the table, sorting through a pile of Dean’s scribbled, doodled-over case notes and copying them into his own journal.

“Shower’s free,” Sam says unnecessarily.

John grunts in acknowledgement, eyes still trained on his journal.

Sam takes the moment to grab his pajamas and toothbrush from his bag. After he brushes, he puts his toothbrush into the cup next to Dean’s. When he pads out of the slightly damp room in his t-shirt and sweatpants, John is waiting for him at the door.

“You take the first shift,” his father orders, just like Sam knew he would. “You look like you’re about to keel over.”

Sam just nods in tired acceptance.

He straightens the sheets out from where Dean’s left them crumpled at the foot of the bed, before collapsing into it, pulling the covers up to his chin and turning his face into the pillow. He lies there for a long moment, listening to the muffled sound of the shower running.

The bed smells like Dean.

The pillow smells like Dean’s stupid hair gel and his shampoo, and Sam can pick up faint traces of Dean’s preferred brand of cheapo laundry detergent on the sheets. He turns his head away, taking long whiffs of the clean air and finds himself blinking away tears. He had been right before. This hurts.

John isn’t trying to be cruel. Sam’s pretty sure John never tries to be cruel, but this is too much to ask.

Sam thinks about going with his first instinct and sleeping in the cab of the truck, but he doesn’t think he even has the energy it would take to get out there, much less the will to have the knock-out drag-out fight with his dad that would surely follow.

He rolls over again and wills himself to relax. He can do this. For one night, he can pretend Dean isn’t missing. He can pretend that the smell is just Dean, sleeping beside him, even if they haven’t done that in years.

They’d shared beds all the time when he was growing up, countless double motel rooms with Dad in one bed and Sam and Dean in the other. It’d been a necessity with the way they lived, at least until Dad left on another hunt and Dean could move into the other bed. Sam didn’t particularly care either way. It was just the way things were. He knew from TV and movies that most kids had their own beds - just like he knew that most kids had moms that gave them homemade lunches in brown paper bags and houses with manicured lawns and friends they’d known since kindergarten - but that life had never been his, and even as he grew to resent the pressure of constantly changing school and the endless stream of skeevy motels and the ever-present threat of danger, he could never really bring himself to resent sharing a bed with Dean.

Then the summer of ’98 came and brought with it a hunger that never seemed to go away and a constant fatigue and awful pains in his legs that woke him in the night and left him muffing whimpers into his pillow that still woke Dean more often than not. (His brother would grump and moan under his breath even as he pushed Sam onto his back and dug his fingers into Sam’s calves to work the pain out.)
Sam had grown a full five inches that summer, finally surpassing all of Dean’s hand-me-downs and forcing his big brother to sell, barter, buy, and steal bigger and bigger sizes of pants and shoes in nearly every town they’d set up camp in. He’d grumbled about it the entire time and put off buying Sam non-essentials for so long that Sam’s flannel pajama pants looked like capris and his t-shirts rode up on his belly and strained at the shoulders, and when Dean had finally stopped finding the sight so damn amusing and Sam’s growth spurt had thankfully slowed down, Dean had pawned everything they had left that neither of them could wear off on the local thrift store in one go and handed Sam the meager proceeds with the air of a great benefactor granting wealth to the masses so that Sam could replenish his wardrobe.

In the aftermath of that summer, sharing a bed had become way too uncomfortable for Sam, and he’d complained about it enough that John had just started carrying a sleeping bag around in the trunk.

The only times they’d really shared after that had been at Uncle Bobby’s, because his guest room had a big king size bed and because he’d looked at Sam standing on his porch with the sleeping bag tucked under his arm, rolled his eyes, and told him that he and Dean were sharing a bed without complaining or he’d whup ‘em both.

Not that Sam would ever complain. The room where they slept at Bobby’s was nice – nicer than most places they stayed. It was a big room with a high, pointed ceiling, floral wallpaper, and a big bed with a soft, cool sheets.

Of course, when Sam got older, he’d realized that the “guest room” he and Dean shared had all of the marks of having once been the master bedroom. His father had told him that Bobby had become a hunter for the same reason John had – because something got his wife. Sam figures he just couldn’t stand sleeping in that bed without her next to him, and he gets that. Hell, their dad had abandoned their entire home after their mom died for the same reason. He’d abandoned the whole town.

(Sam never had a home that he shared with Dean, and if Dean dies, all Sam will have to give up for him is crap motels and greasy diner food and gas stations with rusty pumps and long stretches of dusty asphalt that seem to wind on forever, and it won’t be enough, not even by half.)

But the visits to Uncle Bobby’s had gotten less and less frequent the more he and John had begun to bicker, and eventually Dad had stopped leaving them there altogether, and Sam and Dean had stopped sharing beds entirely.

There had been one more time, when Sam had been barely eighteen, fresh out of high school and hiding his Stanford acceptance letter in the lining of his duffle bag, constant feelings of frustration and excitement and dread roiling in his stomach. John had taken all three of them on a hunt – a vengeful spirit bent on making her ex-lover suffer by killing his family one-by-one. They’d split up, John heading to the cemetery to salt and burn the bones and Sam and Dean to the guy’s home to protect the family for as long as they could. They’d herded the parents and their two kids into a big salt circle in the den, brandishing iron fireplace accessories at the flickering ghost pacing outside. She’d screamed, sudden and awful, and the youngest girl had jumped back, startled, and smudged the salt line. It was just a tiny break, but it was enough. She was dead before Sam had even realized what happened, the blood from her slit throat splattering his face. Dean had immediately elbowed in front of him and closed the circle, and seconds later, the woman’s spirit had gone up in flames.

They’d left the family sitting on the floor of their destroyed den, the mother clutching her daughter’s body to her chest, sobbing open and ugly. It hadn’t been a win.

“You can’t save everybody,” John had said later, just like he always did.

Sam couldn’t bring himself to say a word all the way back to the motel, and that night he lay curled
up on his side in the bed, shaking. He started a little when Dean slid into the bed behind him.

“S’cold,” his brother had said simply.

Sam made a muffled noise of agreement and let his brother use that as an excuse to settle against his back and wind an arm over Sam’s body. He’d rubbed his knuckles against Sam’s chest absently, pressed his forehead into Sam’s neck, and Sam had turned his head into the pillow so that they could both keep pretending that he wasn’t crying.

Dean had stayed in the bed until Sam had fallen into an exhausted, post-cry slumber, and when Sam woke up to go to the bathroom at four in the morning, he’d still been there, sleeping soundly with his palm tucked up against Sam’s heart. When Sam had come back, Dean had shifted in his sleep to sprawl across the whole bed, and Sam had just taken the sleeping bag instead, knowing Dean would be testy and embarrassed if he woke up and had to deal with the aftermath of that kind of chick flick moment, or worse, if he thought their dad had noticed.

Having Dean there like that had been nice, though, no matter what the circumstances, and Sam curls on his side like he had that night, imagines Dean’s comforting presence against his back, and prays for a dreamless sleep.

~

He feels something warm and wet drip onto his forehead, and his eyes snap open.

A sick swoop of horror tears through his stomach at the sight in front of him. Jess is plastered to the ceiling, her stomach split open, her mouth open in a soundless scream.

“Jess!” he shouts frantically.

He has to do something, something, but he doesn’t know what, he doesn’t know how to save her, and then she’s igniting, flames spreading out with alarming speed, engulfing her body, and he screams again as he watches her burn before his eyes.

“No! Jess, no!!”

He shuts his eyes tight against the blaze of fire, and when he opens them, he’s back in the motel. He breathes deeply for a moment, trying to find his center after the nightmare, and then he feels that same wetness dribbling down onto his face. He turns in slow, dawning horror to look at the ceiling.

Dean is staring back at him, his face frozen in that same dead-eyed, silent scream.

Sam tries to move to help him, tries to call out to him or to his dad, but he can’t make his body move. He’s frozen, staring up at his brother, unable to do anything but watch.

Dean doesn’t burn; he just bleeds. It pours from from his wrists, sluices from his neck down the cord of his necklace. Sam can’t make himself move away as Dean’s blood pours down over his face, into his open mouth, forcing him to swallow thick mouthfuls even as he tries to make his mouth work so that he can scream out, so that he can say something, anything (i’msorryiloveyoupleasepleasedon’tdie).

He finally manages a gurgled, wordless scream, and it’s that sound that finally wakes him.

Sam finds himself lying once more in the motel room, tangled sweaty and panting in the sheets. He turns quickly to stare at the ceiling, but it’s as blank and white as ever. He sits up, pressing his palms against his eyes as he tries to calm his pounding heart.
“Sleeping pills are in the medkit,” John rumbles from the battered table against the wall.

Sam turns to stare at his father. John is steadily not looking at him, hunched over his journal, pen in hand. His hair is still wet. Sam can’t have been out for long.

“I’m fine,” he says, shoving a hand through sweaty, sleep-tousled hair and trying to block out the image of flames and silk and sticky, insistent splatters of blood. “I don’t need pills.”

“Second time today, Sammy,” John notes, not absently. Nothing his father does is ever absent, but there is a studied nonchalance in John’s voice that doesn’t carry to the set of his shoulders or the scribble of pen against the smooth, worn pages of his journal.

“It was just a nightmare,” Sam tells him.

John glances up and fixes him with a stern look.

“You won’t be any good to Dean running on empty, son.”

Sam huffs.

“I won’t be any good to him unconscious, either.”

John stands up, strides over to the medkit and pulls out the pills. He pushes the bottle into Sam’s hand.

“Half,” he says. “Just enough to get your head on straight. I’ve got the phones.”

Sam stares at the bottle for a long moment.

“Yes, sir,” he reluctantly agrees.

He’ll hardly be able to help in the search for Dean if he’s so tired that he’s seeing double. He breaks one of the tablets in half and swallows it dry. Sleeping pills have always been effective on him, and he can already feel his body starting to give in as he settles back into the bed. He doesn’t try to fight it, lets his eyes slide closed and his brain shut down without a fight. The last thing Sam is aware of before he slips out of consciousness is the sound of John once again turning pages in the book, scratching out strangely hurried-sounding notes.

When Sam wakes up six hours later, his father is gone, leaving behind only a note scribbled on the hotel stationary and rubber banded to the worn, amber leather of his journal.

~

There are a hundred different things John wants to say to Sam that never make it into the note he leaves.

How he’s sorry for the things he's said. For the things he's done. For the life he forced his boys into. For the hell he had to put them through so they'd grow up strong, so they could go on without him.

He knows he won't survive this. Knows that by continuing his crusade, by fighting this fight he's signing his own death warrant. Hell, he probably signed it back in Lawrence, by refusing to let sleeping dogs lie and badgering the truth out of a Kansas palm reader.

But someone had to. Someone had to believe their eyes, to fight back against the things that went bump in the night.
The things that took everything from him.

Sam will be fine without him. He's stayed sharp, still the hunter John raised him to be. And with that knife-edged focus trained on Dean.... Well, if there's anything left of Dean in this world, Sam'll be the one to find it. He'll find his brother, and they'll be fine without him. Just like John taught them to be.

In the meantime, he has a Yellow-Eyed Son of a Bitch to find and a score to settle.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

In which John is an asshat and Jess is an awesome girlfriend.

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The first thing Sam does when he finishes reading John's note, some bullshit about signs and a hunt that can't wait any longer, is spike the damn thing, along with the stupid fucking journal it was rubber banded to, into the motel trashcan so hard the thing overbalances and rolls to a rest under the bed.

The next thing he does is snatch up his phone and dial his father furiously, swearing up a storm when there's no answer, just the empty click of a voicemail recording, and a bland tone telling him to leave a message.

Sam complies enthusiastically.

Two minutes of bitter invective and very creative swearing later, a polite female voice informs Sam that he will either have to tell his father what a self-righteous, self-absorbed ass he is in a separate message, or call back at another time.

He calls back. He calls back because this is Dean. Dean, who never hesitated to follow an order, who lied for John and learned for John and killed for John and could have been so much more than this life if John had only let him, let any of them, be anything outside of the job. This is Dean, who would have given everything, looked everywhere if John were the one who was missing, who would have never stopped until their dad was safe and sound, and John has just left them.

Again.

Sam tells him as much in his next message, tears his father a new one for abandoning them once more, for leaving Dean when he knows that the worst has probably happened, for being too much of a coward to finish this case, for running off and leaving Sam to clean up his messes, to face finding whatever is left of Dean alone.

Sam tears into him again and again and again because what sort of father does this? Just leaves his sons over and over and over when they need him the most?

When Dean needs him the most?

Sam is more exhausted when he finishes screaming into his father's voicemail than he was when he poured himself into Dean's bed last night. Every inch of him wants to curl up in Dean's pillow, to bury himself in the ghost of his big brother until the ache goes away or he forces Dean to materialize through sheer force of will.

It could happen.

Sam read a few years ago about how some monks made a golem from sheer force of will. If they could care enough about some creature they'd never even seen, never ever met, could focus on it hard enough to bring it to them through sheer force of want, certainly he can pull Dean, who, even
when they're separated, he's never been without, who is so deeply woven though Sam's life, tangled together by memories and thoughts and blood, that they can never really be divided.

If he tried hard enough, it could happen, right?

Sam knows that the train of though he's on is far, far too miserable to do him any good, so he's thankful his phone rings when it does, thankful that it draws him out of thoughts of Dean and the hopeless, cold trail he has to follow to find him, and renews the vicious, fiery hatred he has in this moment for John.

When he checks the caller ID, though, he's surprised to find that it's not John who's calling, but Jess.

He hesitates for a moment with the phone in his hand.

She doesn't need to hear him like this. To know what Dean's disappearance and John's betrayal has done to him.

But she's Jess.

Jess, who… God, even she can't fix it. No one can fix it. But the possibility that she can make it just a little better has him answering the phone before he can second guess himself and shut her out again.

“Hey,” he rasps, hating how the shouting has roughened his voice, made him sound so much like John. John who he hates. John who abandoned Dean. John who took him away from Jess and dragged him back to all of this misery.

“Sam,” she breathes, and Sam can hear the relief in her voice, can practically see her relax at finally getting him on the other end of the phone, finally getting confirmation that he's at least some form of functional, at least the very barest definition of okay. “You picked up.”

It's a poor substitute for “You're okay”, but it's all they've got at the moment.

“Yeah,” he nods, even though she can't see it, “Sorry for not calling.” He sinks down onto the bed, hunching to brace his elbows on his knees and try to rub away the headache pounding behind his eyes with one hand and grip the phone with the other.

“Don't worry about it,” Jess dismisses. “I can take care of myself. What about you?”

Sam doubts, more than he ever has in his life, that he can take care of anything, much less himself. That's not what he says, though, because one hint of that and Jess would have her emergency credit card out and her laptop open, getting a seat on the first flight from California to Louisiana she could find.

“We-” Sam starts before he can catch himself, scrambling to correct his slip, “They- Everyone keeps hitting dead ends. It's like he fucking disappeared, Jess.” He sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face and wincing at the drag of stubble.

“Do they know anything?” she asks gently, softly. Like she knows the answer isn't as important as him hearing her voice, as someone else being in this with him.

“Where his last job was, where he was staying, where his car is,” Sam lists, exhausted. “But none of it tells us anything Jess. The job is finished, the hotel's clean, the car is empty and my Dad-”

He can't finish that sentence. The rage just rises up and chokes the words right out of him. It fills him
hot and tight and swells until he thinks he might burn or burst from it.

“What did he do?” Jess asks, no longer soft, no longer gentle.

The emergency credit card might make an appearance after all, Sam realizes, unless he can handle this a hell of a lot better and fast.

“A job came up.” Sam grits out, sick at having to cover for the bastard, to defend him, and to Jess of all people. “One he couldn't say no to.”

“So he left?!” She explodes, incredulous. “His son is missing, and he just left?!”

“Yeah,” Sam surprises himself by smiling. It's not happy, more wry than anything, amusement at Jess's righteous fury on his behalf, but it is a smile. “My dad's a bastard, news at eleven.”

“That's one word for it,” Jess spits out.

Sam can hear angry clatters in the background. Knowing Jess, probably paintbrushes. He hopes it's paintbrushes. If she's cooking in this mood, he might come back to find the apartment on fire.

“God, I can't believe he just left,” she continues ranting. “What kind of ass does that??”

“The Winchester kind,” Sam can't believe he's still smiling. But it's Jess, and she's angry for him and she's either slinging paint on a canvas or making a mess in the kitchen to deal with it and he loves her. He loves her so damn much.

“No,” she contradicts. “No, that type of- of- spontaneous asshattery is just him! You would never just leave like that! Your brother would never leave like that!”

“You've never met Dean, you don't know that.” Sam remarks quietly, smile fading a little. He's just now realizing that Dean and Jess might never meet. Ever. That those two halves of his life will never overlap. It strikes him that Dean and Jess meeting, in the same room together, swapping awkward Sam stories and generally giving him hell would have been one of his more twisted nightmares last week, but is one of the brightest, best scenarios he can imagine today.

But that might just be a sad commentary on the kind of day he's had.

She's right, though. Dean has never just up and left him in the middle night. Would never go without a word. Would never leave when Sam needed him to stay.

“I don't need to meet him to know that,” Jess answers easily, breaking Sam from his reverie. “He wouldn't. He just wouldn't. Now, what are you going to do today?”

The answer to that is simple and easy, and Sam is a little ashamed he hasn't done it already.

“Go and look for my brother.”

“That's what I thought,” Jess is smiling on the other end of the line. Sam can hear it. “Take care of yourself, Sam.”

“You, too,” Sam replies, and just as he ends the call he can feel the warm drops of blood on his forehead, see her silent scream, before he locks it all away again, back in the corner of his mind with all the other nightmares.

“It was just a dream,” he thinks fiercely to himself, zipping up jeans and pulling on shoes before grabbing the keys on the table and heading out to the Impala.
If possible, the sight of the shiny metal exterior of the Impala hits him even harder now, in the daylight, than it did the night before. After he pulls back the tarp, he stands looking at it for a moment.

This car is the backdrop to his most painful and precious memories: Sitting sprawled out in the backseat and sucking the melty goop out of an ice cream Push Up in the lazy summer heat, wind whipping through the windows to comb through his hair. Countless fights with Dad followed by the by long, tense hours of uninterrupted hard rock pounding into his eardrums. Dean teaching him to drive as soon as he could reach the pedals, wincing at every horrible grind and then practically glowing when Sam finally mastered the stick shift. Watching Stephanie Rosenburg fade away to a pinprick in the distance out the back windshield, already knowing he wasn't going to be able to keep his promise to write. Walking home dejected from a disastrous Homecoming dance and having Dean pull up alongside him blaring “Everybody Hurts” at earsplitting volumes and singing along off key until Sam gets in, turning away so his brother won't see the way his sullen glare is threatening to crack into a smile. Crouching in the back floorboard with his heart in his throat while Dean and Dad go crashing through the woods after a monster. Squabbling with Dean over who’s on whose side of the seat until John threatens to make them walk all the way to Boise. Lying sprawled out on his back and feeling perfectly content, watching the blue, endless sky whiz past over the top of Anna Karenina.

He thinks he's spent more time in the Impala than he has anywhere else in the world. He may not be in love with the car like Dean is, may not know all the specs and what makes her tick, but this is still the closest thing he has to roots, and that means something, no matter how screwed up it is.

He chooses to go through the trunk first. It's empty, since Dean's bags are all in the hotel. He pulls up the floorboard, looking around for a moment until he spots the shotgun that Dean has apparently been using to keep the compartment propped open.

Dean’s artillery is a tangle of weapons, ammo, charms, and miscellany. Sam aches to sort the trunk into some semblance of order, but he knows that his brother would kill him if he did that; more likely than not, Dean has some sort of system going, even if it’s as disorganized as his brain.

He sifts through the compartment as best he can, but doesn't come up with much in the way of clues, though he does find what appears to be an EMF meter made out of an old Walkman and several cases of shotgun shells filled with rock salt. *Looks like Dean's been getting bored,* Sam thinks with a little grin.

He slams the trunk closed and crosses to the passenger's side, tugging open the door. The tarp's kept the sun off of the body of the car, but it's hot enough today that Sam can still smell the familiar scent of warm leather when he slides inside. It makes him remember long stretches spent parked outside of bars and police stations and coroner's offices, sitting in the car with the windows cracked, his bare legs sticking to the seats as he took in long gulps of hot, stuffy air.

He leaves the door gaping open as he begins to dig through the glove box. He comes up with an old cigar box full of fake IDs and badges, a roadmap of the United States, two cell phones, a handful of napkins from IHOP, and a couple of crumpled receipts with waitresses phone numbers on them. Useless. He stuffs them back inside before bending awkwardly to feel around under the seat.

He drags out a beat-up cardboard box that turns out to be full of Dad's old tapes. *Knowing Dean, those probably get a lot of play,* he thinks wryly.
He feels around some more and comes up with a local newspaper from the twelfth of this month. He flips through it, but doesn’t find anything that stands out. Dean hasn’t marked anything, either. There’s a second EMF meter under the seat, too, along with another roadmap, and a half-chewed pack of Spearmint gum, all equally as useless as the contents of the glove compartment.

He finds another box wedged under the driver’s seat, an old shoebox with the lid duct taped on. He can tell the tape’s been pulled off and stuck back on over and over again; it’s gone frayed at the edges and doesn’t quite stick anymore. He opens the box cautiously, unsure of what exactly could be inside, but it turns out to just be more cassette tapes.

*How many tapes does Dean need anyway?* Sam thinks. *He’s just going to listen to the same five albums over and over again anyway.*

His eyes flicker over one of the labels and he stares at it for a moment.

*Slaughterhouse-Five?*

He pulls out a couple more of the tapes, reading the labels with a furrowed brow. Sure enough, they’re all audiobooks. Some are obviously thrifted, though just as many appear to have been stolen from public libraries. Sam flicks through them: Cheyenne, Milwaukee, Charleston, Spokane… *(Seriously, is he trying to steal from every state in reverse order?)*

He can’t help it. He kicks his head back and laughs out loud. Only Dean would steal classic literature from the library and then hide it like it was porn.

He’s digs them out one by one to read the titles, mostly because he’s curious but also because his little brother instinct is telling him that Dean, who’s been trying to play himself off as too cool to read anything more complex than a cereal box since he hit puberty, would seriously flip if he knew Sam had found these.

He’s pretty sure Dean has every novel Vonnegut ever wrote in here, which surprises him, but he guesses it makes sense; he can see Vonnegut’s weird, dark humor appealing to his brother. Dean stole *Huck Finn* from Sioux Falls and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* from Chomanche. The tapes for *On the Road* are beat to hell with labels handwritten in sharpie on masking tape, and *A Confederacy of Dunces* is titled in smeared gel pen by a girl who turned the loops of her “f”s and “y”s into hearts. There’s a single cassette from the set of *Ham on Rye* which he assumes Dean overlooked when he was tossing the rest. Apparently his brother isn’t a Bukowski fan. Sam rolls his eyes at the copies of *Lonesome Dove* and *True Grit* and outright grins when he finds *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. That book could have been written for Dean and the image of his brother rocketing down the hallway, chuckling under his breath at Hunter S. Thompson’s narration is weirdly endearing.

Sam sees the corner of a glossy bit of paper peeking out from the bottom and pulls it out curiously. He blinks in surprise as he finds himself staring at a photo of himself. He knows this picture. It’s from his freshman year at Stanford, back when he and Dean were still on speaking terms, strained as those were. A casual friend had snapped it while they were hanging out on the Quad and given Sam a copy, and he’d tucked it into his short letter to Dean on a whim. The next time Dean called, he’d poked fun at Sam for it, telling him that his polo and shaggy bangs made him look like some yuppie douchebag but that he sure was glad to have a photo of Sam’s pretty face to look at while he was in the trenches. Sam had called him an ass and hung up to the sound of Dean laughing. He never would have guessed that Dean had actually held onto it.

Dean has written *Sammy, 2001* in neat lettering across the back. It’s the kind of thing that parents do with family photos before they put them in albums or frames, and it makes Sam wonder if Dean has held onto more photos of him, and if so, where? He wonders why Dean kept this picture and how it
ended up where it did, whether Dean ever came across it while he was digging through his cassettes for a Part 2 and thought about Sam.

It’s a strange feeling, realizing that there are still things he doesn’t know about Dean, that there are parts of Dean that he still hasn’t seen, and Sam is struck with the sudden want to learn them all and the desperate hope that he’ll still get that chance.

He returns the picture and tapes to the box where he found them and continues picking through the car. There’s nothing in the backseat but a couple of chewed-up old pens and a spare flashlight.

He flips down the visors as a last shot, and finds a folded gas receipt above the driver’s seat. Sam opens it and finds a short note written in ballpoint pen. He’s seen Dean with his phone against his ear, jotting down orders as they come, enough times to recognize what it is.

*New Orleans*

*Six vics*

*Snails/Lizards (!!)*

*Voodoo? Hoodoo?*

*ASAP!*

There's a little pair of Mardi Gras masks doodled in the upper left corner and a handful of zigzagging lines in the bottom right.

Sam sets his jaw and rips the note in half, then rips it again and again until it's nothing more than confetti before opening the driver's door and tossing the tiny scraps of paper onto the cement. He grinds them into the ground with the heel of his sneaker until they're nothing but flat, blackened remnants.

It doesn't really make him feel better.

He sighs, reaches over to pull the passenger’s side door closed, and climbs out of the car. Nothing to do now but push on to the next stop.
And now Sam is on the hunt for Dean all by his lonesome. However will he proceed?

Sam had grown up with John Winchester for a father, so casing a business for security cameras is pretty much second nature. He already knows there aren’t any at the diner, and unfortunately the parking lot backs up to woods, so there isn’t any chance of finding footage of it from some other business in the area. Still, there’s a possibility that somebody's camera had at least documented the cars driving in and out of the lot, which would give Sam a hell of a lot more than he has now. He needs to know how Dean had left that diner. If he was on foot, there’s a likelihood that Sam might find a witness who'd seen him on the walk back (in which case, he’s looking at another miserable night casing every gas station and liquor store from the diner to the La Quinta in the hopes that Dean had stopped in). If Dean had switched to another stolen car, that would give Sam something to go on, too. He could try to get into the police records and see if the car has been recovered and where. It's even possible that he might find it in the parking lot of the hotel, which could tell him that Dean disappeared from there.

The problem is getting footage with a good enough shot of the parking lot, and luck hasn't exactly been on Sam's side today.

When he pulls up to the diner in the Impala, though, he's surprised to find that his luck has at least made a small turn-around. He can spot instantly now what he hadn't noticed at night: There's a traffic camera monitoring this stretch of highway. He eyeballs it and estimates that the exit to the diner's parking lot is within the camera's range. Even though the shot won't be perfect, it'll at least let him see what cars entered and exited and when.

Sam is willing to bet that the highway camera footage goes to either the county or to the state's Department of Transportation. If he remembers correctly, the county seat is actually in Covington, while the state's transportation office is in Baton Rouge, over an hour away. Hopefully it's the former, then, but even if the office is local, Sam has no idea how long they archive that footage. Most places don’t have the capacity to store it for longer than a week or two. He prays that St. Tammany's fear of the Katrina evacuees supposed influence on Covington's crime rate means a longer archival time.

Of course, while showing up with a counterfeited Fed badge to the county traffic office could probably get John Winchester, or even Dean, unlimited access to the highway's camera footage, Sam knows there was no way he's going to get away with it without an older partner. He's only twenty-two, and he knows he looks it. A couple of days of stubble built up on his face may give him a few years, but it isn't going to be enough for him to pass as a Fed without raising some alarm bells - at least enough for his targets to check with the local PD, putting him on the radar in ways he really can't afford right now.

He still hopes that he can find a local business with a shot that's just as good, if not better, but he scrounges around for a half hour, and ultimately, there's nothing. Great. That means he's going to be
paying an illicit visit to the country transportation office after hours.

It's not like this will be the first or even tenth time Sam's committed a felony, but it still kind of rankles that he's been back in the game for less than 72 hours, and here he is, doing something he swore he'd never do again.

As soon as he gets back to the hotel, he vows, he's going to search around and see if he can find a hunter to work with on this. There has to be someone local in Dad's journal who can give Sam some backup here.

In the meantime, he's stuck with casing the St. Tammany Parish traffic office.

~

Picking a character that's stressed out, confused, and desperate isn't exactly a hard choice.

"Ma'am, can you please help me?" he asks, leaning up against the ledge and pressing his face closer to the clerk's window.

The clerk he's dealing with is an overweight woman in her mid-fifties whose hair is piled up into a beehive that's about half a foot tall. She blinks at him dully.

"Yessir?" she slurs, hardening her jaw against a yawn.

"Look," he says, trying to seem as pitiful as possible. "I got in an accident on Highway 190, like, a week ago, and I swear, it wasn't my fault, but my car is totaled and this lady's insurance company is saying it's my fault and that I should pay for her car, and I just cannot afford that right now."

He can't tell if the look the lady is giving him is genuine or feigned sympathy. Mostly she just seems like she's trying to figure out why he's telling her all this.

"Anyway," he adds quickly. "The thing is, I can't find any witnesses to back me up, but I saw a traffic camera that I think got it on video. I dunno if this is even the right place to look, I just really need to find that footage. If I could show it to the insurance company, then they'd have to believe me!"

The woman looks wary.

"I don't know about that, sir," she says. "Can you wait for just one minute, please?"

She turns around and discusses the situation in low tones with the other women in the office, then turns around and gives him an awkward, appeasing little smile before dialing an extension on the phone, lacquered nails clack-clacking against the plastic.

She explains the situation to the person on the other end and then listens for a moment.

"Where exactly was this camera?" she asks Sam, and then repeats his answer into the phone. "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. No, I don't know about that. Yeah, I'll ask."

The woman hangs up and dials another extension, starting the whole song and dance over again. Ultimately, she ends up having to call four different offices to get her answer.

"All right, sir," she says finally. "So here's the thing. We do have the footage from that camera here in the office, but--"

"It's right here?" Sam interrupts in a hopeful, earnest tone, looking through her window towards the
door labeled Archives that he’d noticed twenty minutes ago. “In that room back there?”

She smiles tightly.

“Yes, sir,” she says (and Sam thinks, ’Jackpot!’). “But the thing is, I can't let you in there without a subpoena telling me you're allowed to view it, so you need to go find yourself a lawyer and get him to do all that.”

“Oh,” says Sam, wrinkling his brows. “But my friend said you delete the footage pretty quickly. Do I have time for that?”

“The video gets erased every two weeks,” she tells him. “So I recommend you get that subpoena as quick as you can.”

Sam nods slowly.

“I dunno if I can afford the lawyer,” he says, smiling sadly. “But thanks anyway. I’ll do my best.”

“All right, sir,” the woman says, already turning her attention away. “You have a nice day, now.”

Sam “gets lost” on the way out, taking note of the security camera locations and alarm type. County offices like this can be pretty cheap about security sometimes, so he has high hopes; as it turns out, they’re justified. The security system will be easy enough to bypass from the outside, and he’ll only have to cut one camera once he gets in. He’s willing to bet there’s at least one night watchman, but as long as Sam keeps an ear out, the security guard shouldn’t have any reason to go into the traffic clerk’s office, much less the Archives room.

These are all good things, and this is a decent lead. Too bad he’ll have to wait until nightfall to pursue it, and it’s barely noon now.

He guesses the only thing to do now is head back to the motel and try to track down a local hunter who can help him out.

~

The first thing he does when he gets back to the motel is dig his dad’s journal out of the trashcan and start flicking through the book for relevant numbers.

Of course, John doesn’t have an index or a contact list. That would make too much sense. His journal is a mess of stories, creature biographies, transcribed chants, and random facts. It takes Sam longer than he’d like to come up with the names of five hunters who live in Louisiana and a couple from Southern Mississippi. He’ll widen the net if he has to, but he wants to concentrate first on the help that can get here the quickest.

The first number goes to voicemail, and a husky female voice that Sam guesses belongs to a hunter John had ID’d as Leanne LaRouche orders him to leave a voicemail.

“Make it quick,” the pre-recorded voice snaps. “And don’t call back. I’ll call you, assumin’ your worth my time.”

“Hey,” Sam says after the beeps. “I’m Sam Winchester, John’s son. I’m having trouble with a hunt in Covington and could really use a hand. There’s a hunter MIA, so if you can, please call me back as soon as possible. Thanks.”

He hopes that was short enough.
He hadn’t realized how dry his mouth was until he’d started talking. He could feel his tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth, making little clicking noises as he spoke, and he realizes that he hasn’t had anything to eat or drink yet today. He fills up a paper cup with tap water and drinks half of it to get his voice back in working order before picking the phone back up to try the next number.

Clyde Rosen’s number is out of service, maybe because of the storm, so Sam is forced to cross him off the list.

The next hunter, Ed Glass, actually does pick up, but as soon as Sam gets out the name “John Winchester,” the man hangs up on him, and he won’t pick up when Sam rings back.

“Great,” Sam bitches as he crosses off the name. “Thanks, Dad.”

Richard Stevens’ number doesn’t pick up either, so Sam leaves a voicemail similar to the one he left for Leanne LaRouche and moves on.

It turns out that Beth-Ann Morgan evacuated with her daughter’s family. They’re staying with friends in Sacramento and don’t currently have any plans to return. Another name off the list.

The first Mississippi hunter, David Mitchell, is friendly enough for someone in the business, up until Sam explains who he got his contact info from.

“Dammit,” Mitchell snarls. “I told that son of a bitch to lose my number.”

“Wait,” Sam gets out quickly, hoping to avoid another hang-up. “I know John Winchester can be a real bastard, but this doesn’t have anything to do with him. It’s about his son, Dean.”

The man gives a cynical little laugh.

“That’s even worse,” he says. “Worked with that boy on a case a couple of years back. He got my house set on fire. And he screwed my daughter.”

“Oh,” says Sam. “Um...”

“I don’t want anything to do with any of the Winchesters,” the older hunter says. “Don’t call me again.”

Goddammit, Dean.

Sam crosses the name off. There’s only one left, and he desperately hopes it’ll pay off, but maybe in the back of his head, he doesn’t really expect it to. He isn’t really surprised when the hunter in question turns out to not even be home.

“He’s out huntin’ right now,” Greg Hartman’s daughter tells Sam. “Won’t be back for a week or so.”

“All right,” Sam says, trying not to sound too disappointed. “Well, if the hunt ends earlier than he expected, can you ask him to give me a call? It’s very important.”

“Sure,” she says and takes down his number. “Good luck, Sam.”

Not likely, he thinks sourly, though he appreciates the sentiment.

There’s still a chance that the two hunters he’d left messages for will call back, and Sam can still look for hunters in the surrounding states, though they may turn out to be too far away to really be useful. It’ll take some time to find their numbers, too, and when Sam checks the clock, he realizes it’s already well into the afternoon.
He really doesn’t want to stay in this room a second night and, he tells himself, it just isn’t practical anyway, considering the cover story he’d given to the staff. Besides, how long could Dean’s alter-ego really hold onto a room before the staff finally realizes he isn’t still around?

Sam’s not sure when the night shift starts, but he does know that it’s better for him to get out now and avoid a confrontation.

He packs up his things, as well as Dean’s, and loads them all into the Impala as casually as possible, hoping the desk clerk won’t key onto the fact that he isn’t actually planning to check out, and then guns it out of the parking lot.

It’ll probably take some time to find a motel with vacancies, but Sam’s got several hours to blow until it’s safe to break into the Department of Transportation.

First, he stops at a Wendy’s and forces himself to eat half of a grilled chicken salad and drink a bottled water while he copies down the names of hunters from the greater Mississippi and coastal Alabama area. He doesn’t really have anything resembling an appetite, but he won’t be any good to Dean if he lets himself pass out. Besides, when he finds his brother, there’s a real possibility that Sam will have to fight whatever’s taken him, and he can’t afford to be too physically weakened by that point.

After that, he spends a few hours driving around the city, looking for a vacant motel. The driving actually calms him down a little, helps him relax his hands out of white-knuckled fists around the steering wheel, unclench his teeth when he hadn’t even realized he’d been grinding them. He guesses being practically raised in the Impala kind of has that effect. After all, some of his earliest memories are of all night drives spent in the backseat, listening to soft rock filtering through from the radio, curled up in Dean’s tiny arms.

He finally finds a motel on the outskirts of the north side of town. It’s a trashy, hole-in-the-wall kind of place, which is actually a point in its favor. He takes out a double room and unpacks Dean’s things from the car, sets them at the foot of the bed closest to the door like a promise.

You’re coming back, he thinks with a ferocity that should probably terrify him. I’m bringing you back.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

In which Sam builds a Wall of Crazy and is generally maudlin.

Sam organizes John's hunting contacts by their proximity to Covington, then annotates the list to account for the ones who are out of touch, busy, or of the opinion that anyone named Winchester should fuck off and die.

What he's left with at the end of that task is a short list of potential help, and an awed, frustrated sense of wonder at John's skill at alienating people. Truly, his father's ability to piss off friends, family, and colleagues alike with near perfect accuracy is impressive.

It also means that Sam has jack shit to do until it is late enough to chance breaking into the parish Department of Transportation. True, the place's security is laughable, but hell if he is gonna get pinched on a felony breaking and entering charge because some paper pusher decided to work late.

To keep himself... Distracted? Busy? Sane? Sam papers the wall of the crappy motel room with everything he knows about Dean's disappearance. Timelines, locations, people he met, places he's been, everything goes on the wall, placed in precise order, tracing Dean's path from the first hotel, to Nicey Carter's home, to Georgina Moret's, to the diner to...

Where?

“Where is he?” Sam demands of himself, sketching a quick layout of the diner parking lot on the yellow lined paper of a legal pad. He plots out the building itself, the space where they found the Camaro, the surrounding streets and businesses, everything he can think of, ripping out sheet after sheet as his impromptu map expands. By the time he's finished, the layout takes up six pieces of paper, and displays everything from the probable angle of the traffic camera, to the relevant streets, highways, and businesses, to the rough estimate Sam was able to cobble together of how deep the spit of woods the diner backs up to stretches.

Before he's able to highlight the businesses that would have been open during the time of Dean's disappearance, Sam realizes that night has well and truly fallen and that no city or federal transportation employee, no matter how dedicated, is going to be working at eleven.

It's time.

As Sam discovered on his recon trip, the perimeter of the St. Tammany Parish Department of Transportation is rife with security cameras, leaving too few blind spots to risk taking the Impala in close. Luckily, morbid city planning has the bank of government offices practically on top of the local cemetery, which is just full of deserted, security-camera-free avenues for Sam to park Dean's baby in while he walks less than a block to the building's relatively unmonitored side entrance.

Being sure to keep his back to the camera and his face completely obscured by the hoodie he was lucky enough to pack, Sam makes quick work of the lock on the door to the building's back hallway.
He's got time enough to take care of the security tapes before he leaves, but when it comes to potential felonies, it's really better to be safe than facing time in the federal prison system.

The alarm system is easy enough to bypass, and in a surprisingly short amount of time, Sam finds himself in the DOT's archive room, staring down the computer bank and vaguely wishing he had a cup of coffee to go with what was certainly going to be hours of sifting through surveillance tape for any hint of Dean.

He quickly locates the footage from the camera he needs, setting playback to the night Dean visited the diner, at roughly the time Christie the Waitress alluded to, hoping for something, anything that will lead to Dean, that will give him anything to go on.

The first hour and a half Sam spends running through video is useless. There's no hint of Dean or the Impala anywhere on the recordings, just hours of mind-numbingly empty streets and identical cars, first zooming by too fast for Sam to make anything of them, then too slow as he smacks rewind, the fast again as he realizes that this car too was another dead end, that this flash of pedestrian was a just another civilian, that he is no closer to finding Dean than he was when he woke up this morning, that his last solid lead was the Camaro, and he would have missed that one too, if it hadn't been for John.

Sam is really beginning to regret not grabbing a protein bar or some expresso before coming. His back is aching, his knees are sore from smacking into the bottom of the stupid lowest-bidder elf desk, and his eyes feel like they are literally about to dry up and fall out of his skull. He can't tell if that's because he's tired or because he's watched more grainy traffic cam video than any one person should without sleep or coffee, but he can't bring himself to care that much.

Tired or not, achy and hungry and exhausted or not, it's not like he can quit. Dean is out there somewhere. He had to leave the diner somehow. This camera has him on it somewhere, walking or driving or fucking swimming to wherever the hell he went after he saw that damn waitress and her shitty pie, and as soon as he stops feeling sorry for himself, he can go back to watching the damn video, find Dean, and kick his ass for making him worry like this.

It's going to give Sam grey hairs before he's twenty-five at this rate.

It's another forty-five minutes of grainy video before Sam catches a glimpse of anything useful, and even then he has to rewind the recording twice to make sure his eyes aren't playing tricks on him, but, sure enough, on the lower left edge of the screen, he can catch a glimpse of faded, powder-blue fender.

It's Dean, driving into the diner after finishing the job.

Sam has to pause the video and let his head drop forward into his hands.

It shouldn't affect him like this. It's just a blurred, half-image of a stolen car. With the way the camera is positioned, he can't even see Dean in it.

But it's something. Confirmation that he's on the right track, that there's a lead here to be found, if he can just focus, just push himself a little bit more.

Sam presses play with shaking hands, scans through the video until the timestamp tells him that the diner should be near to closing. That Dean should have reappeared by now, either on foot or in the Impala. Cars come and go, of course, but Sam can't see Dean in any of them. He marks them down, notes the make and model, the plates when he can get them, but it seems pointless.

Why would Dean steal another car when he was done with the job? The hunt had gone smooth, he
was clearly not worried about being followed, not if he was relaxed enough to take a two and a half hour stab at nailing Diner Girl. He should have either driven away in the Impala or walked back to the hotel by now, so where the hell was he?

Sam keeps watching the video, carefully taking note of every car that exits the diner now, but at this point the place is closed. The parking lot is all but empty, the last patrons making their way home one by one as the streets empty and the whole block slowly but surely deserts.

Sam checks the dates. Rewinds the video to the point where he saw the Camaro, watches everything again, nearly in real time. He checks and double checks and triple checks, hoping like hell he slipped up somewhere, made a stupid, careless mistake along the line.

He didn't.

There's no Dean. Not on the video. Not leaving the diner.

Not anywhere.

The frustrating, teeth-clenching, mind-numbing feeling of uselessness eats at Sam, burns him from the inside out because this isn't a normal hunt with normal dead ends. This isn't trying to save Stan McNormalguy from the magical McGuffin he bought on Ebay, this is Dean, and every dead end, every mistake, every second wasted could be the difference between finally getting to tell Dean he never meant those godawful things he said two years ago, and standing alone in a field, watching whatever's left of his brother's body burn. Every time Sam can't find the answer it's like he's killing Dean himself.

It's been a whole day, and he's not any closer to finding his brother.

It's been nearly two weeks since anyone's seen Dean at all.

Sam forces himself to move. To take his notes and wipe away his fingerprints, to erase the security tapes and take care of the cameras covering his exit.

He didn't find Dean here. There was no lead, no hint of where the hell his brother disappeared to.

Just another dead end.

Sam makes his way out of the building in a fog, trying to get the hell back to the Impala before he loses it completely, hoping to somehow force his sluggish, sleep-deprived brain to think its way past the great looming wall of “can't find Dean can't find Dean can't find Dean” in his head.

He gets nothing for his trouble until he forces himself to stop at a crappy, all night convenience store on the outskirts of town. There, after a protein bar and three cups of gas station coffee, Sam slowly begins to accept that there may be a possibility he hasn't considered before.

Maybe Dean didn't leave the diner at all. Or if he did, he didn't get nearly as far as Sam and John thought.

Sam feels suddenly, crushingly heavy as he fires up the Impala, pulling out of the gas station parking lot and turning towards the diner once more, this time not to interrogate a witness or scope for traffic cams, but to search the woods behind the restaurant.

He doesn't want to believe the hunt has come to this. Doesn't want to believe that his intelligence and his knowledge of Dean, the things that have gotten him so far, so close, have finally failed him, but he can't see any other path Dean would have taken.
His brother had finished the hunt, gotten back to Covington. He left the restaurant, but the car he arrived in was still in the parking lot. He didn't take the Impala back to the hotel room, didn't leave on foot, didn't have any reason to steal another car. Why would he? The job was done. He should have finished his pie, called Dad to check in, and then gone back to the hotel to get the mud and blood off of his boots before setting back out to bang Christie the Pie-Slinging Porn Extra.

He should have, but he didn't.

Dean has all but vanished, and maybe there's nothing to find in the woods behind the diner but another dead end, but Sam doesn't have anywhere else to look. He has literally nothing else, and maybe there's nothing in the woods but trees and scrub, but Dean didn't walk out of those diner doors and fall off the face of the earth.

Maybe there's nothing in those woods for Sam to find, and maybe there is. Maybe something that will end this search, that will destroy any hopes Sam's harbored of finding Dean safe or well or in one piece. Something that Sam doesn't want to find at all.

But he has to look.

Returning to the diner in the silent, dark hours of the night makes Sam feel like a failure: defeated and incompetent and utterly inferior to his father.

It's been over a day since John left, and Sam has no new leads, no clue where Dean is, just a dark stretch of woods to search and his Dad's friends to beg for help. It doesn't matter that Sam has never been anything but a straight A student. It doesn't matter that Stanford accepted him with a full ride, that he's never met a class he couldn't ace or a subject he couldn't master. None of that means anything when it can't help him find his brother. What was the point of being the smartest, the best, for this long if he doesn't know what he needs to know to find Dean? Why can he do everything but this right?

Not finding answers, not finding anything but more dead ends and more questions is burning at Sam, reminding him of too many hunts where it was him at the library and Dad and Dean out of the job, relying on Sam to find the answers, find the right bit of history or lore, find the right grave, the right weakness, to look in the right library in the right book in time to bring them both home safe, because people were dying out there, and if Sam didn't get in his ass in gear it would mean more bodies and more bloodshed.

Except this time, it isn't a faceless family. It isn't a random stranger or even another hunter they know.

It's Dean.

It's Dean who is on the line here. It's Dean's case that he can't solve, Dean's mystery he can't unravel, and if he can't find something, anything, it's going to be Dean's body on the slab.

Dean's blood on his hands.

The thought freezes and burns and swallows Sam all at once, consumes the tiny, hopeful spark he didn't even know he still carried.

It doesn't matter that Dad sent Dean to Louisiana. It doesn't matter that John started this job with Sam and then abandoned him. The job is Sam's now. The responsibility is Sam's now.
Whatever has happened or will happen to Dean is on Sam now, and the weight of that just might kill him.

Even exhausted, desperate, and depressed, Sam remembers how to search woods. He's wasted enough time, made enough mistakes already, to screw up on something as basic as this.

He circles, keeping a sharp eye on the leaf-littered floor of the woods, on the thin, scraggly trees that make up this tiny outpost of suburban wilderness. It's not a huge area, not even a proper empty lot, just a scrubby, overgrown copse of trees masking a natural ditch that had been incorporated into the city drainage system, one gaping concrete pipe poking out on one end of the furrow, it's twin emerging from the knot of land a few yards away, the intermittent stretch of ditch a swampy, waterlogged puddle.

There's been nothing in the woods but leaf litter and scrub so far, but that doesn't mean that there's nothing in the swampy bottom of the ditch, or the deep, dark tunnel of the storm drain.

Sam is not looking forward to this part. It's not even that he doesn't want to slog through the marshy ditch. Though it wouldn't make his top ten anything, as far as hunts go, he's had worse details.

The thing is, there is literally nothing good Sam can find in that storm drain.

If he finds nothing, then he's wasted time tromping around in the woods that he could have spent following a real lead, and if he finds something....

Well, after two weeks of nothing from Dean, finding anything that would still be in that storm drain...

Sam doesn't know what he would do.

He doesn't know what he would do if this whole awful journey, their whole awful life, has just been leading up to him finding Dean dead in a Louisiana ditch.

He doesn't know what he would do.

But Sam doesn't take those last few steps to begin his search of the marshy bottom of the woods because he'll like what he finds or because he knows how he would handle it.

He does it because it's his brother. Because it's Dean.

And he's waited long enough for Sam to find him.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

In which Sam encounters the Biscuit King and judges Rick’s wood.

After all the buildup, after all the hurting and searching, it feels less like relief and more like a letdown when Sam doesn't find anything in the ditch… or either storm drain… or the culverts each drain leads to.

He's trudging back through the woods at the back of the diner, squinting in the weak morning light after hours of nothing but the dark of the culverts and the weak flicker of the flashlight when his phone rings.

For a brief, awful moment he thinks it's his Dad, calling to check on the progress of the case. Then he sees the Louisiana area code, and that possibility flies out the window.

There's no way John's in the state, much less calling to check in after leaving Sam cold.

Which, Sam thinks perversely as he answers the call, might be the one helpful, encouraging piece of information that he's found out today.

“This Sam Winchester?” asks a gruff voice from the other end of the line.

“Yeah,” Sam answers automatically, not willing to hope that whoever is calling him has good news.

“Rick Stevens,” the man on the other line responds. “Got your message. Still need a hand on that hunt in Covington?”

“I really do,” Sam admits uneasily, not sure how to breach this next part. He’s never really worked with other hunters alone before, not at all if Caleb, Pastor Jim, and Bobby didn't count. “Are you-- Can you help me out?”

“No promises, but I'll listen to what you got, see if I can do somethin' for it,” the man replies, a little cagily. Sam wonders if it's his nature, a hunter thing, or the fact that Sam is John Winchester's son that has Rick Stevens so reluctant to commit.

As they set a time and a place for the meet, Sam thinks that it might be a combination of all three.

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He has to admit that the place Stevens has chosen is a typical paranoid hunter's paradise.

The Biscuit King's Fun Barn is a lonely hole in the wall on a stretch of county road just outside Covington, and goddammit if the place isn't located in an actual barn. Well, it looks like it was a barn at one point, converted to vaguely respect the social and health department codes that the State of Louisiana deemed necessary for an eatery. Now it's a… well, 'restaurant' doesn't seem quite the word Sam's looking for.

The parking lot is gravel, and even at five in the morning, the best spots have been taken by a few
beefed-up pickups. Not the pricey, designer makes that the trust fund babies pretending to be macho drove back at Stanford, but grittier models, scored and pitted by years of hard use. The building itself is the type of worn and sagging that Sam knows has nothing to do with the recent hurricanes and everything to do with the wear and tear of age. The red paint that coats the barn is faded and flaking, and the whole place seems to be covered in a fine layer of grit. Even the white plywood sign in front of the building, advertising that this is in fact a business, and not just a decaying wreck of abandoned barn wood, is half obscured by a set-in patina of road dust and grime.

As Sam guides the Impala into the uneven stretch of gravel at the back of the lot, he tries to keep the car as unobtrusive as possible, but recognizes a losing battle when he sees it.

Dean's baby sticks out like a sore thumb, unapologetically gleaming in the weak late October sunshine.

Looks like if Stevens has anyone on the lookout for John Winchester's kid, the guy's gonna have an easy time of it. Sam tries to compromise by putting a little cover between himself and the entrance to the joint, making sure that the Impala is lined up easily with the path to the highway.

Sam knows that John and Dean would rather face a pack of Black Dogs with one gun between them than admit it, but the turning radius on their girl sucks. If Sam's gonna have to make a quick exit, he doesn't want to end up in a ditch trying to do it, something Dean or their Dad never seem to need to account for. Then again, Sam has years of practice under his belt and he still can't maneuver the car like Dean or even John.

Maybe his brother was right and the Impala just doesn't like him as much.

Of course, allegations like that were usually followed with Dean stroking the dash lovingly and crooning sweet nothings to the car that Sam had never heard him use on an actual woman, so maybe the fact the Sam isn't quite as close with the Impala is a good thing.

The memories of Dean, grinning over at Sam from the driver's seat, thumbing in one of his battered cassettes and generally giving Sam hell, spur Sam on. Make him stop stalling and reach over to the duffle he'd tossed on the front seat earlier, snagging a knife and an extra clip to augment the gun he's already got hidden on him.

He doesn't expect a pat down in the middle of the restaurant, but he's seen less paranoid hunters do more extreme things under better circumstances. Hopefully if Stevens or whoever he's got with him does pat him down, they'll be satisfied to find the gun and get sloppy with the rest of the search.

Sam crosses the parking lot with long strides, taking in the exterior of the place. There are no cameras, no nearby businesses or residences that he can see, just overgrown Louisiana woods and deserted highway.

Sam is definitely in “no one can hear you scream” territory here, but after too long stuck in the same damn place with no leads, no trail, no hint of Dean anywhere, risking himself by walking into a strange location to meet a strange hunter on the hope that he can give him something, anything that might lead to Dean seems like a fair trade.

Before Sam can overthink it, he's at the door of the Biscuit King, shouldering open the rusty hinges and peering into the bright, fluorescent lighting of the interior as the combined smells of hot grease, frying meat, and burnt cheese hit him all at once.

It's simultaneously the most appetizing and the most disgusting thing he's ever smelled, a fact that Sam chalks up to his not having eaten much in the last twenty-four hours.
The restaurant's menu, a hand painted plywood sign bolted to the wall behind the service counter that divides the prep area from the rest of the room, lists the solitary breakfast offering of the Biscuit King as numerous variations on what it calls an “Ugly Biscuit.”

A quick glance at what the other diners are eating, combined with the hot messes of… something sizzling on the grill behind the counter lead Sam to believe that whatever an ugly biscuit actually is, it definitely qualifies as the kind of food he swore he'd never eat again when he left for Stanford. The realization that this is exactly the kind of greasy hole-in-the-wall that Dean loves kills any appetite Sam might have had in a single, sinking heartbeat.

He orders a coffee, grabs a table with a good view of the entrance, service counter, and other diners, and hopes none of the oozing masses of Bisquick and burnt cheese gain sentience and make a bid for world domination before Rick Stevens shows up.

Sam doesn't have to wait long. Halfway through his hot but unabashedly mediocre coffee, a man who looks to be in his mid-forties steps out of the door marked “Staff Only” and steps to the cook, sharing a few quiet words and a friendly slap on the back with the man before snagging something wrapped in greasy waxed paper and making a beeline for Sam's table.

“Winchester,” the man nods to Sam, pulling out the chair across from him and taking a seat. Sam's eyes flash down to the man's ankle as a flash of metal catches his eye. Just as quickly, they're up and on the table, a hot, ashamed flush rising on Sam's face as he realizes that the flash of metal is the ankle of Rick Steven's prosthetic leg.

“It's Sam,” Sam corrects automatically, fiddling with his coffee before asking the real question on his mind. “Was I that easy to make?”

Rick nods to the coffee between Sam's hands. “People don't come here for the coffee, kid. Willie's got his talents, but a good cup of joe ain't one of 'em. Now, what can you tell me about this case?”

Rick asks, settling right down to business.

Sam will give Rick Stevens credit, however the man may feel about helping John Winchester's son out on a case, he's done a good job of listening to the details so far. As soon as Sam gets beyond the background information, the man pulls out a worn, black notebook from his back pocket and begins taking notes with a pencil stub that had been tucked between the pages with a practiced ease. For the most part he's silent as Sam briefs him, his face carefully neutral, only breaking in to Sam's tale once or twice to ask for clarification about a detail or sequence of events.

“And you swept the place with EMF?” Stevens asks perfunctorily after hearing all the details of the case Sam's got so far.

“Every inch,” Sam replies definitely. That whole night in the woods, his eyes had been making a constant path between the ground and the busted Walkman-cum-EMF in his hand. The damn thing had stayed silent the whole time, no matter how often Sam checked the batteries. The same as when it was in the diner parking lot, Dean's hotel room, the Impala, and the Camaro.

There was nothing.

“Well, boy, I don't want to be the one who says it,” Rick begins quietly, turning a few pages in his notebook to read over what he's written and then casting a careful glance back at Sam. “But have you considered that maybe a hunter's not what you need on this one?”

“What are you saying?” Sam growls. He's considered it. Of course he's considered it. He's not stupid. He knows that this looks bad. For Dean. For Sam. For everyone.
But this is Dean. Dean who made his first sawed-off shotgun in sixth grade, when Sam was still trying to figure out how to tie his shoelaces without using the bunny-ears rhyme. This is Dean, who never misses a shot, not matter what the conditions are. This is Dean who Sam has watched take on things three times his size and win, nightmare things made of blood and bone that shouldn't even exist in this world. This is Dean, who can take on all that and still swagger back into the hotel room at the end of a job with nothing more than a grin and an easy “Heya Sammy.”

This is Dean. Whatever the hell has him is big. It's big and it's bad and it didn't get him easy.

Rick Stevens doesn't know any of that, though, so his face is clear, sympathetic even, when he speaks, “I'm saying that people disappear all the time kid, and it's not always a creepy crawly what did it.”

“Well, something had to take Dean!” Sam explodes. “He wouldn't just leave, not without telling someone!”

“No need to get all riled up,” Stevens placates, taking a bite of the biscuit in front of him. “I'm not saying he ran off to TJ. I'm saying, case like this, the police could help. At the very least there's a whole hell of a lot of them and just one a' you.”

“I'm fine,” Sam dismisses automatically, because he is. No one is going to look for Dean as quickly, as thoroughly as he is, so until Dean is found that's what he's gonna do, no matter how many sleepless nights or missed meals it takes. Those things aren't important, not compared to finding Dean.

“Really?” Rick asked skeptically, “You sure about that?”

He lets his food drop onto the battered table.

“'Cause you look like it's been a year of cold beds and bad roads and not to put too fine a point on it, but you smell even worse,” Rick declares bluntly, not so sympathetic now. “When's the last time you slept? Or showered? Christ boy, you smell like you spent the night in the swamp!”

“I did,” Sam answers flatly, still feeling the squelch of the dark, brackish water of the ditch in his shoes. “Have there been any disappearances in the area other than Dean's?” he demands, ignoring Rick's concerns. If the man won't pitch in on the hunt, he can at least give him some background on the area, provide Sam with some idea of where to focus his research into what took Dean.

“You mean aside from the couple hundred thousand the hurricane took out?” Rick smirks through an enormous bite of biscuit.

Sam gives him what he's heard Dean call a 'classic bitchface.'

Where others would quail in the face of the six foot four inches of “Do Not Fuck With Me” that is Sam Winchester, Rick just rolls his eyes and puts down the biscuit.

“The last disappearance in Covington was in 1987,” Rick lists, sounding bored. “Brenda Miller vanished from her bed, turned up three weeks later in Nashville.”

“What was it? Witches? Some sort of dimensional vortex?” Sam asks, leaning forward with interest. If this thing is just plucking people up, dropping them hundreds of miles away, he's got a hell of a bigger search pool, but if this Brenda Miller could just show back up, out of the blue...

“She ran off with the pool boy,” Rick finishes flatly. “I'm tellin' you, file a missing persons, kid. You're barkin' up the wrong tree on this one.”
“And I'm telling you,” Sam throws back, getting angry now, but Rick cuts him off before he can get anywhere.

“That there's no way big, strong Dean got taken by anything less than Batman riding Godzilla in a freak snowstorm, yeah, yeah, I heard you the first time.”

In a flash the creaky, battered table of the Biscuit King is overturned and Sam's got Rick Stevens slammed against the flaking red paint of the barn wall, both hands fisted in the fabric of the older man's shirt, hoisting him against the wall to let his toes dangle against the dull concrete of the restaurant floor.

“Listen Rick,” Sam growls, leaning in close. “My brother is missing. I don't have time for games, I don't have time for bullshit, and I really don't have time for your attitude.”

“Winchesters,” Rick sighs, rolling his eyes, apparently completely unconcerned that he is currently pinned to the wall of the barn like a bug. “There anything you don't gotta go into ass-backwards?”

They're still in the middle of the restaurant. Still surrounded by people who are, presumably, civilians. Sam still has both a knife and a gun.

All Rick Stevens has is a notebook and a pile of burnt biscuit in greasy wax paper, both of which are currently scattered across the floor. And yet, Sam gets the feeling that he is rapidly losing control of the situation.

From behind him, Sam hears the sound of several guns cocking at once and those suspicions are confirmed, but before he has time to think up a plan or panic or both, Rick is holding up a hand to the rest of the room.

Of course, right when Sam is scoping out the rest of the diners to see who looks the most trigger happy is when Rick curls that hand into a fist and rams a mean right hook into his face, sending Sam sprawling dazed onto the concrete.

Sam tries to elbow up immediately, blinking his eyes back into focus, but Rick is there, crouching quickly and fisting a hand into Sam's hoodie to slam him back onto the concrete.

“I ain't your daddy,” Rick hisses, leaning in, hand still planted heavily on Sam's chest. “I ain't got any say in how the hell you run your life. You can run it right offa cliff for all I give a damn, but you called me for help on a hunt. Well, you want my advice, I'm giving it to you: Let the police do their jobs. They're a hell of a lot better suited to handle this than you are, especially as ragged as you've run yourself. Hell, boy, you're lucky it ain't nothin' supernatural. As worn the hell out as you are, strong wind'd knock you on your ass.”

“So what do you suggest I do?” Sam grits out, glaring up at him, hating that he got taken down so easily, hating that Rick might be right, that he might be useless to Dean even if he finds him.

“Can you forget you're a Winchester for one goddamn minute and take a piece of good advice when you get it?”

“Yeah,” Sam grits out, not really having much of a choice.

“Good,” Rick nods, hauling Sam to his feet. “First let's get you the hell upstairs before Willie and the boys decide to pump your ass full of buckshot on principal.”

“Fair enough,” Sam nods, and lets Rick hustle him through the “Staff Only” door without a fuss, studiously avoiding the glares the cook and other diners shoot him.
Rick leads Sam through the hall and up a back staircase, unlocking the door at the top of the cramped landing to let Sam into what he realizes is an apartment built into the loft of the barn.

“You don't wanna call the cops, fine,” Rick begins, taking a seat at a battered desk against the wall and motioning Sam towards a hideous maroon couch, “I got one more suggestion for you. One more, and you don't like it, don't let the door hit ya in the ass on th' way out.”

“What is it then?” Sam demands, sinking down on the maroon monstrosity only to shoot right back up again when something digs into his hind end.

Sam swears, digging in the cushions to fish out what looks like the bastard child of an oversized fishhook and one of Jess's graphite pencils.

“Oh yeah,” Rick nods. “That's my huntin' leg. Put it on the coffee table, why dontcha. Dixie's still deployed. She can't give me shit about it.”

“Dixie?” Sam asks, wondering if maybe nine cups of coffee was too many for a trip this deep south.

“My wife,” Rick nods proudly, gesturing to a photo of himself and a woman in combat fatigues posing over a Cape Buffalo with its tongue hanging out and a crossbow bolt in its neck. “Marine. Hell of a woman.”

Considering the lady in question has a buzz cut, a bowie knife, and looks like she could bench press Sam without breaking a sweat, “Hell of a Woman” seems like something of an understatement to Sam, who keeps his mouth shut.

“Now I suggest you get your ass to sleep while I figure out if any of the cars you saw leave that diner were stolen,” Rick announces while firing up an ancient laptop on the desk. “We can agree to disagree about whether or not it's a monster what's got Dean until we see if any of the cars that left that diner were boosted, and at that junction you can either concede the fucking point, or start looking for creepy crawlies that can drive. Either way, you're getting some sleep. Look like you're about to fall the fuck over.”

“What?” Sam asks, surprised.

“You called for help, well, this is me helpin'. Now, you wanna fight me on this, or you wanna get your ass to sleep and let me help an ungrateful brat out?”

“Umm… do you need me to get you onto the DMV d--” Sam begins, only to be shot down immediately by a glare from Rick.

“Boy, I was on the force for fifteen years,” he scowls. “What I don't know about lookin' up stolen cars could fit in a shot glass, now lay your ass down and get some goddamn rest.”

Sam raises an eyebrow.

“Have you ever met a man named Bobby Singer?”
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

In which Sam finds something of Dean's.

“Of the 23 cars that left the diner,” Rick announces loudly, waking Sam up with a jolt. “Exactly one was stolen. A blue 2000 Blazer, reported missing by Maurice Brown of 431 DuPont Boulevard, New Orleans, Louisiana, August 27th of this year.”

“When did it leave the diner again?” Sam asks blearily, scrubbing a hand over his face and checking his watch. He's only been asleep for a few hours, but it feels like it's been days.

“According to your disturbingly detailed notes, it turned left outta the diner at eleven forty-five,” Rick reads from Sam's notepad. “That gel with when your brother left the place?”

“Just about,” Sam concedes. “It turn up anywhere yet?”

“Called a trooper buddy of mine while you were sawin' logs. A blue blazer was reported abandoned on I-12, 'bout half an hour out of Covington a few days ago. No plates that anyone could see, but it would be a hell of a coincidence if it weren't the same one. 'Course, they've been powerful busy with hurricane clean up, those parts, haven't gotten out to tow it yet,” Rick grins. “How's that for a couple hours work?”

“Not bad,” Sam sighs, giving the man a halfhearted grin in return. He's happy with the progress, however small, and grateful for the help, but what does it say about his hunting skills that the most progress that's been made on Dean's case in days happened while he was dead asleep? And he was, too. Sam doesn't know what's harder to swallow, that he completely missed following a lead like this, or that he really did need sleep as bad as Rick said he did.

Both revelations sting, but Sam has to admit that a car stolen from New Orleans area leaving the diner at the same time as Dean should have is, at the very least, worth checking out. More so now that it's been found abandoned so close to Covington.

It was taken too early for it to be Dean behind the wheel, but it wouldn't be the first time something sinister had followed them home on a job...

“You want backup on this one?” Rick asks quietly, leaning against the desk.

Sam swallows. Maybe he should be numb to readying himself to find Dean's body by now, but he isn't. Each time it hurts, filling him with awful, agonizing images of what could have happened to his brother, of what he couldn't get to him in time to stop.

Sam wonders which, of the dozens of scenarios he's had to imagine in the past three days, will be the one he has to carry to his grave.

“I got it,” he rasps at Rick, “Can you- can you get me those directions?”

“Sure thing, kid,” Rick replies, looking like he want to say more, do more.
He doesn't, and Sam is grateful. He's not sure how much more quiet pity he can take, not when they don't even have concrete proof that Dean is...

Well, there's a time for quiet pity. There's a time for understanding glances and quiet commiseration and empathetic words and this sure as hell isn't it. As far as Sam is concerned, this is still a hunt, and right now, at this moment, he's got a lead to follow.

The directions Rick gives him lead Sam west to an isolated stretch of interstate outside of Robert, Louisiana.

He spots the Blazer easily as he rounds a curve in the highway, the dull blue SUV hard to miss, pulled off like it is onto the shoulder of the lonely length of road.

In a heartbeat, Sam's got the Impala pulled up behind the SUV and his lock picks in hand, circling the vehicle with long strides.

Everything looks perfectly innocuous. Of course, it would have to have sat unmolested on the road for over a week. Sam hopes, as he works on the lock to the driver's door, that the inside isn't as pristine, that it gives him something to go on as to who has Dean.

The door pops open with relatively little trouble. Sam peers inside, noting that the plain, grey interior is clean. Very clean.

Suspiciously clean, even.

Sam has spent the better portion of his life on the road, in and out of cars. He knows firsthand that even the most-loved, best cared for cars accumulate a little clutter. A service receipt here, a spare pen there, a Tic-Tac that you just couldn't find when it dropped beneath the seats. Even floor models have spec sheets and user manuals lying around, tucked away discreetly somewhere. No matter what the car is or who the owner may be, life accumulates.

The Blazer, though, is spotless. Completely devoid of the detritus that accumulates in the course of use. Checking the glove compartment, the console compartments, under the seats, even the sun visors, Sam finds nothing. Not so much as a pen cap or a stray stick of gum.

Stymied thus far, Sam pops the rear hatch and stalks around the SUV to examine the rear storage space, not even surprised to find it pristine. Even pulling up the carpeting to check the well compartments yields nothing but a dusty jack and aging spare tire.

The whole vehicle has been scrupulously picked clean of any little bit of evidence as to who had it or where they've gone, with a care and attention to detail that speaks of someone much smarter than your average car thieves. Normal boosters, hell even Sam, when the occasion demanded he steal a car, would just wipe their prints and be done with it. Take anything you brought into the car, sure, but get rid of anything and everything not bolted to the chassis?

 Whoever took the Blazer was careful, very careful. And it's pissing Sam off.

As he makes a final sweep over the SUV, Sam wracks his brain for the next step. He could call Rick back, have him check for carjackings or other vehicles stolen from the area, but how likely is it that the driver of the Blazer, so incredibly careful up to this point, would do something so risky, so easy to trace?

No, Sam thinks, they ditched the Blazer here, spent so much time and energy erasing every trace of their presence from the car... This was planned.
Whoever did this thought it through, didn't leave loose ends. The meticulous personality that scrubbed the Blazer of any shred of evidence wouldn't have risked getting pinched on the side of the highway in the wake of a backwoods carjacking, wouldn't have gotten rid of the SUV in such a deserted area if he needed another car.

Unless there was one waiting…

In an instant, Sam is backtracking, circling the stretch of shoulder the Blazer is parked on, looking for signs of another vehicle coming or going. The Blazer's tire tracks are still visible, the path where the thick tread of the SUV's wheels has dug into the soft, marshy ground of the Louisiana lowlands still traced into the dying October grass.

Sam is so intent on finding tire tracks in the sparse grass that he almost misses it, lets his eyes run over it once, twice, again before he realizes what exactly he's looking at.

There, on the ground, almost lost in the grass and dirt, is a little bundle of red flannel.

It's dirty, worn and crumpled after over a week on the side of a Louisiana highway, but still recognizable. Still a dead ringer for the bundle in Sam's pocket, for the gris-gris bag Nicey Carter made for Dean.

Protection from evil magic, and maybe, Sam thinks, a little bit of luck.

Sam doesn't even try to stop the grin that rushes over his face as he picks up the tattered charm bag, because Dean was here and Sam finally, god, finally has proof he's on the right track. He's got the first real, concrete lead in days that he's not chasing suspicion or ghosts, conjured by his own stubborn paranoia, but Dean, Dean who was here, in this spot, just a few days ago.

The rush of relief and triumph almost leave Sam dizzy, have him momentarily forget what he's meant to be checking the ground for, caught up in the bright, blinding gratitude that if the driver of the Blazer had to miss anything, it was this, this one, tiny, irrefutable link to his brother. It's small, but powerful, powerful enough to have Sam setting back to his task with renewed fervor.

He's so close now, so much closer than he was a moment ago, but there's something that's bothering him.

If they were as careful as Sam thinks, why this stretch of road? Why abandon the Blazer somewhere it was found so easily, where it's path was so easy to trace? Why not plow it into a ditch or into the swamp? Somewhere it might never be found? It's not like there's a shortage of them around here. Hell, Sam must have passed half a dozen dips in the wooded borders of the Interstate big enough to hide an SUV in, and at least twice that amount of swampland.

The only answer Sam can come up with is that there is something special about this span of highway, something that set it apart, but he just can't put his finger on it.

He scans the shoulder of the highway for fifty yards in either direction, crosses the interstate to check the opposite shoulder, even backs the Impala up at a snail's pace to check under her long, black body for something he might have missed, but finds nothing.

“Fine, so, no second driver,” Sam mumbles to himself, getting frustrated, mentally backtracking to try and figure out his next move.

The driver of the Blazer has Dean, bound or unconscious. His brother had to be incapacitated somehow. There's no way he went with whoever it was willingly without checking in with Dad to let him know the voodoo case hadn't gone south first. So, they have either a tied up and angry or a
knocked out and heavy Dean Winchester to get from point Blazer to point… where?

Sam scans the surrounding woods in the afternoon light. There's nothing he can see, anywhere. The last exit was ten miles back, the next one not for another five. Nothing lines the highway that Sam can see but scrubby, marshy woods.

He casts his gaze higher, looking across the tree line for something, anything, but there's nothing. Nothing but more trees, rising slightly to surround the shallow depression in the land that cradles the highway. It's not until Sam looks around a second time that he realizes the trees on his side of the highway don't match the ones opposite them.

The opposing stretch of highway is bordered by trees that rise in a more or less even expanse of forest. On Sam's side, though, the side where the Blazer had been abandoned?

There's a long, uneven break in the trees, a gap almost, where Sam can see the treetops silhouetted against the canopy of the forest beyond. As if there, in the woods, there's a clearing. A long, thin clearing running through the trees.

Like a road, running parallel to the highway.

~

Sam is struck by the desire to throw himself into the woods, to tear blindly through the scrub and out the other side, forcing the stretch of trees and undergrowth to cast Dean up from wherever the hell they're concealing him.

Another part of him, a calmer, more rational voice that has grown far easier to listen to now that Sam has at least a little rest under his belt, wants to press on, to mark the Blazer's coordinates on the GPS, take the upcoming exit, and approach the road in the woods from a position of strength; in the Impala with a half dozen cover identities in the glovebox and an arsenal in the trunk to back him, rather than tried, dirty, and frantic after spending untold hours tearing through the swamp. Again.

Rational wins out, narrowly, and Sam guns the Impala back onto the highway, the engine purring approvingly as he pushes her up, up, up, past sixty, then seventy, and on, towards the next exit.

Towards Dean.

~

The turnoff dumps Sam on the outskirts of Robert, Louisiana, a town that apparently consists of a single stoplight, a gas station, and the Scrub n' Grub, a combination laundromat and roadhouse, the latter of which is closed.

As Sam eases the Impala onto the cracked stretch of Louisiana blacktop that must pass for Robert's Main Street, he realizes that he can see a sign in the distance, identical to the one he just passed welcoming him to Robert, that announces the reader is leaving Robert, making this either the smallest or the narrowest town Sam has ever been in.

Luckily, Robert being the antithesis of a bustling metropolis means that it's not hard for Sam to find a county road that runs parallel to the Interstate. In what seems to Sam like no time at all, he's backtracking along the deserted two lane blacktop, heading closer and closer to the Blazer's coordinates.

Sam keeps careful track of what he finds on the road. Mostly it's just forest and marshy scrub, but Sam isn't taking any chances. There are a couple of houses, and a tiny country church, not much
more than a sanctuary keeping watch over a few, listing headstones. The rest is woodland or fields, most with crops, but some home to a few groups of fat, sullen cows, staring morosely out at him from behind rusted fencing.

But closest to the Blazer's coordinates, where Sam goes from alert to hyper-aware, there are three houses, spaced apart in a long, wooded row along the highway.

They're certainly nothing big, just more of the same busted up, broken down cinderblock and worn, warping wood that seems to make up the rest of Robert. Each is separated from the other by wide, dense stretches of woods on either side, the places that manage to be free of wood and underbrush cluttered up by broken down cars or junked appliances, half-wild vegetable gardens or doghouses half obscured by dirt and weeds.

Of the three houses, the first is clearly occupied, with cars in the crooked, winding dirt driveway and battered toys littering the wide, uneven expanse of acreage that's too large for Sam to comfortably call a yard.

The second house seems neglected, but occupied. The driveway is empty and the lights off, but that's not too surprising for a weekday afternoon. The neatly hanging curtains on the window and trashcans lined squarely against the side of the house seem a little at odds with the overgrown, debris-strewn lot and weedy shrubs out front, but not too much.

The third house is the one that catches Sam's attention.

It's set further back from the road than the other two, with a dingy, listing “For Sale” sign in the badly overgrown yard. The roof is sagging and most of the paint on the warped wooden porch has flaked off onto the wildly tangled bushes attempting to overtake the broken railing. While the second house smacks of neglect, this one reeks of out and out abandonment.

It's perfect.

Sam pulls past the third house, parking the Impala a discreet distance away. If there's someone in the place, he doesn't want the rumble of the Impala's engine to tip them off.

Before he goes back to the house, Sam unlocks the trunk, flipping open the weapons cache and firmly jamming the shotgun in place to keep it open. His eyes scan across the varied array of guns, knives, and assorted killing miscellany that Dean's collected over the years, trying to decide what he needs to take.

It's tricky, because though he has no idea what's in this house, he can't just grab every lethal thing he sees and storm into the place guns blazing. That's a terrible plan that would almost certainly get everyone killed. And there's no way he can carry that many weapons without a bag or duffle, neither of which he can find at the moment.

In lieu of an arsenal, Sam grabs a sawed off shotgun and enough iron and silver rounds to chew through a wall. That, combined with the knife and gun he's already got on him should do the trick. As he's about to let the hatch fall shut, he eyes a machete consideringly. It would be hard to conceal, but the intimidation factor alone...

In the end, Sam decides against it, letting the trunk fall shut with a familiar thunk. If whatever's in that house isn't intimidated by a shotgun, a .45, and Sam's meanest hunting knife, a machete isn't going to bother it one bit.

~
Sam starts from the back door, picking the rusted lock with a little difficulty, but not too much trouble. He works his way through the kitchen, then the back hall cautiously at first, searching for signs of habitation, of who or whatever had Dean in that Blazer, but after he hits the second bedroom and still finds nothing, his stomach starts to sink.

The inside of the house is empty, devoid of not only people, but even the ugliest and most unwanted of furniture. There's only the awkward, forgotten things that Sam knows get left behind in a house when it's owners move on. A mop leaning against the wall of the garage. A few hangers in a closet. A busted TV on the floor of a back room, dusty VHS's still stacked on top.

It's pretty clear that no one has been here for a long time. Certainly longer than Dean has been missing. Sam has seen his fair share of crime scenes and has cleaned up more than his fair share of hunts. He can tell the difference between a room that's been scrubbed of someone's presence and one that just hasn't seen people in it.

The dust is a dead giveaway.

It lies thick on every surface Sam can see in the house, settling on and in-between everything left out in the open, rising to sift through the air as Sam pads quietly through the house, choking his breath and giving the light a muted, filtered haze.

Every hunting trick Sam has ever been taught, everything he's managed to pick up along the way in a lifetime of running, telling how to erase your tracks or clean a crime scene, to hide the fact that you were ever somewhere you didn't want people to know you'd been, all that knowhow, lodged in his brain, sleeping for the past four years but wide awake in the aftermath of Dean's disappearance, and none of it covers how to fake the thick, silent dust of abandonment. It's not something you can counterfeit, that kind of lonely desertion. The thorough absence of human presence the house betrays is honest. Honest and inescapable.

Dean isn't here.

No one is. And from what Sam can see, that's been true for a long time.

He tries to keep the disappointment, raining cold and all too real over the hot lick of hope finding the Blazer and gris-gris had sparked, from killing him.

The late October sun is just starting to sink below the tree line as Sam pokes his head out of the back door of the abandoned house.

He looks over, to the woods lining the lot of the empty home, and thinks of the next house over, of the still, empty darkness of the place, even in the light of day.

He remembers another house like that, back in New Orleans. The Bernard's shotgun home had no light in the windows, no car in the drive, no sound or movement or signs of life at all. But that house hadn't been empty; far from it, in fact.

Sam checks his weapons and starts towards the tree line.

He works his way around the house from the cover of the woods, trying to get a bead on the place. If it's actually as empty as it looks, getting in to look for Dean without attracting attention should be as easy as picking the cheap lock on the backdoor, but if it's like the house back in New Orleans, a full building projecting empty with the help of voodoo, then Sam's got to be a whole hell of a lot subtler than just breaking open the back door.

The problem he keeps running into is the damn curtains. They're thick and long and on every
window, hung to carefully conceal every detail of the room within from the casual observer, so Sam has no idea if the rooms of the house are empty or full, safe or bursting with whatever the hell took Dean from that damn Blazer.

Just as he’s about to say to hell with subtlety and march up to the front door with his Marshal's badge, Sam spots it. It's small, and half concealed by the trash cans lined up along the side of the house, but there is definitely a basement window, just big enough for him to slip through.

Luckily, the latch on the basement window is as worn as the rest of the house, the wood of the frame swelled and warped into unreliability. All it takes is a few careful turns with Sam's knife and the window is creaking open, leaving just enough room for Sam to quietly lower himself into the gloom of the basement.

The sudden transition from late afternoon sunshine to the dim gloom of the basement has him blinded for a moment, but then his eyes begin to adjust.

It seems normal at first. Metal shelving units, half-forgotten bits of hardware, cleaning supplies, and then Sam turns and looks around.

And sees the cage.
In which blood is lost, and found.

It's iron and rebar, built like a dog kennel on steroids, but inside isn't an animal, it's someone Sam would know anywhere. If he forgot his life, his own name, he would recognize the man slumped in the cage on the floor in front of him.

It's Dean, half-lying, half-sitting, slumped over and he's pale and he's not moving. Before Sam knows what he's doing, can process anything but DeanDeanDeanDeanDean he's across the basement and kneeling against the bars, reaching through the iron with both hands, grasping for a pulse, for anything because his brother is in a cage and his skin is clammy and cool and far, far too pale, paler than Sam has ever seen him, with Dean's freckles standing out like flecks of ink against his skin.

“Dean?” he pleads, panic rising. He can't find a pulse, can't find anything under his fingers but cool, filthy skin and worn t-shirt. “Dean, Dean please wake up please.”

Sam can't have gone through all this just to lose him now he can't, but then Dean's head lists to the side and he's got it. It's weak and thready and barely there, but Dean's got a pulse.

He's alive.

“Sammy?” Dean mumbles, finally, god, finally, blinking his eyes open and lifting his head unsteadily. “- 'th hell?”

He's awake. Oh god, Sam could kiss him. Not right now, because there's a big-ass iron cage in the way and the something that put Dean in there to kill and, yeah, the whole incest thing to deal with, but still.

“I'm here, Dean,” Sam answers, completely unable to keep the stupid grin off his face as he scrambles to get to the lock on the cage because Dean is here and alive and calling him Sammy like nothing ever happened, and yeah, the whole incest thing to deal with, but still.

“Sammy... get out...” Dean slurs, head lolling back against the iron.

“What? No! What?!” Sam sputters, looking up from the lock for a split second. No way he's leaving Dean, not now, not ever. Not again.

“S'a vampire...” Dean mumbles, head still propped weakly against the iron, but his eyes determined.

Determined... and scared. What the hell has this thing done to him?

“Vampires aren't real, Dean,” Sam murmurs, working frantically at the lock to the cage now, but the thing is a rusted out piece from the Stone Age, and Sam's been out of the game for a while, let his fingers lose the fine-boned strength that he would need to force the tumblers.
“Tell that to the sonofabitch suckin' m' blood every night,” Dean grumbles.

“There's just one of 'em?” Sam demands, giving the lock a frustrated smack.

Dean nods, and Sam notices them for the first time, red, angry rounds of teethmarks. They're bites, Sam realizes, tearing up and down Dean's neck, disappearing down the neck of his shirt, peeking from the sleeves of his jacket.

The shock must play across Sam's face, plain as day, because even Dean, half-dead from blood loss, can read it.

“Go, Sammy,” he whispers, “Go. H'll be awake soon. Come back n' the morning.”

“Dean,” Sam begins, but he can't finish that sentence. Can't say out loud that Dean probably doesn't have that long. If it really is a vampire...

Sam is smart. He's been trained in more emergency medical techniques than he needs to know the signs of hypovolemic shock, the effects extreme blood loss. It's a miracle Dean is alive, much less awake and talking.

He can't lose any more blood.

“How the fuck do you kill a vampire?” Sam asks, not expecting an answer. Shapeshifters, voodoo, Loups Garoux, Sam was prepared for anything, anything but vampires. Vampires! Who the fuck even?

“Not stakes,” Dean supplies, dazedly. “Tried that.”

“How the hell did you get a stake?” Sam asks.

“S been feedin' me. Told 'im I wanted Chinese, then-”

Dean makes a weak stabbing motion and gives a bad impression of the violin screeches from Psycho, because of course. Dean Winchester gets taken captive by a vampire, he's gonna get it to bring him kung pao chicken and then try to stab it to death with a chopstick. Why not? In a situation where any other person would be making peace with their maker, Dean is figuring out ways to kill with takeout.

“Didn't work?”

“Buffy lied t’us, Sammy.”

“Any chance you missed the heart?” Sam asks.

Dean is half exsanguinated, but the look he gives him is all big brother, the one that clearly says, “Dude, remember who the fuck you're talking to here.”

Sam huffs a breath out through his nose and chooses not to argue the point. His fingers fumble on the lock again, and he swears under his breath.

“He have the key?” he asks, already expecting the answer.

“Yeah,” Dean breathes; his eyes are wide and unfocused, and Sam knows he’s losing him.

To hell with this. Sam’s just going to break the damn lock.
He jumps to his feet, darting over to the old, leftover tools that he’d noticed earlier on the far wall. Of course he wouldn’t be lucky enough to find any bolt cutters in the basement, but he does spot a big, black toolbox on one the metal shelving units. He reaches for it and catches his elbow on the end of a rake. He’s barely able to grab hold of it and the shovel propped up against it before they both go clattering to the cement floor. He catches Dean’s eyes across the room. His brother is looking back at him in silent apprehension, his chest heaving up and down. Sam isn’t sure if it’s due to fear or blood loss, but either way, it makes him work faster.

The toolbox makes more noise than Sam would like as he heaves it off the shelf and to the floor, but it doesn’t take a lot of digging to find a screwdriver and hammer. They’ll do.

He kneels by the cage again, positions the tools over the top of the lock. Before he can strike down, Dean darts a hand out and catches him around the wrist. His hands are freezing cold, his grip shockingly weak.

“He’ll hear you,” Dean says, still breathing heavy.

“I don’t care,” Sam says. “I’m getting you out of here.”

“Don’t be an idiot, Sam,” Dean tells him, and Sam bristles a little. “Y’ wanna fight this thing?”

Sam does actually. He wants to tear the thing that took his brother limb from limb, but he’s pretty sure that isn’t what Dean wants to hear right now.

A floorboard creaks overhead, and they both freeze, listening to the sound of footsteps circling above their heads. Dean’s grip on Sam’s wrist tightens almost imperceptibly.

“Where’s Dad?” Dean whispers.

Sam feels his heart constrict.

“He’s not here.”

“You need to go get him,” Dean tells him. “He’ll know how to kill it. Jus’ go get Dad, Sammy, you can’t—”

Creak.

The sound of the cellar door opening makes them both start. Sam drops the tools in his hand and, ignoring Dean’s small noise of protest, raises his shotgun, training it on the figure descending the stairs.

Sam doesn’t know what he expected the thing that took out Dean to look like, but it wasn’t this. The vampire looks just like a hundred men Sam’s seen since he crossed the border into Louisiana. He could have passed it a dozen times while he was looking for Dean and not thought twice about it. Medium height, medium build. Sam could probably take the creature out without too much effort if he was as human as he appears.

But he isn’t human, and the fact that he’s had Sam’s infinitely more competent big brother in a cage for almost two weeks is proof enough of how in over his head Sam probably is.

The vampire stops at the foot of the stairs, regarding Sam with an expression of faint amusement.

“Dean,” he says placidly. “I thought you had a friend down here.”
The vampire takes a step into the room, and Sam instantly adjusts the shotgun’s aim to stay trained on his heart, cocking it in warning. The vampire doesn’t even spare it a glance.

“Here I was thinking no one was coming for old Dean, here,” he says. “But then, here you are.”

He smiles, dark eyes glittering.

“Of course, I was hoping for Daddy, and all I get is Dean’s...” he sniffs the air. “Cousin?”

He glances between the two, seems to read something off them that makes him smile a little wider, showing the slightest hint of bone-white teeth.

“Or maybe... brother?” he says. “Well now, that is lucky.”

Sam was planning to shoot him anyway, but the fact that he sounds so damn smug just makes pulling the trigger that much more satisfying.

The creature stumbles back a little when the blast hits him in the chest. He looks down curiously, dipping his middle finger into the blood running down his shirt. He lifts it to his mouth, smacking his mouth thoughtfully.

“What is that, silver and iron?” he muses. “Clever. But wrong.”

He’s across the room and in front of Sam in an instant.

“Guess baby brother doesn’t know any more about killing vampires than you do, Dean-o,” he smirks down at Sam’s brother, who’s watching them with wide, frantic eyes. “I wonder, what has that father of yours been teaching you?”

Sam steps slowly backwards out of arm's reach.

“How do you know our dad?” he asks, trying to keep the thing talking while his brain is working overtime, trying to dredge up any scraps of vampire lore he can remember.

The creature flicks his gaze from Dean to Sam.

“Seen him around,” he shrugs. “With Elkins. Learning to do what you hunters do. And from what I hear, your daddy was a damn good student.”

Sam furrows his brow. He’s never heard of a hunter by that name, but that doesn’t mean much. Dad always did have a habit of losing friends as quick as he could make them.

“I could never forget that man’s scent. The second your brother rolled into town, I knew exactly who he was – and I knew what I was going to do to him.”

Sam darts a glance over at Dean, swearing in his head. Of course the thing had known. Dean doesn’t just have John’s blood running through his veins; he’s got John’s jacket on his back, has been driving around in John’s old car. Sam thinks back to Dean’s toiletry bag, stuffed to the brim with John’s shampoo, John’s deodorant, his aftershave, his toothpaste. Dean would have been like a blinking, neon sign to anything after their father.

“So this is revenge,” he prompts. “What did Dad do to you?”

He’s edging to the side, trying to maneuver the creature into a circle while it’s distracted.

“Oh, it’s not what he did,” the vampire says. “It’s what he is.”
“And what’s that?” Sam asks, trying to project calm in spite of the way his heart is hammering in his chest.

“A murderer,” the vampire answers darkly.

He’s following Sam’s path, apparently unconsciously.

“I had a family, you know,” he says. “Just like you and dirty, half-dead Dean over there. Your dad’s buddy Elkins killed them in their beds. He slaughtered them like animals.”

Sam takes another step back, hands tightening on his shotgun.

“But that’s what hunters do,” the vampire continues. “They kill things they don’t understand. How many families like mine do you think your dad’s murdered? And you? And your brother? And why the hell shouldn’t I do the same thing to your family?”

The way the vamp is writing Sam off as if he’s already captured him is really starting to piss Sam off.

“That’s not going to happen,” he growls.

He rushes the vampire, knocking him backward and forcing his head up and out of the basement window Sam’s been positioning him in front of, putting his skin in contact with the late afternoon sunlight.

The vampire gives a long pained shriek, and Sam feels a brief moment of triumph before it lowers its head abruptly and fixes Sam with a smirk.


The vampire kicks out, and Sam finds himself flying across the basement. His back slams into the rail of the staircase so hard that he hears the wood creak and snap. The force of the blow knocks the wind out of him, and he sinks to the floor, wheezing.

“Sammy!” Dean croaks from inside his cage, and that’s enough to get Sam stumbling to his feet, still trying desperately to catch his breath.

He kicks frantically at one of the wooden supports of the railing, managing to get a long, solid piece loose. He snaps it over his knee to make a sharp point as the vampire comes at him from across the room.

Sam rolls with it when the thing pounces on him, using his opponent’s momentum to drive the makeshift stake up under the sternum, toward the spinal cord. He’s absolutely certain that he’s stabbed the heart; years of John’s training has made certain of that. The vampire makes a choked sound, draws back for a moment and then fixes Sam with another haughty, triumphant smile.

He flings Sam across the room again like a rag doll, sends him sliding across the floor to come to a stop in front of Dean’s cage.

“Told you,” Dean manages to grit out.

“Shut up,” Sam snaps, stumbling to his feet again. “There’s no way you got the heart with a chopstick.”

“Oh, you two are just adorable,” the vampire sneers, pulling the stake from his chest with a nauseating squelch. “Honestly, what’s next? Garlic? A crucifix? Maybe you’ll try to get me to count
“At least the brick would shut you up,” Sam says, snatching up his fallen shotgun and shooting the thing again, in the head this time.

He isn’t expecting it to be effective. He’s just trying to buy time until he can figure out how to kill it. John’s drilled into them that, when all else fails, dismemberment and immolation are always good standbys, but Sam’s having trouble finding tools he could use to do either. He curses himself for leaving the machete in the trunk.

Unfortunately, the headshot seems to make the vampire more angry than anything else.

It moves so quickly that it seems to vanish and reappear right before Sam’s eyes, catching him by the throat and throwing him back into the metal shelving, sending the whole structure down with a cacophony of bone-shaking crashes. Sam’s head hits something hard and sharp, and his vision dips and swims, blazes white around the edges, and he feels himself go limp for a moment before he can help it.

He hears the sudden, stuttering sound of metal on metal, and he realizes it’s Dean trying to use the tools Sam left behind to bust the lock on his cage. It’s pointless. Even if Dean miraculously managed to pull together the strength to free himself, he’d be much too weak to do anything to fight off this thing.

It’s up to Sam.

He pushes himself up, trying to extricate himself from the tangle of tools and twisted metal as the vampire walks slowly towards him, his expression an infuriating mix of smugness and hunger.

“Still got some fight in you, huh?” he taunts. “That’s okay. I don’t mind playing with my food a little. Isn’t that right, Dean?”

Sam stumbles to his feet, can’t help looking at his brother, slumped in the cage and staring back at Sam, his pale face frozen in an expression of helpless terror.

The vampire is on Sam in an instant, hand an iron grip on Sam’s throat, shoving his head back into the cinderblock wall with a sickening thud. Sam struggles against the hold and finds himself being lifted by the neck until his feet are kicking out uselessly at the air.

“You’re going to be just like him,” the vampire hisses. “I can already tell. You’ll put up a fight at first, try to kill me, try to escape. Tell me someone’s coming for you, how I’m gonna pay. But all that fight’ll go out of you eventually. I’ll be able to take you out of your cage, strip you down, open you up and sink my teeth into all those soft, tender places. I’ll bleed you until you can’t even cry anymore, can’t do anything but watch me with those sad, pretty eyes and wait for the day I finally kill you – and that day will be such a long, long time coming.”

The vampire tightens his grip on Sam’s neck, cutting off his windpipe. Sam kicks out, chest heaving uselessly as he gropes for the hunting knife he has concealed in his pocket.

“Come on, kid, just let go,” the thing croons. “I can smell you underneath all of that swamp stink, all fresh and sweet. You smell delicious.”

Sam’s vision is swimming, and he’s fighting to stay conscious, fighting to keep his eyes from going unfocused as the vampire crowds even further into his space, catching his gaze in an icy stare.

“Tonight, you can watch me finish drinking your brother dry,” he says with a tight, cruel smile.
“And then I’m going to kill you slow – just like I did him.”

Sam’s fingers finally find the knife, and he strikes out, catching the vampire under the jaw. It swears, dropping Sam and stumbling backward, and Sam abandons the knife, grasps one of the shovels propped up against the wall and bashes the vampire’s head with all his might.

The vampire snarls, mouthful of fangs descending from his gums. He lunges at Sam, and Sam strikes at his skull wildly, again and again. He hears something **crunch** and keeps going until he’s stunned the thing enough to send it tumbling to the ground.

He lifts the shovel high and uses every ounce of his strength as he brings it down onto the vampire’s neck.

It isn’t sharp enough for a clean decapitation. At the first slice, the vampire gives a shocked, humansounding cry, eyes wide as it struggles to escape. Sam stomps down on the blade, over and over, watches as blood burbles up between the vampire’s lips and it thrashes and growls under him like a wounded animal.

It lashes out, catches Sam’s ankle in a bone-crunching hold, and Sam almost loses his balance. He shouts, kicks out with his other foot, catches the vampire in the temple and manages to twist his leg free from its dazed grasp. He stomps on the end of the shovel again, reveling in the squishing, gurgling noises as the shovel tears through muscle and sinew.

One, two, three more stomps, and he finally severs the spinal cord with a loud, sickening **snap**. One more, and he finally saws his way through the rest of the meat and sends the end of the shovel skating against the concrete floor with a gritty shriek. Untethered, the vampire’s head rolls to one side, eyes frozen wide, mouth gaping open.

Sam doesn’t stop, can’t stop. He digs the shovel into the joints of its arms, hacks and hacks and hacks at its chest, feeling its ribs snap under his blade. He keeps going until there’s nothing left of the thing that would have killed Dean but a pile of ruined meat and bloody clothes.

Sam stumbles away from the body, sinking to his knees and taking desperate, greedy gulps of air. There’s blood on his face, pain shooting through his arms from the too-tight grip he has on the shovel, and he watches what’s left of the vampire’s body for a long moment, but there’s no signs of movement. Nothing left for him to kill.

He darts to his feet, adrenaline still pumping through his system, and rushes to the cage. He breaks the lock with a couple of solid hits and pulls the door open with a tortured squeal.

He’s vaguely aware of Dean gasping out slurred words (**Sammy, Sammy, oh my god, what—?**), but it’s all background noise as he hauls his brother out of his prison and to his feet.

Dean’s dead weight in his arms, and that alone is an awful sign. If Sam’s big brother had anything left in him, he wouldn’t let Sam lift him to his feet unassisted, wouldn’t lean on Sam for support or hang limp in his arms – except he **does**, and he doesn’t even seems aware that he’s doing it. He’s gone quiet now, and his eyes are distant, his face twisted into a look full of confusion and anxiety, his chest heaving, and Sam can’t stop himself from panting out useless, comforting words – it’s **okay I’ve got you I’m gonna take care of this Dean you’re going to be fine** – but he isn’t sure, he just isn’t sure that they aren’t lies.

Sam hates having to drag Dean up the stairs one-armed, but despite what Dean has said, Sam just can’t count on the house above them being empty. Misjudging his number of opponents could very well be the difference between life or death for his brother, so Sam keeps the blood-stained shovel
clutched tight in his hand as he moves from the basement to the first floor.

Luckily for him, there’s an open floor plan, and it doesn’t take Sam long to clear the first story. He keeps an ear out for sounds from upstairs as he maneuvers Dean over to the couch and lays him flat. He spares a split second to prop Dean’s feet up on the couch leg and throw the blanket draped over a nearby armchair over his body, hoping to stave off some of the shock. Dean makes a bewildered, disapproving noise as Sam moves away, groping feebly after him, but Sam avoids his grip easily.

He takes the stairs two at a time, busts in every door without pause, but the place appears to be empty.

In the master bedroom, he finds the vampire’s personal belongings. One wall of the room is papered with charcoal drawings, most of them depicting the same people in a variety of historical costumes, laughing, frowning, sleeping. Sam assumes they’re the “family” the vampire mentioned.

There are several, too, of a man that Sam assumes is Elkins, holding a machete, his face darkened with sinister shadows. One of the drawings depicts a younger man with him that Sam recognizes with a start as his father. John is looking away, expression easy, totally ignorant of the monster watching him, waiting for a chance to sink its teeth into his sons.

Worst is the picture Sam finds plastered in the lower right hand corner: Dean looking out from between the bars of the cage, his eyes fixed in an expression of terror and despair that Sam has never seen on his face before and never wants to see again.

He rips the picture off the wall and crumples it in his fist, tears down the rest after.

He grabs Dean’s duffle from one corner of the room and carries it, along with the wad of paper, back down the stairs. Dean’s still lying on the couch. His eyes are closed, but they flutter open to half-mast when Sam drops the duffle onto the ground next to his head. Sam unzips the bag and pulls out a small bottle of lighter fluid and a box of matches.

“I’ll be right back,” Sam tells him, before hustling back down to the basement.

The vampire’s body is right where Sam left it. He tosses the drawings on top of the body and then pulls down the sleeve of his hoodie and uses it to wipe down the basement window, the toolbox, the screwdriver and hammer, the bars of Dean’s cage. He wipes down the handle of the shovel, too, tossing it down next to the dismembered corpse.

He’s covered in the vampire’s blood, he realizes belatedly, has probably left tracks all through the house, but he can’t worry about that now.

Sam’s no stranger to torching bodies. It doesn’t take long to thoroughly douse the vampire’s corpse in the lighter fluid. He lights the whole matchbook, tosses it onto the body and watches to make sure it catches. The fire consumes the figure quickly, the papers acting as additional kindling; the charcoal drawings curl and blacken, the air filling with the smell of singed flesh and hair, and Sam feels a sick kind of satisfaction.

There’s no time to dwell on that, though. Sam needs to get Dean out of here.

He grabs his fallen weapons and hurries back up the stairs, where he throws them in Dean’s duffle. He hauls it over his shoulder and then lifts Dean in a bridal carry. His brother makes a disgruntled noise.

“I know, I know,” Sam tells him. “You can bitch at me for this later.”
Parking the Impala a block away is the second misstep Sam’s made tonight, but he makes it in record time. Maybe it’s all the time Sam’s been spending at the campus gym, maybe it’s the fact that Dean’s half-starved and exsanguinated, or maybe it’s just the adrenaline, but Sam doesn’t even feel Dean’s weight in his arms as he sprints the distance from the house to the car.

He throws open the back door, tosses the bag in the floorboard and unloads Dean onto the seat. He tucks the blanket tighter around Dean, props his feet up on the front passenger seat and then, after one short, tremulous look, slams the door shut and circles the car at a run. He starts the Impala up, floors it, speeding back towards the motel in Covington as quickly as he dares. It’s supposed take about twenty minutes to get there from here.

Sam’s willing to bet he can make it in ten.

He fumbles out his cell as he watches the odometer climb, dialing in the number to his dad’s cell. Unsurprisingly, it goes to voicemail.

“Goddammit, Dad, pick up the phone!” Sam shouts after the beep. “I’ve got Dean. The thing that had him was a freaking *vampire*. It’s dead, but Dean is in bad shape, Dad. I need you to call me back when you get this, okay? Seriously, call me back!”

He hangs up, flinging the phone into the passenger’s seat.

Sam’s scrambling for what to do. Dean needs blood. He knows that much, but he doesn’t know how the hell he’s going to get it for him. Everything in him is screaming that he needs to take Dean to the ER and get him a transfusion, but there’s still a part of him that lived through John’s training and knows that he can’t.

Dean’s dirty, starved, and covered in ten days’ worth of vampire bite marks. How the hell can Sam explain that? And how can he bank on being able to convince the ER nurses that his brother is suffering from extreme blood loss without any obvious massive trauma on his brother’s body? The idea of Dean dying in the waiting room while Sam frantically tries to convince the staff to admit him ahead of the other patients is enough to make him scrap the hospital idea, but then he’s right back in the same position, frantically wondering:

‘What am I supposed to do?’
In which there is a lot of blood.

Seriously, kids. Don't try this at home.

The summer after Sam turned fourteen, their dad took them on a hunt in Minnetonka that ended with John doing an emergency ritual to banish a pagan god that required the caster’s blood – and a lot of it. He’d cut deep, bled himself nearly dry, and Sam and Dean had absolutely no idea what to do. John had needed to carve mystic symbols all down his arms to make the spell work, and they knew what something like that meant: No emergency room.

It was one of John’s biggest rules: No hospitals, at all, ever unless there was a very real risk of death and the injury could be explained away. Sam had that drilled into him from day one, long before he knew why it was even a rule. And in this case, there was really no choice but to follow John’s wishes. Two teenagers showing up at a hospital with their father covered in self-inflicted knife wounds – much less ones in the shapes of supposedly satanic symbols – would set off every alarm bell in existence. Sam would be in foster care by sundown, and John would wake up to find himself with a one-way ticket to the loony bin.

In the end, they knocked over the emergency room instead.

Needless to say, it wasn’t one of their better plans. Sam sat in the Impala, idling with his foot stretched to reach the pedal, John slumped unconscious in the back seat, while Dean broke into the hospital and stole the blood they needed to keep their dad going.

In the following months, long after they were sure John was going to be okay, it became a special kind of hilarious to both of them. Dean had called Sam’s cell from inside, frantically asking him all sorts of crazy questions: “Am I supposed to take the yellow ones or the red ones?” “Is Dad negative or positive? Does it matter?!” “Do I have to take one of the metal pole thingys too?!” Like Sam knew that answers to any of that.

(Of course, looking back, Sam realizes that Dean was barely eighteen, was really just a kid scared out of his mind, and feels bad about poking fun of his big brother about that phone call for years afterwards – even though he’s completely sure Dean would have preferred that over sympathy.)

The whole fiasco had culminated in Dean getting caught in the act by a member of the nursing staff. He’d ended up having to tie her up, and then, to his chagrin, she’d helpfully provided answers to all of his questions. Dean had rushed out, dove into the Impala like they were robbing a bank instead of a hospital, and Sam peeled out of the parking lot so quick it made even him wince for the tires.

Of course, John hadn’t really seen the humor of the whole thing once he’d woken up. Sam, and particularly Dean, had faced an extended reaming out on exactly how stupid what they’d done was.

Sam, who hadn’t yet gotten to the point where he’d openly pick fights with John but who had never
taken kindly to being accused of stupidity, had protested that they just hadn’t known what else to do, and for once, John had actually taken his point – which was how they’d ended up having even more emergency first aid added into their training regimen.

It was much easier to rob a blood bank than a hospital, John had lectured. Security wasn’t nearly as good, there weren’t lockdown procedures or straggling cops, and the blood was much easier to locate. He’d gone over first aid procedures as best he could, then sent Sam on a research mission to gather any information he’d overlooked.

“Most kids have to do oral reports on summer reading,” Sam had bitched to Dean, kicking up clouds of dust with his ratty trainers. “I’m probably the only kid in America who has to do one on back alley blood transfusions.”

With Sam on the case, the Winchesters had pretty much become experts on the subject within a week. It had also sparked a memory in John of direct, person-to-person blood transfusions that he’d heard about during his tour in Vietnam, which Sam, to his joy, had also been assigned to research.

The basic conclusion John reached (and Sam wasn’t arguing) was that direct blood transfusions were undoubtedly the dumbest option available and not to be attempted unless it was literally a choice between life and death. It’s pretty damn dangerous, and if done incorrectly, there’s a real chance that you could end up with two bodies instead of one. Still, John was on one of his survivalist kicks, so he’d made sure they all learned a couple of techniques to do it, and John had taken Sam and Dean to donate blood to the Red Cross specifically for the free blood typing.

As it turned out, Sam and Dean were both type B, while John’s blood type was AB, which meant Sam and Dean could give blood to each other and to John if they had to, but John could never give blood to them. Even at fourteen, Sam had pegged that for a pretty fitting metaphor for their whole damn family relationship. Dean, on the other hand, had looked at him like he was speaking in tongues when Sam had mumbled a little “Yeah, that figures.”

John had picked up the supplies and used them to illustrate the lesson before packing them away in the first aid kit. He’d given Sam a lot of instruction on arm anatomy and how to perform the surgical procedure needed for the most difficult – but arguably safest – kind of direct transfusion, which involved threading the donor’s radial artery through a silver tube and then fixing the recipient’s vein to it with a suture.

It wasn’t until Sam had asked what he should do if he had to give a blood transfusion and there wasn’t anyone around to do the surgery and Dean and John had fixed him with looks of open disbelief that he’d figured out that, in their minds, it was never going to be Sam giving the blood. That it was always going to be Dean giving to John or to Sam, and hell if that wasn’t an even more fitting metaphor for their whole fucked up family dynamic.

Sam really did hate them in moments like this: John demanding Dean give up everything for the family, while his brother just sat there calmly flipping through photocopied medical texts, the eternal willing victim, and neither of them considering for a moment that Sam could – and would – give up for Dean the same things Dean would give up for him or dad.

But the joke’s on them. Sam’s the one who did the research, and Sam’s the one who has Dean’s first aid kit packed with medical tubing and IV needles, and there’s no one around to stop him from doing anything he needs to with that knowledge and those supplies.

He’s going to do whatever it takes to save Dean, and if Dean wants to yell at him about how stupid it is later, he can. At this moment, Sam really couldn’t care less.
Dean goes from barely conscious to completely out as Sam pushes the Impala to her limits to get them back to the motel, and he doesn’t wake up again, not even when Sam speeds around a corner into the parking lot and accidentally runs Dean’s baby right over the curb with a jolt. He doesn’t wake up when Sam carries him into the room or respond to Sam’s attempts to revive him, either, and hell, Sam can tell himself that he was going to do the sensible thing and search out a nearby blood bank up until this point but there’s no way he’s going to do that now. Dean’s already slipping into the final stage of hypovolemic shock, and in the time that it takes Sam to find the blood bank, get there, break in, get back, and then set up the transfusion, there’s a very real chance Dean’s organs could start shutting down, that Dean could experience brain damage, that Dean could die. Sam won’t risk that. Can’t risk that.

He works Dean’s leather jacket and the button-up shirt he’s wearing under it off before laying his brother down on the bed furthest from the door.

“Shit,” he hisses as he looks Dean over.

The bite wounds he’d seen peeking out from under Dean’s clothes are even worse than he’d thought. There are only a couple on his left arm, but the right one is absolutely riddled with them. It makes a lot more sense that the vampire would have gone for Dean’s arms more than the stereotypical neck bite, given the cage. Sam’s willing to bet the vampire chose the right for the added bonus of crippling his prisoner’s dominant arm. The thing wasn’t stupid, just overconfident.

Case in point, the bite wounds look like they’ve received some basic medical attention, most likely to ensure that Dean wouldn’t bleed out early. Sam can pick up the scent and sheen of Neosporin on the ones that appear to be more recent. He wipes Dean’s arms and neck down with a washrag and bandages the bite wounds up, anyway. There’s no point in pumping blood back into Dean only to have it start hemorrhaging out again.

He cuts off Dean’s t-shirt to get better access to a bite on his upper arm and then gives in and tugs off his boots and pants, too, to check for any injuries to his lower extremities. There’s a series of recent bites adorning Dean’s inner thighs, and Sam bandages them with shaking hands, tries not to scream with rage, replays the memory of sinking the shovel into the vampire’s throat with a new level of satisfaction.

He hurriedly digs around in Dean’s bag until he finds a pair of sweats and a black t-shirt to wrestle back onto Dean’s body. His brother’s skin feels even more shockingly cold to the touch than before, so Sam pulls the covers up over him before turning back to the first aid kit.

He manages to find a foot of medical tubing and two IV needles inside, along with rubbing alcohol and the digital blood pressure monitor that he’s almost 100% sure neither Dean or Dad have touched since Sam insisted on adding it into their kit five or six years ago. He takes his brother’s blood pressure, snatches up the hotel pen to jot down the number, and when he can’t locate the corresponding pad of paper after a couple of seconds, just scrawls the woefully low number on the wall above the headboard.

The next part is tricky. Under normal circumstances, Sam would be pumping blood from his left arm into Dean’s right, but his brother’s right arm is so messed up that Sam just doesn’t have the confidence to try it. He locates a vein in the crook of Dean’s left elbow that will do the job just fine and marks it off with the hotel pen.

But that’s not the tricky part.
No, the truly difficult part of this is the fact that Sam’s going to have to use his radial artery to pump the blood into Dean’s arm, and he’s going to have to be damn sure he’s got it right. Because of the short length of the tubing and the fact that Sam needs to be horizontal for this, it looks like Sam will have to donate from his dominant arm which is… not ideal, considering what he’s about to do.

*Dean’s really going to kill me for this*, he thinks, almost hysterically.

He shuffles his supplies onto one of the bathroom towels, setting them down next to him when he moves onto the bed at Dean’s left side, and then tucks another towel down onto the bed to protect the sheets. He sterilizes Dean’s pocket knife, locates his radial artery, and then lines the blade up in the area right next to it, close enough to access the artery but far enough away that he knows he isn’t going to hit it by accident.

The first cut is hesitant, Sam’s mind too focused on keeping his non-dominant hand steady on the blade, and he already knows it’s going to be too shallow, so he pulls back, breathes deeply and begins again. Digs back into the wound and opens it up deep, so deep that he swears he can feel the blade slicing into his gut, churning in his stomach.

It hurts. God, it hurts, it *hurts*, and he has to do it slow and careful, willing himself not to bear down and go into shock. Blood spills out of the gash, down Sam’s arm to leave livid splashes of red on the white plush of the towel, but it’s not from his artery, so *it’s okay, it’s really okay*.

When he’s split himself about six inches from the wrist, he lets the knife drop onto the towel beside the bed and grabs up the medical tubing with the already sterilized IVs attached at both ends. He digs his thumb into the area next to the cut, gasping again at the fresh shock of pain, and maneuvers his radial artery into view.

He quickly takes up one end on the medical tubing and slides the tip on the needle into the exposed artery, willing himself to control the trembling in his hand that’s probably equal parts pain and the fact that he’s using his left hand to do it.

Blood starts streaming into the tube almost instantly. Sam waits until it fills up completely, starts welling out the other end, and then, once he’s made sure there aren’t any air bubbles, he finds the vein marked off on Dean’s arm and slides the needle into it.

He takes in a series of pitiful, stuttering little breaths, reaches for the gauze pads and medical tape he’s been using to patch Dean up with and, after mopping up as much of the blood on his arm as he can, patches up the cut in his arm. He’s accessed the vein at about the middle point of the cut, so he tapes one pad tight over the area closest to his wrist and one more loosely over the area above the IV. He can’t risk cutting off the blood flow to Dean, so the second bandage is pretty damn inadequate. It’ll probably be soaked through in a matter of minutes, but there’s not much he can do about that except deal with that when it comes.

He lies down next to his brother so their shoulders are pressed tight together and clenches his fist rhythmically in the remnants of Dean’s shirt to help his heart pump blood into his brother more quickly.

Dean’s body accepts the blood easily. Even though he’s in poor condition right now, Sam is still probably the healthiest he’s ever been, his body primed by good diet and regular exercise, while Dean’s body has lost so much blood that it isn’t even putting up a token resistance to the influx of fluids.

There’s no way to monitor exactly how much blood he’s giving Dean. The most Sam can do is pay attention to his own physical and mental state and watch Dean for signs of improvement – walking
the tightrope that’ll keep either of them dying of blood loss. He turns his head on the side, training his eyes on Dean and trying not to balk at the proximity.

His brother looks even worse under the harsh florescent lights of the motel. His face is sunken and grey, and he looks almost painfully young. That sounds pretty stupid coming from someone who's four years younger than Dean is, but it can't be helped. Sam's seen Dean through worse things than most people can even imagine experiencing, seen him flash a shit-eating grin in the face of monsters, toss around quips while the ceiling literally caves in around him. He's never seen his brother look like this – limp, small, and helpless.

Sam's not used to feeling protective of his brother. Possessive, maybe, when Dean started getting pulled away for hunts or first began to notice girls, but never protective. That's pretty much always been Dean's deal, not his. Not to say Sam never worries about Dean or that he wouldn't give anything for him, either, and definitely not to say he thinks Dean's perfect. (After all, Sam's made a hobby out of pointing out his brother's shortcomings pretty much since he learned to talk.) But still, there's a part of Sam, deep down, that has always seen his big brother as untouchable. It's a part where the word Dean is irrevocably linked with words like safety, with protection, a part where he's always looking up to Dean no matter how tall he gets, a part that insists that Dean will always be okay, that he couldn't possibly need Sam’s help.

He's sure something would have broken him of that eventually, but he doesn't think anything could have shattered it more quickly and thoroughly than this.

Right now, the rush of protectiveness that goes through him is irresistible and complete. He feels a little dizzy and unsettled with it in a way that he knows has nothing to do with the blood loss. He brushes his knuckles against Dean’s, just for a second, just to ground himself. He’s pretty sure if Dean were conscious, he’d be calling Sam the world's biggest girl right now, but since he isn’t, Sam takes the chance to do it a second time. It eases some of the weight off of his chest, lets him breathe a little easier.

Dean’s complexion is starting to improve. There’s some color coming back into his face, and the skin under Sam’s fingers feels a bit warmer. That’s comforting, but it doesn’t mean Dean’s out of the woods yet. Sam's not sure how much of his own blood he’s given to his brother, but he estimates it at maybe a pint. He figures he could give two before he absolutely has to pull out.

He lets his eyes wander away from Dean to stare up at the ceiling. He traces the edges of an old water stain with his eyes, tries to pull it into a shape like it’s a Rorschach test. For a moment, he thinks he’s starting to see something – two arms, two legs, a face – but then the stain splits into three, the ceiling flashes white around it, and Sam’s world goes black at the edges.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

In which Sam calls the cavalry.

Sam realizes what’s happening literally seconds into the faint.

He squeezes his eyes shut, heart hammering in his throat, and tries to breathe past the crushing wave of dizziness. His world narrows down to a moment, to the too fast rise and fall of his chest, to the swirl of light playing behind his eyelids. He digs his fists into the scratchy comforter, stomach rolling. After a moment, he’s able to push past it and keep himself from going under, but it’s close.

Way, way too close.

Sam quickly realizes that he did not prepare for this. How little it matters that he was in the gym every day at Stanford when he’s skipped on food and sleep for days on end, is bleeding out in an effort to buy his brother just a little more time.

If he’s not careful, next time he won’t be strong enough to stop himself from tipping over the edge into unconsciousness. With Sam out and no one to stop the bleeding...

He could kill them both.

Or worse, he could wake up, dizzy but alright and Dean could be- would be-

No.

That can’t happen. Sam can’t let that happen.

“Come on,” he breathes, digging awkwardly around in this right-side pocket with his left hand before pulling out his phone and dialing a number, fingers trembling.

Rick Stevens’ phone goes right to voicemail, and Sam remembers with a spike of dread how long it took him to call back last time. For all Sam knows, he could be on a hunt of his own by now, could be gone for days or even weeks.

Sam swears loudly, spikes his phone onto the bed in frustration as his mind tears through the people he knows for anyone that can help. Even if Nicey Carter had a working phone, Sam doesn’t have her number. John won’t answer his goddamned calls, because why would he? It’s only his son on the line.

And Jess? There’s nothing Jess could do. Jess would panic, would pull out that emergency credit card in a second and show up here frantic, and she can’t see Sam like this, he can’t explain any of this to her.

Sam wants to cry. He has no one, no one at all, and the only constant he’s ever had in his life is dying on the bed next to him, and Sam doesn’t know what to do.

He takes a deep breath, tries to calm himself down again.
Think like Dean, he tells himself. If his brother were in his place, what would he do?

He’d call someone, Sam thinks, his mouth twisting before it hits him. Dean would call someone, but his phone isn’t full of trust-fund babies and wannabe-lawyers, it’s full of hunters. Contacts.

Someone who could help.

He reaches gently across Dean’s body, careful not to jostle the tube connecting their arms. He grabs Dean’s duffle from beside the bed, deposits it on his own stomach, and digs through it until he finds Dean’s cell. For a second, he thinks the battery’s gone dead, but then he realizes with a rush of relief that it’s just been turned off, probably to keep anyone from tracking the thing.

The most recent calls are all to Dad’s phone, and Sam half wants to try his number again, to see if he’ll pick up for Dean, at least. But he doubts it, and even if John did pick up, Sam knows he doesn’t have the energy to deal with him right now – doesn’t know if John would even have the time or willingness to help Sam with this. He scrolls through Dean’s contacts instead and clicks on the first name he recognizes.

It goes for five rings – enough for Sam to start thinking frantically that no one is going to pick up this time, either – before a voice finally sounds in his ear.

“Singer Salvage.”

“Bobby,” Sam exhales.

It comes out sounding more tremulous and pitiful than he’d intended, but it seems to get Bobby’s attention.

“Who is this?” he demands, and Sam can imagine him sitting up a little straighter, making the connection that this is some hunter, at least.

“It’s Sam,” he says. “Sam Winchester.”

“Sam?” Bobby repeats, sounding baffled (and why shouldn’t he? The last time he’d talked to Sam was years ago, long before Sam left for Stanford), “You all right, boy?”

“Yeah...” Sam says noncommittally, glancing down at his own mangled arm. “Bobby, listen, I need your help.”

“Okay,” Bobby says warily. “Shoot.”

“I’m in Covington, Louisiana,” Sam tells him. “I need to know where the nearest blood bank is.”

Sam hears a wooden sounding creak on the other end, some shuffling, and then the tinkling melody of the Windows startup.

“What the heck is this about, Sam?” Bobby demands.

“Dean—,” Sam starts, and then adds all in a rush: “Something happened. Dean got caught by this vampire. The thing had him for ten days before I got there, and he’s lost a lot of blood. I need to get some into him fast or—”

“Now wait a minute,” Bobby interjects. “Did you say vampire?”

“Yeah, and that’s the other reason I called,” Sam says. “I have no idea what’s— I didn’t even know they were real, Bobby. I don’t have a clue! I took its head off and torched it, and I think that was
enough to kill it, but I need to know if there’s any chance Dean’s going to turn, how to stop it, and if there’s anything supernatural about the bites, venom or anything like that, how to treat it—"

“Okay,” Bobby says in an appeasing tone. “All right, Sam. The vamp stuff I can probably answer. Never went up against one myself, but from what I’ve heard, chopping the head off is pretty much the only way to take one out. Turning’s supposed to be through blood contact, so unless the thing bled in Dean’s mouth or somethin’, I think he’s clean. Never heard of any venom or nothin’ like that either. I’ll get on the horn and double-check, though.”

“Thank you,” Sam breathes. “I need the blood bank info first though. I don’t think I can give him much more—"

“Hold up, hold up,” Bobby interrupts him again. “What do you mean you can’t give him more?” Sam fumbles for a good answer, but the only thing that comes out is a guilty silence.

“Sam Winchester, I know you are not bleeding out into your brother while you’re on the damn phone with me.”

“No,” Sam placates. “No, don’t worry, I clamped it.”

“Sam,” Bobby says warningly.

Sam reaches into his supply pile and finally compresses the tube.

“Okay, well, I’ve clamped it now,” he tells Bobby.

“Goddammit, boy!” the man exclaims. “Where the hell is your daddy?!”

Sam scoffs.

“Hell if I know,” he says. “He left. Won’t pick up his phone.”

Bobby swears a blue streak on the other line.

“The fuck’re you thinking?” Bobby demands, but Sam isn’t sure whether it’s meant for John or for him.

“I need to know about that blood bank,” Sam insists.

“Hold your horses, boy, I’m working on it,” Bobby snaps. “How much have you bled out?”

“Maybe a pint and a half?” Sam guesses, scrubbing a palm over his face. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. Well, that’s just great,” Bobby grumbles. Sam can hear him typing rapidly on the other end.

Sam switches to speakerphone, tosses the phone onto the bed, and uses the waiting time to very carefully remove the tube connecting him to Dean. He bandages Dean up and then turns to himself. He’s going to need stitches for this, and if he doesn’t want to pass out on the way to the blood bank, he’s going to need to do them now. He uses more gauze pads to staunch the flow before slowly getting off of the bed and digging through the first aid kit.

He fishes out the needle and a spool of dental floss, and then takes Dean’s blood pressure again, scrawling the result it on the wall under the first reading. The improvement is dramatic, though still nowhere near as high as it should be.
It’s enough that Sam feels okay leaving Dean alone for a little while, though. He just hopes the nearest blood bank didn’t get wiped out by the storm.

“Gotcha,” Bobby says over the phone. “There’s a bank in Mandeville, never closed down for the storm. It’s about twenty minutes from you.”

It’s as good as Sam could have hoped for. The older hunter reads off the address and some quick directions, and Sam shakily writes them on the wall next to his blood pressure measurements.

“Okay, thanks, Bobby,” he says, reaching over to disconnect the call.

“Now, wait up, Sam,” Bobby says. “Are you okay to drive?”

“Well, I kind of have to be,” Sam tells him, in lieu of an actual answer.

Bobby’s silent for a moment.

“Where are you staying? I’m coming down there.”

It’s a nice gesture, but Sam knows there isn’t much point to it.

“You don’t have to do that,” he says. “It’ll take you forever to get here from your house. We need to get out of this town as soon as we can. We might be gone before you even get here, and even if things go wrong, you’re not gonna get here in time to help.”

“Dammit,” Bobby swears. “Sam, I want you to check in with me for the next couple of days. If I don’t hear from you, you better believe I’m coming after you, and when I find you, I’m gonna tan your damn hide.”

Sam laughs weakly.

“Sure,” he says. “I can do that.”

“You’d better,” Bobby gruffs before hanging up.

Bobby’s information has eased a lot of Sam’s worry, but he’s still got the rest of Dean’s transfusion to take care of, along with the unenviable task of stitching up a deep cut with his non-dominant hand.

He takes up the needle in his left hand, even more unsteady now in the wake of all of that blood loss. He watches as it quivers in his grasp and finds he can’t make it stop, no matter how hard he tries.

Shit.

Well.

Time to get to work.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

In which we hear from someone new.

Dean tips in and out of consciousness.

He’s aware, fleetingly, of sounds and sensations: a warm presence at his side, then above him. He feels hands on his arms, on his face, feels himself being pinched, prodded, and moved. He can’t track what’s happening to him or why, can’t even put the brain cells together to wonder. There’s a voice buzzing in the distance, maybe talking to him and maybe not, and Dean knows its sound, the way it sends feelings of comfort and familiarity thrumming through him, even if he can’t recognize its owner. The awareness comes and goes in between long, deep chasms of unconsciousness, like he’s surfacing briefly from murky water, taking a quick, shallow breath of air before being dragged back to the bottom.

When he finally wakes up – really wakes up – it’s to the sound of birds twittering outside, and he finds himself in a room glowing yellow in the glare of early morning sunlight.

It’s confusing, unsettling even. It takes a moment for him to process that he isn’t still in that basement, hunched over in a cage made of rusty rebar, rotting like leftover takeout. He remembers getting jumped by that vampire son of a bitch, he remembers the first few days after he was captured, but after a while, things get… fuzzy. He can’t quite remember how he got out of there, and he definitely can’t remember how he got here, wherever here is.

He squints up at the shape looming to his right and makes out the glinting metal of an IV pole and the bag of saline solution that he realizes is attached to his own arm.

‘Hospital?’ he thinks, then takes in the yellowing wallpaper, the water stains on the ceiling, the scratchy sheets and corrects: ‘Motel.’

His head feels heavy and his neck muscles are all locked up, like he’s been sleeping deeply for a long, long time. He forces his head to turn anyway, lolling to the side on the pillow.

Dean doesn’t realize how fully convinced he was that Dad had finally come to save him until his eyes adjust, and he recognizes the figure on the other bed as, not Dad, but Sammy.

It’s Sam, he’s sure of it– would know the kid anywhere, even if he’d gone blind and deaf – but that doesn’t make any damn sense, because Sam’s been gone for a long time now. Dean and Sam haven’t even spoken in almost two years. Sam’s supposed to be living his precious normal life at Stanford. There’s no reason that his little brother would be in some fleabag motel in Bumfuck, Louisiana.

And then Dean remembers. He remembers waking up to find Sam outside the cage and being half-convinced he was hallucinating (but of course, no hallucination could be half as stubborn as flesh-and-blood Sammy). And then he remembers the vampire coming downstairs and having to watch as it threw his brother around the room, unable to do anything to protect him from a monster neither of them even knew how to kill.
His first thought after that is that Sam is hurt, that he’s lying on the bed next to Dean’s because that vampire’s left him just as fucked up as Dean, ’cause Sam?

Sam looks awful.

He’s sprawled out on top on the covers, fully dressed, on his stomach with one leg dangling off. Dean can see dried, rusty blood soaking his sneaker, splashed all up his pant-leg, painting stiff, rust-red splotches on his hoodie. Splatters decorate his neck, smeared at the edges where it’s been hastily wiped away from Sam’s face. There’s a long, bandage wound down his arm, a collar of finger-shaped bruises across his throat, a bloody gash on his forehead that looks like it hasn’t been treated yet. His face is drawn up, tense, like he’s in pain, and Dean wants nothing more than to get up and make sure he’s okay, but he can’t seem to make his damn body cooperate.

Suddenly, the alarm clock on the nightstand goes off, and Sam starts. He shuts it off quickly, grabbing up the blood pressure cuff next to it. He almost drops it when he sees that Dean’s awake and looking at him, and the expression of relief on his face is so damn naked that it makes Dean feel squirmy and embarrassed.

“Hey,” Sam says softly.

“Hey, Sammy.”

Dean’s voice comes out sounding more fucked-up than he’d expected, all dry and wavery. It actually sounds really pathetic, but that doesn’t seem to worry Sam. All things considered, Dean figures his brother’s just glad to see him conscious.

“How are you feeling?” Sam prompts.

Dean has to think about it for a second.

“Like shit,” he finally rasps. “But not like I’m gonna die.”

Sam gives a tiny, breathy laugh, sinking down onto the edge of Dean’s bed.

“How about you?” Dean asks him. “You okay?”

Sam looks bewildered.

“Are you serious?” he asks incredulously.

“You’re bleeding,” Dean points out, lifting his hand a couple of inches to point weakly toward Sam’s head.

Sam touches his fingers to the injury, then regards the drying blood on his fingers in apparent surprise.

“It’s just a cut,” he says dismissively, wrapping the blood pressure cuff around Dean’s arm. “I’m gonna check out your vitals, okay?”

Dean stares at him for a moment.

“Where’s Dad?” he asks.

Sam doesn’t look up from the cuff.

“Not here,” he says flippantly, though there’s in an undercurrent to his voice that Dean can’t quite
grasp. “Sorry, you’re stuck with me for now.”

Dean thinks he could imagine a lot worse things than that, but hell if he’s going to say it.

“Good,” says Sam, when Dean’s blood pressure and temperature have apparently met his standards. “I’m gonna ask you some questions now, okay?”

Not like he’s giving Dean much of a choice. He makes an affirmative noise.

“What’s your name?” Sam asks seriously.

Dean raises an eyebrow.

“Look, just humor me,” Sam huffs. “You were pretty touch and go for a while. I just want to make sure you’re all there.”

“Dean Winchester,” Dean grumbles after a moment. “The president’s George W. Bush, and the year’s 2005. You aren’t holdin’ up any fingers, but when I get concussions, you always used to end up holding up three. I’m all here, man, I promise.”

Sam gets this expression on his face that’s a weird mix of relief and irritation.

“Oh, fine,” he says. “Well, here’s another one: What happened to you?”

Dean looks away.

“Went to this diner after I finished the job in New Orleans. Bastard jumped me in the parking lot,” he says. “Got me with chloroform.”

He’s not sure if the part where he’d sensed the thing sneaking up on him and tried to fight back makes him seem more or less competent so he just leaves it out entirely.

“When I came to, the thing had me locked up in that cage. You know the rest.”

He makes a vague, floppy hand motion that’s supposed to encompass everything else that happened: Having some creature slowly eating him to death, spending night and day trapped in a cage that’s too small for him to even stand, the long stretches of time where he could only stare at the cement block wall and think about how, if he died here, he’d be leaving Dad all alone, looking for revenge on two monsters instead of one. How Sammy would never know that Dean’s biggest regret was leaving things between them so screwed up, how maybe he wouldn’t even know that Dean had died and, at the darkest points, how maybe he wouldn’t even care.

That last part clearly isn’t true, and Dean feels even guiltier for thinking it now than he had before.

Sam’s expression is muddled. Maybe he expected a better explanation than that, and Dean wishes he could give him one. He’d love to say that he’d gotten caught in a hunt, taken out in the line of duty by a whole nest of the fuckers, that he’d killed three of them in the struggle, but the truth is, he just screwed up.

He’s dreading, more than anything, having to tell all of this to Dad, because he knows exactly what he’s going to say: That Dean was careless, that he should have been able to get himself out of that situation, that Dean almost got himself and Sammy killed, that he’s so disappointed.

He won’t be wrong.

“So what…?” Dean asks. “I remember you killing that thing—” (Boy, did he ever. The rush of
blood, the screams, and wild, wild eyes disappearing in a wave of red with the scrape of steel and bone against concrete. Yeah, that one's gonna stick with him for a while.) “—but what happened after?”

“Oh,” Sam says, strangely evasive. “Well, you lost consciousness on the way back here, and your vitals were really bad, but the hospital was out because of the, you know.”

He motions to the bandages Dean assumes are covering the vampire’s bite marks.

“So you finally got to use your back alley blood transfusion research,” Dean guesses.

Sam nods. It’s not really funny, but for some reason it makes Dean want to laugh.

“Did you remember to steal from a blood bank and not an ER?” Dean ribs.

His brother nods again.

“And you even stole one of the ‘metal pole thingys,’” Dean teases.

Sam glances up at it and apparently recalls all of his mocking repetitions of that phrase from all those years ago because his lips quirk, cheeks dimpling a little.

“Well, you never know,” he says, repeating Dean’s own defensive explanation. “We might’ve needed it.”

It hits Dean then, all in a rush, that this is the first time he’s seen Sam in years. He’d been pissed at Sam, sure – really still is – but never so much that he didn’t miss his little brother like a phantom limb. He’s thought of a hundred different stupid scenarios for how he could somehow get Sam back, what he could say to get Sam to understand Dad and the mission and Dean, even though he knows it’ll never happen. Sam is selfish and spoiled and angry and Dean loves him with a ferociousness that sometimes terrifies him.

He thinks ‘Damn, it’s good to see you again,’ and even though he doesn’t say it out loud, he thinks Sam somehow gets it, because their eyes catch and there’s this weird, half-longing look in his brother’s eye that Dean thinks he should be able to finger but just can’t.

“Oh, yeah,” says Sam, diverting his eyes to fiddle through the med kit next to the bed. “You probably want these.”

He brandishes Dean’s bottle of rainy day opiates.

“I wanted to check for brain damage before I gave them to you,” Sam explains, handing Dean two pills.

“Sammy, you are an angel of mercy,” Dean tells him and swallows them dry.

He must be more out of it than he thinks, because the meds hit him harder and faster than usual, and before he knows it, his body is threatening to slip back into unconsciousness.

“So,” he says, fighting it without really knowing why. “What I don’t get is… why are you here?”

Sam looks at him like he’s wondering if Dean lost brain cells after all.


‘Yeah, but why?’ Dean thinks.
“Well, you found me,” he says instead. “Not bad for a college boy. Guess you’re a Winchester after all.”

Sam seems like he doesn’t really know how to take that. He makes a noncommittal noise.

Dean takes a moment to study him. Up close like this, he looks somehow worse than before. It isn’t just the grime from the hunt, or the injury on his arm (and don’t think Dean hasn’t noticed how much he’s favoring his left), the cut on his forehead, or the dark, purpling necklace of strangulation bruises.

Sam looks wrecked. Not just tired, but... fragile.

He’s deathly pale, dark circles standing out in sharp relief under dull eyes, and when he sits still like this, Dean can see that he’s trembling a little, unconsciously. He looks and smells like he hasn’t showered in days. Dean doesn’t know how long he’s been out, but it’s surely been long enough that Sam shouldn’t look like this anymore. Dean’s going to take a guess that he’s being stubborn about getting himself fixed up for some reason or another.

“You should get some rest,” Sam says and moves to stand.

“Hey,” Dean says.

He grabs out, catches one of Sam’s belt loops.

“Seriously, you look like shit,” Dean slurs at him. “Let Dad patch you up when he gets back.”

Sam draws a shaky breath.

“Ohay,” he says in a small voice. “Go back to sleep. I’m all right.”

Dean doesn’t think he could fight him on that even if he wanted to. He can feel himself already slipping out of consciousness again.

He hopes Sam will still be there when he wakes up.
The next time Dean opens his eyes, it’s gone dark outside and Sam is cramming a thermometer in his ear. Dean grimaces up at him.

“Hey,” Sam says awkwardly, glancing down to where he’s attached to Dean’s head. “This’ll just take a minute, and then you can get back to sleep.”

Actually, Dean’s pretty sure his body’s ready to wake up anyway. He guesses he’s been sleeping for at least ten hours, probably more, and that’s not even counting how long he was out after Sam dragged his ass out of that basement, which brings the total up to maybe twenty-four. He hasn’t slept that much in… ever. But then again, he hasn’t exactly been having a restful couple of weeks.

He says as much to Sam once the thermometer in his ear has cheerfully informed his brother that Dean’s temperature is still normal.

“Whatsoever,” Sam says easily. “You’re still on bed-rest, though, so don’t get any ideas.”

“You’re sayin’ I’ve gotta drop out of the triathlon?”

Sam glares.

“I’m saying you aren’t driving or going to bars or drinking or anything else that’s not lying in that bed until I decide it’s okay.”


It’s true. He’s not sure if it’s the amount of sleep, the pain meds, left-over adrenaline, or what, but he doesn’t even feel the bite wounds anymore. He’s riding high, like he could go three rounds with a vamp right now, and he half wishes Sam hadn’t so thoroughly killed the thing so he could justify going after it.

Sam doesn’t seem to buy it though.

“Don’t even try that,” he glares. “You spent the last ten days bleeding out in a rusty cage, and yesterday you had an emergency transfusion. You are not fine.”

Dean groans.

“But come on, man, I’m already bored.”

Sam tosses him the remote.

“There,” he answers. “Knock yourself out.”

“I’m pretty sure this is against the Godiva Convention,” Dean tells him, getting it wrong on purpose just to get the kid’s dander up.
Sure enough, Sam’s giving him that look like he can’t believe Dean survived infancy.

“That’s the Geneva Convention, Dean,” he bitches. “And there’s nothing in there against forcing your pain-in-the-ass older brother to take it easy for a day or two.”

Dean grumbles under his breath, shifting to sit up fully against the headboard.

At least Sam looks a little better than he remembers. Apparently he’d listened to Dean for once and gotten himself cleaned up a little. He’s patched up the gash on his forehead and changed out of his dirty, blood-covered clothes into a pair of sweatpants and a grey Stanford hoodie. Seems like he’s showered, too, thank God, though he’s still deathly pale and the shadows under his eyes look, if anything, like they’ve gotten darker. Dean would bet fifty bucks the kid hasn’t slept more than three hours since the last time Dean was awake.

He takes a moment to glance around the room and nearly drops the remote.

_Holy shit_. It looks like a _psycho_ lives here.

There’s a whole mess of papers taped to the wall in front of him, taking up a huge chunk of space. It’s made up of several timelines, scribbled notes with people’s names circled, sheets of paper listing off every place Dean was in the twenty-four hours before he disappeared. There’s a sheet filled with crossed out phone numbers taped up next to what Dean recognizes as his own hunting notes. Beside that is a gigantic sketched out map that, according to its label, shows the area around the diner Dean was taken from, and taped directly in the middle is a picture of Dean himself that, after a moment, he recalls as a snapshot he’d taken in front of that giant peach water tower in South Carolina and sent to Sam as a joke during his first or second year at Stanford. That, more than anything, confuses the hell out of Dean. Who would’ve expected Sam to actually hold onto that thing?

The rest of the room isn’t any better. The trash can is filled to the brim with bloody bandages and discarded needles. Dean’s cooler is sweating a ring of water into the carpet in the front of the TV, and he knows instinctively that it’s full of the left-over packets of blood. In the corner of the room, a blood-soaked pile of towels and bedspread has already left rust-colored stains on the wallpaper and the carpet. Dean’s first aid kit is spilling out everywhere between their beds, and the bedside table itself is covered in medical supplies. There’s writing scribbled on the fading white wallpaper above the table, stretching to the wall above Dean’s headboard. Dean recognizes it as a combination of directions to the blood bank, complete with a crudely drawn map, and blood pressure readings.

“_Dude_!” he exclaims. “What the hell?”

Sam glances up from where he’s fiddling with his laptop and follows Dean's gaze. He looks sheepish.

“Yeah,” he says. “I couldn’t find any paper.”

Dean looks pointedly toward the yellow legal pad he’s already spotted on top of the TV.

“I was distracted,” Sam defends.

“ Seriously,” Dean demands. “ _Where_ is Dad?”

He can’t see John Winchester letting Sam do something as stupid as splashing blood everywhere, much less writing incriminating shit on the damn wall like some kind of psychotic kindergartener.

Sam cuts his eyes away for a split second before looking back at Dean.
“He left a little while ago,” Sam tells him. “There was a case.”

Dean frowns. It’s kind of strange that Dad would leave without even waiting for Dean to wake up, even (hell, especially) with Sammy looking out for him. He would have expected him to at least stick around to dress Dean down for getting caught, to give him orders on what to do next, and yeah, to make sure he wasn’t a vegetable.

The thought flashes through his head that maybe Dad’s more upset than Dean expected, and he twists his hands in the sheets.

“Seemed like he thought it was really urgent,” Sam adds, like he knows what Dean’s thinking.

His face looks pinched and kind of nauseous. Dean figures it’s killing him to make excuses for Dad on this one. He can already picture the fit Sam probably threw when Dad told him he was leaving. He’s surprised the shouting didn’t wake him up, massive blood loss or no.

“Well, if he said it was important, I’m sure it was,” Dean says, and if it tastes a bit sour on his tongue, well, nobody ever has to know but him.

The stormy expression on Sam’s face deepens, drawing his eyebrows together and digging an angry groove between them.

Dean sighs. This better not turn into an argument about Dad. He may feel a hell of a lot better than he should, but that doesn’t mean he wants to get into that crap.

He tosses the covers off and stands up, grateful that he isn’t still attached to the IV.

“What are you doing?” Sam asks almost instantly.

“Calm down, Annie, I’m just going to take a piss.”

Sam looks relieved, and Dean swears, if his brother starts talking about what a good sign it is that Dean has to pee, Dean’s going to smack him. He’s starting to get why Sam seems so strung out, though. It’s not just the fact that he’d had to fight a vampire solo. From the looks of it, John rode Sam hard while they were looking for Dean. And leaving Dean’s medical care in Sam’s hands to go chase after another case? Sam may be older now, but they’d never put that much responsibility on him before he left for Stanford. No wonder he’s freaked.

He finishes up his business in the bathroom and glances at himself in the mirror as he washes his hands. Yeah, just like he expected. He looks rough, but not nearly as bad as he could, given the circumstances. Mostly he feels gross. Sam apparently changed his clothes, but Dean still hasn’t showered in almost two weeks, and that is just... ugh.

He strips down and then starts peeling off the bandages lining his arms, neck, and legs. The marks are already starting to heal, the oldest ones fading to rows of red dots. They’ll scar, sure enough, but Dean figures there’s a good chance it won’t be too noticeable. He wonders if it’s some sort of vampire self-defense mechanism that makes the marks heal so quickly. He’ll have to tell Dad about it the next time they talk. He wonders if John even had a clue about vampires being real or if this whole incident is getting a full page spread in the journal.

“Taking a shower!” he hollers out the door and then turns on the spray so he can’t hear it if Sam protests. Dean doesn’t do sponge baths, okay?

He closes his eyes and lets himself relax under the warm water. It’s the best thing he’s felt in a long time. A little over a day ago, Dean was coming to terms with the fact that he was going to die. Now,
he’s finding himself not only alive, but with the little brother he hasn’t seen in forever sitting in the next room, proving that, despite all appearances to the contrary, he does still care about his family. It’s a hell of a mood change.

“Hey, I’m hungry,” Dean tells Sam after he emerges from the shower, scrubbing the towel over his face.

“Oh,” says Sam. “Yeah, definitely, I’ll go pick something up. What do you want?”

“Pizza,” Dean answers without pausing for thought. “Meatlover’s pizza.”

Sam gives him an ‘are you shitting me’ look as he moves over to try to help Dean re-bandage the bite wounds. Dean smacks his hands away.

“Hey, I had a blood transfusion,” Dean tells him. “I need my protein.”

His little brother huffs and rolls his eyes, but half an hour later, Dean has a large pizza and two six packs of Gatorade deposited next to him on the bedside table. He digs in happily. God, even food tastes better now that he’s out of that basement.

Sam, he notes, didn’t pick up anything for himself except a bottle of water that he’s more flirting with than actually drinking.

“When was the last time you ate?” Dean asks knowingly.

Sam looks cagey.

“Lunch,” he says, and then reluctantly adds, in response to Dean’s accusing glare: “The day before yesterday.”

Jesus.

Seriously, what the hell was up with Dad?

He, of all people, should know you have to force Sammy into things like eating when he gets all intense like this. Dean doesn’t know how many times they’d come back from working cases to find Sam running on nothing but espresso and good, old fashioned Winchester stubbornness. That’s not to mention the way Sam nearly made himself pass out during exam weeks in high school. If it weren’t for protein bars and shakes, he probably wouldn’t have made it through adolescence. As far as Dean can see, the kid just does not like food, a fact which has always left Dean simultaneously baffled and dismayed.


He holds out one of the pieces of pizza. Sam looks at it like Dean just asked him to eat roadkill.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Well, that is just too freakin’ bad,” Dean shoots back. He tosses the pizza so it lands face-up on his brother’s thigh.

“Dean!” Sam exclaims in his most exasperated tone, picking up the pizza hurriedly with his left hand and using a napkin to mop up the grease smeared on his jeans.

“Eat up, sport,” Dean goads him. “It’ll do your body good.”
Yeah, acting like this would get him a nice, long bitching out under normal circumstances, but Sam’s still in this weird ‘treating Dean like a cripple’ mode (and Dean is going to have to break him out of that soon, because it’s already getting annoying), so instead Sam just picks as much meat off of the top of the pizza as he can and eats it with slow, tentative bites.

Satisfied, Dean turns back to the TV, flipping through the channels before settling on some heavily cut-down action movie. He puts down two pieces of pizza and is starting on a third by the time Sam finishes his. He’s trying to figure out if Sam could somehow be convinced to let Dean have a beer when his brother strides quickly past him and into the bathroom.

Dean hears the bathroom fan click on, the dull whirr not quite masking the sound of Sam emptying his guts into the toilet. There’s a flush, the sound of running water, and then Sam opens the door and leans against the frame. He looks a little green.

“Did you just puke that up?” Dean asks unnecessarily.

Sam nods, shamefaced.

“My stomach’s kinda… not good,” he admits.

Dean mentally kicks himself. Goddammit, he should’ve picked up on that. Sam doesn’t need to be guilt-tripped into forcing down greasy shit; he needs something light like crackers or soup, but Dean doubts he’ll be able to convince his brother to go back out and get any of that stuff, and there’s no way Sam’s going to let Dean go do it. He couldn’t feel any more trapped in this bed than he does right now.

“When was the last time you slept?” Dean asks instead. “I don’t mean that ‘set an alarm for every ten minutes’ crap. I mean actual sleep.”

Sam ponders for a moment, and the fact that he even has to think about it is answer enough.

“Take a nap,” Dean orders. “Your stomach’s probably just fucked-up because you’re running on empty.”

He wonders if Sam’s actually going to listen to him or not. Four years ago, Sam would have fought him even on this. His brother definitely does look annoyed by Dean’s tone, but he seems to consider it. Finally, he nods.

Dean isn’t sure if Sam’s acting this way because he’s actually matured in the past couple of years or because he’s just treating Dean with kid gloves. Whatever it is, Dean’ll take it. At least it’s getting him what he wants this time.

Once Dean’s got Sam into the bed, he’s out like a light in a matter of minutes. His “nap” lasts for hours. Dean finally turns in around midnight, fatigue catching up with him again. When he wakes up at seven, Sam’s still down for the count. Dean decides to take that as a good sign.

He fiddles around with the TV for about an hour, trying to find something decent on, but daytime TV is only barely tolerable after ten o’clock. Right now, there’s shit to watch and Dean is seriously going to go nuts if he doesn’t find something to do.

Dean sends a speculative look in Sam’s direction, and then gets up out of the bed. He pulls on some clothes, snags his phone and wallet along with Sam’s keycard, and slips quietly out of the hotel room. He’s willing to bet there’s a convenience store within a block or so of here. Even though he still feels okay and he’d much rather take his car, he knows that’s probably a bad idea. He gives her a loving pat on the ass on the way out of the parking lot, all the same. At least Sam hasn’t done any
obvious damage to her.

As it turns out, the place they’re staying is called The Green Springs Motel. It’s a dingy little building half-hidden away on a desolate stretch of tree-lined highway. There’re houses visible through the oaks on either side, brick and stucco two-stories that are nothing much to look at, but a hell of a lot nicer than the shabby motel tucked between them.

Dean picks a direction at random, figures he’ll hit something sooner or later. He doesn’t mind the walk. He rambles along the shoulder, enjoying the feel of the sun on his skin, the crunch of gritty dirt under his boots, the mingled smells of grass and hot asphalt. A breeze picks up and sends his jacket fluttering, and he can’t help but grin.

There aren’t many people out this early, but a couple of cars go whizzing past all the same. An old man wearing tattered jeans and a sour expression in sorting through the mailbox outside of one of the houses, and Dean gives him a cheery little nod that the man choose to ignore. Finally, Dean spots a sign warning about an intersection ahead, sees the tree line thinning out, and knows he’s chosen the right way.

The first place he sees is an old strip mall boasting a Dollar General and not much else. It’s as good a place as any. The store’s almost totally empty, so Dean takes his time, wheeling up and down the aisles and grabbing up whatever stuff looks good. He picks up some Saltine crackers and Sprite in case Sammy’s stomach is still messed up when he wakes up and a box of Pop Tarts and a big bag of Peanut M&Ms for himself. He forgot that Dollar General doesn’t sell beer, which blows since he was thinking he could at least drink one on the walk back to the motel. He grabs a Mountain Dew instead and then sidles over to the magazine rack. He tosses a copy of Weekly World News into his pile and is trying to choose between two swimsuit mags when his phone goes off.

He picks up, throwing both of the magazines in with a shrug.

“Hello?”

“Dean?!” Sam’s voice comes blaring through. “Where are you?!?”

Aw, crap.

“Chill out, Sammy,” he says. “I went to pick up some grub. I’m at the Dollar General down the road.”

“You drove?!” Sam demands.

“Are you kidding? I’m not gonna risk crashing my baby!” Dean tells him. “Anyway, it was pretty close to the motel.”

“Dean, you walked there?”

“No, I flew, jackass,” Dean tosses back, frowning at the cover of a fitness magazine. “Seriously, it’s not a big deal.”

“I’m driving there now,” Sam bites out on the other end. “I’ll pick you up.”

“What?” Dean walks briskly up to the counter, shoving the items at the checkout lady. “No, don’t do that. I’m already on my way back.”

“Just wait there, okay? I’ll be there in five minutes,” Sam demands before hanging up abruptly.
Okay, what the fuck?

Dean considers just hoofing it back anyway, but ultimately, he ends up shifting awkwardly from foot to foot under the awning outside the store. He feels like he’s a teenager again, caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to, waiting for Dad to come take it out of his ass. That alone pisses him off, because Sam does not have that kind of authority over him. Dean’s still Sam’s older brother, and just because Dean screwed up this one time doesn’t mean Sam can start treating him like he’s a moron or made of spun fucking glass.

He hears the Impala before he sees her, and when Sam pulls up in front of him, he gets in without a word. The drive back to the motel is tense but thankfully short. There’s a muscle twitching in Sam’s jaw, and Dean knows he’s working himself up to a boiling point, and just like always, Dean doesn’t have a clue what to say to stop it.

They make it back to the motel, and Dean drops his bags off on the bed, riffling through them for the cold stuff that’s going to need to go in the mini fridge. He’s kind of hoping that just acting like nothing happened will be enough to calm Sam down, but, well. It’s not like that’s ever worked.

“What were you thinking?!” Sam demands, and Dean winces a little, turns to give him an unapologetic look.

“I was thinking I was bored and hungry,” he says. “Nothing happened, Sam, what’s the big deal?”

“What’s the big deal?” Sam mimics. “The big deal is that you almost died, Dean! I told you to take it easy for a couple of days! What, you couldn’t even do that?”

Dean bristles.

“You know, you don’t get to order me around,” he snaps. “You’re not Dad.”

Sam’s nostrils flare.

“No,” he snaps. “I’m not. I’m the one who—”

He breaks off, but Dean latches onto the comment anyway.

“You think because you were the one who got me out of there, I’ve gotta do everything you say?” he demands.

“No, but I do think you’ve got to stop acting like you have a death wish!”

“I do not have a death wish!” Dean exclaims. “I just went to the damn store!”

“Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you?” Sam presses on. “You didn’t even leave a note! You just left!”

“Sorry,” Dean bites out. “I didn’t mean to steal your thing.”

Sam draws back.

“Shut the hell up,” he says angrily. “Don’t make this about me!”

“You’re the one who’s making this about you,” Dean argues. “I’m fine! You’re just pissed off because I didn’t do what you wanted.”

“That’s not what this is about, Dean!” Sam grits out.
Dean just glares at him.

“Goddammit, it isn’t!”

“Whatever, Sam,” Dean says coolly.

He turns around to rifle through the bag again and then jumps when the lamp from the bedside table comes hurtling through the air into the wall next to him with a crash.

“WOULD YOU JUST FUCKING LISTEN TO ME?” Sam yells.

Dean whips around, heart hammering in his chest.

“Dude, what the hell?!”

“I thought you were dead!” Sam exclaims, and Dean knows he doesn’t mean this morning. “I don’t care what you and Dad think about me, this isn’t some freaking power play! I just want to make sure you’re okay! I just want you to listen to me for once!”

He’s swaying a little on his feet, chest heaving like he can’t quite get his breath, and Dean goes from pissed off to concerned in a record-breaking .05 seconds.

“Sam, you need to calm down,” he says levelly, stepping forward. “You’re gonna pop a stitch or something.”

“Don’t tell me to calm down!” Sam snaps. “I don’t want to calm down. I want you to listen—!”

“Fine,” Dean says, grabbing two fistfuls of Sam’s shirt and trying to maneuver him into sitting on the bed. “I’m listening, okay?”

“No, you’re not, you’re just—!”

Sam’s shoving at Dean’s chest, trying to dislodge him without hitting any of his injuries, and Dean grabs his forearms without thinking, forgetting about the wound on Sam’s right arm.

Sam shrieks in pain, and Dean lets go instantly, eyes wide.

“Shit!” he swears. “I didn’t mean to—”

Sam sinks onto the bed, clutching the arm to his chest, eyes clenched tight. He’s practically sobbing, and Dean feels like he just got kicked in the chest.

“Here, let me see,” he says, reaching out.

Sam’s eyes snap open.

“No!” he exclaims. “No, don’t— don’t touch it!”

Dean looks at him for a moment before nodding jerkily, eyes darting to the floor.

“You know, maybe I should just—”

Go, he’s planning to say, but Sam cuts him off.

“What?! No!”

Sam stands up abruptly and, just like that, his knees buckle under him, and he goes down. Dean’s
barely fast enough to stop him from eating motel carpet. He winds his arms around his brother’s waist. Sam’s freaking heavy, and it takes some effort to get him back onto the bed.

He’s still mostly conscious, so Dean puts a hand on the back of his head and presses it down so Sam’s head is between his legs. Dean sinks down on to the bed next to him.

“Breathe,” he says. “Just breathe.”

Sam does, and Dean runs a palm down his spine under the guise of calming him down. The warmth of Sam’s body heat pulses through his shirt, his back rising and falling as he takes deep breaths of air. Dean rubs circles over his upper back for a few moments, then pulls the hand away quickly away once he realizes what he’s doing.

Instead, he presses the back of that hand against Sam’s forehead. He feels warm and clammy. Probably a low grade fever. Dean’s willing to bet a decent portion of this freak out is because Sam’s been beating the crap out of his body for the last couple of days. And he says Dean acts like he’s got a death wish.

Dean grabs up the Sprite and crackers and presses a couple of them into Sam’s hands once he’s decided the dizziness has passed enough to sit upright. Sam takes them and nibbles them down without looking at him. He takes a few tentative sips of the soda, and Dean reaches out and grabs the bottle of pain pills.

“Here,” he offers, shaking two out onto his palm.

Sam finally looks at him.

“No,” he says. “I don’t want those.”

“Sammy,” Dean admonishes.

Sam looks embarrassed, but he still shakes his head.

“Fine,” Dean says. “Just take half of one.”

Sam draws his lips into a thin line. Dean breaks the pill and presses it into his hand anyway. After a moment, Sam swallows it down. He puts down a few more of the crackers and about half of the Sprite, which satisfies Dean pretty well.

“I’m going back to bed,” Dean tells him, even though he isn’t actually tired. “You should, too.”

He shoves Sam into the bed without waiting for him to agree, yanking off his shoes and tugging the covers over him roughly.

“Listen, Dean,” Sam says after a moment. “I’m sorry…”

“Forget it,” Dean interrupts quickly. “No big deal.”

“No, but—”

“Sam, really,” Dean insists. “Forget it.”

He sits down heavily on his own bed and pushes his shoes off with his toes. Sam’s starting to fade again already, cheek sagging against the pillow, but that doesn't stop him from reaching out to snag Dean’s wrist in long, drug-dulled fingers. He looks up at Dean from under heavy lids.
“Don’t,” he murmurs, his grip tightening. “Please don’t leave while I’m asleep.”

Dean hates it – that vulnerable little boy look on his brother’s face. Even more, he hates knowing that he’s the one who put it there. Not by taking an early morning run to the convenience store. No, that’s not what this is about. Whatever shit Sam’s been putting himself through in the last few days, Dean knows that it’s on him. Sam shouldn’t have had to go after him, shouldn’t have had to fight Dean’s battles for him. Sam's really shaken up, and Dean isn’t sure if he feels guiltier about getting Sam into this situation or about the shameful little thrill of pleasure he feels at the evidence that Sam was really this worried about Dean, despite Stanford - despite everything.

“Yeah, of course,” he nods and covers Sam's hand with his own, giving it a reassuring squeeze before depositing it back onto Sam's bed. He reaches out, pushes some of his brother's stupid, floppy hair from where it's fallen in his face.

“Don’t worry, Sammy. I’m not gonna leave you.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

In which several secrets are revealed.

Sam isn’t suffering under the delusion that he’s handling this well.

That’s good, because taking apart the motel room so that they can leave is really driving home how closely he’s been flirting with a complete meltdown. The place looks like a crime scene, and Sam ends up having to treat it like one, too, wiping everything down with bleach, tearing off the wallpaper with his handwriting on it, dropping the trash a few blocks away and burning the towel and bedspread covered in his blood.

He’s been in a kind of in-between place for a while now where he realizes he’s acting irrationally, but still can’t seem to stop himself. He’d like to blame that on extreme sleep deprivation and rock-bottom blood sugar, but he can’t really say for sure it wasn’t just a good, old-fashioned psychotic break. It’s pretty damn embarrassing to find himself doing things like tossing a lifetime of training out the window or throwing furniture at the older brother he’s gone half out of his mind trying to save. He thinks that’s half the reason he’s hiding the whole truth about the blood transfusion from Dean, even though it’d be smarter to fess up and get his brother to redo his stitches, at the very least.

The other half, of course, is that Sam knows that the second Dean realizes how badly Sam is actually hurt, this is going to become about Dean taking care of Sam. Again. Dean would probably happily waste away and not even notice, all of his attention focused on his brother. And yeah, it’s not like Dean’s that great at looking out for his own health anyway. See yesterday’s debacle for a case in point.

God, waking up out of that nightmare about Jess to find Dean’s bed empty had been one of the scariest moments of his life. Sam hadn’t even thought of trying to call him for a good five minutes, blood rushing through his ears as his mind reeled from possibility to outlandish possibility. It was like he’d never found Dean at all, like he was back at square one; no clues, no messages. Dean was just gone.

He knows it was stupid, he knows. He’d known it ten seconds after that stupid argument that had ended with him freaking swooning, and yeah, wasn’t that a moment that was sure to inspire Dean’s confidence in him.

Sam just needs to keep it together for a couple more days, make sure Dean’s really as okay as he says he is, and then Sam will tell him everything.

Well.

Almost everything.

Every part of him wants to let Dean keep believing that John left on that case after they rescued Dean. The problem is, despite all evidence to the contrary, Dean is no idiot. He’ll figure it out, sooner or later, and the longer Sam waits to tell him, the more pissed Dean’s going to be. But he just can’t.
How can he tell Dean that their dad left him to die?

No. He’ll let Dean believe anything he wants to about John, for once, and when their dad eventually resurfaces to give Dean another order or drag him off on another hunt, Sam just hopes he has the good grace to try sweeping the whole incident under the rug like he has with every other mistake he’s ever made.

The motel room is still pretty damn wrecked when they pile into the Impala in the early hours of the morning. The sun isn’t even up yet, and Sam feels like a Spring Break co-ed trying to sneak out before management realizes the mini fridge is in the pool. He’s glad he at least thought to pay in cash and give a fake name.

“You can’t drive all thirty-five hours, you know,” Dean is griping, shoving his bags into the trunk. “You’re gonna have to let me behind the wheel sooner or later.”

You wanna bet? Sam thinks.

He gives Dean a look that says as much and his brother rolls his eyes before sliding into the passenger seat.

After spending a moment in tender reflection about how wonderful it is to be back in the car which includes some suspiciously erotic dashboard stroking (seriously, his brother’s obsession with the Impala borders on unhealthy), Dean starts fiddling around under the seat. He comes up with a cassette tape labeled “Metallica,” and Sam slaps his hand over the slot before he can put it in.

“No, no, no,” he grins, because he has been waiting for this moment. “What was it you and Dad always used to say? Driver picks the music—?”

“And shotgun shuts his cakehole,” Dean grumbles. “Yeah, yeah.”

Sam pulls his own cassette tape out from his jacket pocket while they’re idling at a red light. He pops it in and watches Dean’s eyes go wide as the voice informs them that it will be reading Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas by Hunter S. Thompson.

“Yeah,” Sam teases, all little brother smirk. “I had to go through your car during the search. I had no idea you were so well-read, Dean! Maybe there’s hope for you yet.”

Dean groans.

“You’re never going to let me live this down, are you?”

Sam just flashes him a shit-eating grin.

His head is killing him and he’s still feels exhausted and dizzy and every time he has to shift gears, it’s like being stabbed in the arm by a thousand tiny daggers, but by the time Raoul Duke is shouting “We can’t stop here! This is bat country,” Dean is trying desperately to smother a smile in the collar of his jacket, and it’s worth it. It’s so worth it. Sam would do it all again for Dean; he’d do so much worse.

And who knows? Maybe someday he will.

~

They’re somewhere outside Beaumont, Texas when Sam shifts down to fourth gear and feel something give in his arm. It sends a thrill of shuddering agony through his body, and he has to bite
his lip to keep from screaming in pain.

Shit, he thinks with perfect clarity. I just ripped my stitches.

He’s been dreading this possibility, hasn’t really planned for it other than the vague hope that it just won’t happen. He doesn’t have a lot of options here: Either tell Dean and have him fix it or do the really stupid thing and keep it quiet until he can sneak away and re-stitch it himself in some dirty truck stop bathroom.

It’s a shame to break such a winning streak of poor decisions, but when he starts feeling blood soaking through the bandage to drip down his sleeve, he knows what he has to do.

“Hey, Dean?” he asks, straining to keep his voice even, flicking the volume down. “How are you feeling?”

Dean glowers at him.

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“Uh, no,” Sam corrects. “I mean, how steady are your hands right now?”

Dean’s eyes narrow.

“…Why?” he asks warily.

“I just popped my stitches,” Sam admits with an apologetic grimace.

His brother glances down at his arm.

“Fuck,” he swears.

He smacks Sam’s hand away from the gear shift and grabs hold of it himself with an expression that says he’s kicking himself for not doing that from the beginning.

“All right, we’re gonna pull over.”

“I think it can wait,” Sam lies. “There’s a rest stop in about fifteen minutes. We can stop there.”

“Yeah, no, we’re not doing that,” Dean says. “Get over on the shoulder. Now.”

“But—” Sam starts.

Dean reaches out and deftly pulls the keys out of the car’s ignition, smacking the gear shift to stall her in the middle of the highway. It’s pretty damn extreme for Dean, even if there aren’t any other cars on the road. The one time Sam had gotten pissed enough to do that, Dean had made him get out and verbally apologize to the car and then left him to walk all the way back to the motel.

Dean throws open his own door, rounds to the driver’s side, and bodily shoves Sam over into the passenger seat before cranking her up again and maneuvering her off of the highway.

He tugs the first aid kit out of the backseat and looks at Sam expectantly.

“Okay, let’s see it.”

Sam feels trapped and guilty under his gaze.
“You know, I’m going to get blood all over the seats,” he points out.

Dean just shoves up his shirt sleeve and starts unwrapping the bandage. Sam’s not stupid enough to try to stop him at this juncture, so he sits still and lets his brother do whatever he wants as he listens to the muted audiobook dialogue and tries to avoid Dean’s gaze.

“Holy…” Dean exhales, after he’s peeled off the bandages, and then: “What the—?”

Sam knows he’s taking it all in: the location of the cut, the surgical precision, the subpar stitch work.

“Sam, what is this?” Dean demands, but it’s not a question – not really – because Dean knows; he knows.

“I-I couldn’t get to the blood bank quick enough,” Sam explains. “I didn’t have any other choice.”

“Dad let you—?!” Dean starts incredulously, before it clicks; he looks down at the fucked-up stitches and back at his brother. “Dad wasn’t there.”

Sam’s silence is answer enough.

“Was Dad ever there?” Dean demands, his grip tightening, and what Sam hears is ‘Have you been lying to me about everything?’

“Yeah,” Sam insists desperately. “Yeah, of course he was. How else would I have even known—?”


“I told you,” Sam says miserably. “There was a case he thought he couldn’t pass up. Something big.”

Dean’s letting it sink in, putting the pieces together.

“And he left before you did this,” he indicates Sam’s mangled arm.

Sam nods, staring resolutely at a small rip in the knee of his jeans.

“Before you found me.”

Sam nods again.

“Five days ago,” he says. “The same night we got into town.”

Dean scrubs a hand over his mouth, eyes flickering upward.

“And you just let him go?” he asks incredulously.

Sam hears it as another accusation, and his eyes go wide.

“No!” he insists. “I wouldn’t do that! You know I wouldn’t, but I just couldn’t sleep, and he got me to take a sleeping pill, and I didn’t hear him leave. By the time I woke up, he was long gone. I had to look for you, I couldn’t—”

“Oh, Sammy,” Dean says quickly. “It’s okay.”

It is so beyond not okay. Dean looks shaken down to his core, but he takes a deep breath and starts digging around in the first aid kit anyway.
“First things first. We’re gonna get you patched up, and then we’re gonna call Dad and straighten this out.”

“He won’t answer,” Sam tells him in a small voice. “I’ve been trying to call him since he left. He doesn’t pick up.”

Dean purses his lips, pressing a wad of gauze tight against Sam’s bleeding arm.

“We’ll see.”

~

It takes everything Dean's got in him not to just reach across the front seat of the Impala and shake Sam. His pain-in-the-ass little brother deserves it, just for being so… so… Sam.

Because this would only ever happen to Sam, and he would only ever do it for Dean, which means that the red, angry mess of butchered skin and staggered, crooked, makeshift stitches and blood, (god, so much blood, did he cut down to the fucking bone?) that used to be his little brother's right arm is Dean's fault.

Sammy would have never needed to come and save him if Dean had been on his guard, hadn't been lazy or stupid enough to get caught in the first place. If he had actually rubbed two brain cells together and figured a way out of that fucking basement, had done his job like Dad taught them, Sam wouldn't have had to come down and pull his fat out of the fire, wouldn't have needed to fucking maim himself to keep Dean's sorry ass alive.

God, and his little brother's arm is maimed. Dean's mind can't scrub away the chilling image of the wrecked, half-broken Sammy that pulled him from that cage bleeding into him, pouring so much of his own blood into Dean that he couldn't even hold the needle straight to fix up the wound after.

It's gory and wrong and maybe one of the more twisted things Dean's ever gone through with his brother, and that's coming from a lifetime of gory, twisted family bonding experiences.

“What were you thinking, Sammy?” He asks quietly as he twitches the gauze away from Sam's arm to check the bleeding, his voice rough in the hush of the Impala. Fear and Loathing has long since run out, disjointed, drug-fueled chaos subsiding into the quiet, steady click of the cassette deck at the end of the tape.

“You were-” Sam begins, and then stops himself, swallowing hard. He's pale and shaky, with a thin sheen of sweat across his face, probably not just from the pain, but the stress, the lack of sleep, the blood loss and starvation he's put himself through over the last week.

God, what was Dad thinking leaving Sammy like this? Anyone could see the kid can't fucking take care of himself. Dean's got the rest of their gauze pressed to a seven inch stretch of maimed right arm to prove that.

“I couldn't let you die.” Sam grits out finally, meeting Dean's eye with a stubborn set to his jaw that Dean recognizes from a hundred fights and a thousand arguments. “You were…”

There are tears in Sammy's eyes now, and Dean feels something in his chest tear at how little two years of silent distance matters in the face of everything.

At how fast two years of cold, empty space can fall away into nothing.

“I couldn't find your pulse and you were dying and it was this or lose you, Dean,” Sam chokes out,
tripping over the words as they spill out fast, faster, too fast, “And I couldn't lose you, I couldn't, not after- not without-”

And god, the tears in Sam's eyes well up and spill over and Dean's gone. Just gone.

Twenty-two years and he’s still just as lost in the face of Sam's crying as he was when he was four years old. Nothing makes him feel more helpless, more defeated, and God, he’d do anything in the world to get that look off Sammy's face, anything. Kill any monster, beat any bully, cheat, steal, tell any lie that Sam needs to hear – always that same lie, the only one that Dean knows to tell: “It’s okay, Sammy. It’s okay. It's gonna be okay.”

He says it now, over and over again, and he wants Sam to believe it. He wants it to be enough, even though it never is.

He keeps his right hand tight over the gauze staunching the wound in Sam’s arm, reaches out with his left hand and curls it at the base of Sam’s skull, pulling him forward until his forehead is pressed against Dean’s shoulder. The position is awkward, uncomfortable, more of a clumsy press of bodies than a hug, but Dean scritches his fingers in the hairs at the nape of Sam’s neck, curls his thumb down over the shell of Sam’s ear, presses his face into Sam’s hair, and for just a minute, he lets himself believe his own lie.

They're together now, arms crushing and hands clinging and sticky with blood over bandage and bruise alike. Sam is shaking with fear and exhaustion and tears that dampen the neck of Dean's t-shirt, that soak into the gauze over the bites on his neck to sting and burn, but it's okay. It's okay.

There are two of them now.

They're not alone anymore.

It's okay.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

In which Sam is glad to have his brother back. Even if he is an annoying, overprotective jerk.

After, Dean ends up just taping the gauze over Sam's arm and grumbling for him to keep pressure on it while he pulls back onto the highway.

He bitches about weepy little brothers and bleeding on his Baby's seats and awkward angles marring his flawless suturing, but Sam wasn't born yesterday. He can see the dampness in Dean's eyes as he steers them back onto the Interstate, the almost imperceptible shake in his brother's hands as he finds a smear of Sam's blood on the gear shift.

They're neither of them in the best shape to be trusted with needles, apparently.

It isn't until Dean turns off at an exit outside of Beaumont, Texas marked with the ubiquitous blue and white 'H' that Sam figures out his plan.

"The ER?" he complains. "Really Dean? It's a couple of busted stitches! I'll be fine."

"It's a fucked up line of dental floss keeping your whole fucking ARM together, Sammy," Dean barks, stubborn determination set into every inch of his face.

It's not just that, though. Sam recognizes the mixture of guilt and worry that he sees there. How can he not? It's impossibly familiar, the same look Dean always has when Sam gets hurt. It doesn't matter if it's a scraped knee from tripping on the sidewalk or a busted leg from a vengeful spirit shoving him through a window. His big brother always gets that guilty, sucker-punched shadow in his eyes when he thinks he's screwed up and let Sam get hurt, always sets his jaw and grits his teeth afterward, determined that this scrape, this cut, this bruise be the last.

Sam wishes, for just a second, that he could make Dean understand that this was his choice. That he'd rather have a fucked up arm than Dean, still and white in the backseat of the Impala, slipping away on Sam's watch. Bandages and bleeding? That's temporary. Easy, even. But losing Dean? It would be the end of Sam's world.

Dean, who is alive because Sam doesn't need his right arm half as much as he needs to know that his brother is out there in the world somewhere, listening to bad music and calling him ‘Sammy’ and patching up scraped knees and crooked sutures alike, keeps ranting about Sam's arm.

Because apparently not being able to let anything go is genetic.

“And don't think I didn't see how deep that fucking cut goes, Sammy,” Dean curses, glowering at the..."
red light they're stopped at and Sam's positive that he wants to run it, because despite his vociferous
protests, Dean and Dad have always maintained that traffic laws are for civilians. “I mean, what the
fuck were you doing? Digging for gold? Who knows what you fucked up! Nerves, tendons, some
other shit you're gonna need. How are you gonna do anything with a gimp arm, huh? Bitch all you
want, I am NOT tying your shoes and opening your ketchup bottles for the rest of your life.”

Dean is taking this way too hard, so Sam does what comes naturally when Dean is taking himself
way too seriously.

“Aww, I didn't know you cared,” He coos, smug, sarcastic grin on his face. He can't deny the hot
slice of satisfaction that hits him when Dean shoots him a pouty-lipped version of the bitchface his
brother accuses him of using all the time.

His grin widens. Sam's not sorry. He's here, in the front seat of the Impala, bickering with Dean
while Black Sabbath tears through the speakers and Dean gauges his chances of making it through
the intersection without turning his Baby into a black pretzel.

He never thought he would have this again.

As far as Sam's concerned, it's summer sun and laughter. Straight A's and the winning goal. His first
kiss with Jess and Dean with a trunk full of fireworks on the Fourth of July.

There's nowhere in the world he'd rather be right now.

~

It isn't until Dean's winding the long black body of the Impala through the narrow, slightly crooked
rows of the parking lot outside of the hospital that Sam remembers how not a fan of this idea he is.

“We really doing this Dean?” he asks. “What about Dad's 'Not Unless It's Death or Dismemberment'
rule?”

“That's different,” Dean dismisses out of hand, sliding his Baby into a parking space a little ways
away from the entrance to the ER, shady and far enough away from anyone or anything that may try
and dent or ding the love of Dean's life.

“Yeah,” Sam agrees. “That's important. This is something you can patch up in a motel bathroom.”

“Not without crippling your fucking arm all to hell!” Dean snaps, glaring at Sam for one hot second
before he looks away and snatches the keys from the ignition.

“Ohkay,” Sam nods slowly.

It looks like Dean is gonna make this a thing.

“But they're gonna wanna know what happened,” he presses as they unfold themselves from the
Impala. “And I'm pretty sure 'I had to save my brother from vampires' is gonna land us a one way
trip to the psych ward.”

“Come on, Sammy,” Dean grins, not so subtly nudging him to start walking. “We're in Texas. We'll
just tell 'em we were drunk and everything'll be fine.”

“Just because you say 'everything will be fine' in your confident voice, doesn't mean that it will be,
Dean,” Sam bitches, a step behind his brother as they close in on the doors of the ER and convinced
that this is going to be one of those decisions that they never, ever tell Dad about. “What about the
bruises on my neck, or your arms being covered in bite wounds?"

“Well it'll be hard, Sammy,” Dean grins as they near the entrance to the ER. “But I guess I'll have to keep my shirt on for this one, which sucks because—”

Why exactly it sucks that Dean won't be flashing his orgy of vampire bites to the poor inhabitants of the Christus St. Elizabeth Hospital Emergency Room will forever remain a mystery to Sam, because at the exact moment Dean is about to finish that thought, his brother sees something through the glass doors of the ER that has him seizing the sleeve of Sam's shirt and whipping him around so fast he actually gets dizzy for a second.

Sam would like to blame the vertigo and nausea that have the edges of his vision fading to black on Dean's manhandling, but he knows exhaustion, malnutrition, pain, and significant blood loss are much more likely culprits.

“About face, Sammy,” Dean grumbles. "We got a problem."

“What, cops?” Sam asks, ducking his head and letting himself be hustled back to the Impala as he tries desperately to keep his legs underneath him where they belong. They're four hours away from Covington, but he did just commit armed robbery and arson. A run-in with the authorities would be exactly what they don't need right now and is one of the myriad of reasons going to the ER for a few stitches is a terrible, terrible idea.

“No,” Dean answers, as Sam feels the world stop spinning and sees the shadows retreat from his peripheral version when he oh-so-casually leans on the Impala. "But the place is packed, and I did not sign on for three hours in a hard ass plastic chair stuffed between an accountant who thinks the burrito he had for lunch is a heart attack and a six year old who didn't know better than to not shove his lunch money up his nose."

“Great,” Sam nods, relieved, not just that it looks like the danger of him having another humiliating swooning fit have passed, but also because apparently Dean has reevaluated his dream of making the most awkward ER visit in history.

“Because I was- Dean? Dean,” he sputters. “What are you doing??”

Dean looks up from where he's digging in the cooler wedged in the foot wells of the Impala's backseat.

“I don't like waiting.,” he announces, fishing around in the half melted ice for something with one hand while groping for Sam's injured arm with the other.

“Yeah, no shit, but what.” Sam continues, reluctantly allowing himself to be pulled forward, not exactly sure he's going to like what Dean has up his sleeve, but not wanting to risk a repeat of their fight in the hotel last night.

He's had enough near-swoons for today, thank you very much.

“Hold still,” Dean cuts him off, pulling Sam's injured arm closer as he nabs a leftover packet of B from the cooler and tears through the plastic with his teeth, squirting the bright, clammy blood all over Sam's arm.

“Oh my god!” Sam sputters, half convinced for a second that he's hallucinating. “Dean, what the hell?!?”

“I don't like waiting,” Dean repeats, stepping back a bit to examine his work.
Apparently he finds the livid splashes of blood that paint Sam's arm and a good portion of his right pant leg lurid, dripping scarlet satisfactory, because he crumples up the mangled bag of blood and searches for somewhere in the backseat to stuff it, rooting around a bit before settling on an empty Frito's bag.

“This is fraud, Dean,” Sam bitches as his brother drags him back towards the ER, trying not to scratch as the blood begins to dry on his arm, a tacky itch soaking the bandages in the midday Texas heat.

“Hey, something new and different for us!” Dean smarms sarcastically, shooting Sam a shit-eating grin. “See how much you're complaining when we get bumped to the front of the line, huh?”

“Emergency Room triage is important, Dean,” Sam hisses, feeling himself flush at the stares his new and improved arm wound is attracting. “You can't just completely ignore it because you have the attention span of a caffeinated toddler!”

“See, that's where you're wrong,” Dean grins. “Plus, the two-for-one taco special at the Tex-Mex joint we passed on the way ends at three, so stow your moral high ground until after lunch, alright?”

“Jerk,” Sam grumbles, rolling his eyes and going along with it because it's Dean, and because of course. Of course his brother would commit fraud to get free tacos. What weight does law and order really command when free tacos are on the line?

“Bitch,” Dean counters, pushing Sam through the automatic doors of the ER before sharply nailing his little brother in the back of the knee with one well-placed boot.

Sam, predictably, goes down like a felled tree, crashing onto Dean's waiting shoulder as his brother more or less drags him the rest of the way into the ER.

“Can we get some help here?” Dean calls, hefting Sam's weight respectably for someone who was a vampire's chew toy a couple days ago.

Sam would probably compliment him on it if he could feel anything below the knee and weren't currently being maneuvered into a wheelchair by a nurse and two rather handsy orderlies.

Seriously, these people had enough time to hang around the door waiting for someone to collapse, but they couldn't help thin out the line a little by fishing a dime out of a kid's nose?

“What happened?” one of the nurses demands, and before Sam can even try to get an answer out, Dean is there.

“Barfight. Med-School here insisted he could sew it up himself,” Dean supplies smoothly. “See how well that one worked out.”

In the space of minutes, Sam's lying back on an uncomfortable hospital bed in a room just off the packed ER, a skittish intern taking his vitals then mopping the blood off his arm with gauze under the too-bright fluorescent lighting. Dean's sitting in a chair he liberated from... somewhere, crammed up against Sam's bed and is watching the poor intern in washed-out blue scrubs dab at Sam's arm, Dean's hand twitching for his gun every time she gets a little too close to the crooked, oozing line of stitches and makes Sam flinch.

Honestly, Sam feels kind of bad for the girl. It's really hard to see where the cut starts and stops under all the blood and ruined dressings, and Dean's been glaring daggers at her for the better part of half an hour, his overhyped sense of protect-Sammy-rage filling the room with the thick, stifling air of barely suppressed violence.
It's not exactly ideal working conditions, so Sam does his best to keep the flinching to a minimum and remember whether or not Dean walked into the hospital packing.

Around the time his arm starts looking like an arm again and not a ruined tangle of blood, bandage, and medical tape, the doctor sees fit to make an appearance, shouldering open the door with a careless shove, her eyes never leaving Sam's chart as the terrified intern snatches up the bloody gauze and bandages and all but runs from the room.

“So, Mr… Winchester,” the no-nonsense middle-aged woman begins, and Sam can feel Dean's hackles rise as she has to search his chart to find his last name. “I understand you had a rough night?”

“Yeah,” Sam admits, playing up the sheepish college boy angle for all he's worth. “Things got a little out of hand.”

Sam looks down at his arm, splayed on the blue-draped tray like a half-finished dissection, and tries not to flush at how true that is as the doctor twitches aside the gauze.

“Well,” she exhales after a measured look at the long, angry slice in Sam's skin, the strained, crooked stitches no longer holding the ruined skin together, a slice of muscles and tendon just visible in the gap. “If this is what you look like, I'd hate to see the other guy. You said you sewed it up yourself after a bar fight?”

“Genius here said it wasn't that bad.” Dean chimes in, and Sam is gonna have to deal with his bitching about this for years. “Something he could take care of himself. See how well that worked out.”

“Awfully clean cut for a bar brawl,” the doctor notes, examining Sam's arm with a skeptical eye.

“Another med student,” Sam supplies before Dean can open his fat mouth and get them into real trouble, because this, this right here is what Sam was worried about. “We're in the same class, the professor only gives out so many recommendations, you know how things like that can get out of hand.”

The look that crosses the doctor's face is the visual equivalent of a “fair enough”, which makes Sam wonder, somewhat hysterically, exactly how violent her stint in Med School had gotten, and if her doctorate came with a kill count.

Before he can ask himself whether he really wants someone who understands shivving another person in a bar for a recommendation poking around in his arm, she's injecting him with a local anesthetic and asking about his range of motion, so Sam's window for moral and philosophical dilemma is pretty much closed as he assures the doctor - but mainly Dean - that he can move his hand just fine.

An hour later, Sam is 53 stitches richer and Dean is drawing increasingly creatively proportioned dicks on the hospital sheets with a pen he picked from the doctor's lab coat.

“That should about do it, Mr. Winchester.” The doctor announces, letting the needle and forceps drop on the tray and turning to rifle through one of the room's many cabinets. “Now, between the fever and redness, you've got what looks to be a low grade infection cooking up here, so I'm starting you on a course of antibiotics.”

“Infection?” Dean repeats, glancing up from the myriad of genitalia now decorating Sam's sheets, then shooting Sam a glare. It was one that Sam had seen a hundred times before, one that said “Great, Sammy. Look what the hell you've gotten us into now.”
Never mind that this is Sam's stupid arm and Sam's saving of Dean's life that hurt his stupid arm, and that Sam was the one who had to watch a forty-something doctor who may or may not be a serial killer make a sampler of his stupid arm over the past hour while Dean hummed and drew on every flat surface like a bored six year old with a thing for Metallica.

No, this was clearly on Sam's plate. Clearly.

“Nothing major,” the doctor dismisses, selecting medical supplies from the cabinet with a practiced hand.

Sam can already see the saline bag and IV kit. Looks like it’s his turn to be hooked up to a drip. Yay.

“I would like to keep you overnight for observation, though,” she continues, opening a drawer and selecting one bottle from a lineup of seemingly identical drugs.

“Is that really necessary?” Sam asks, panicking a little. Everything that Dad had ever taught them said that ER’s were a bad idea, to be avoided at all costs, but an overnight stay in the hospital? For a cut on his arm?

“Well,” the doctor mitigates, hanging the IV bag and swabbing Sam's hand with alcohol. “It's not a chance I'd like to take. There's no real way of knowing the extent of the infection without careful observation, and with such a deep cut in a critical area like this—”

“He'll stay,” Dean gravels from Sam's side.

“Dean,” Sam protests, his head jerking to his brother before snapping back to his arm at the sharp slide of the IV needle into his hand.

“How many times you wanna risk crippling your hand, Sammy?” his brother growls. “If I have to sit on your ass to keep you here, you’re staying.”

“Actually, visiting hours are over at two,” the doctor interjects helpfully, squeezing a syringe of clear liquid into Sam's IV and adjusting the drip. Almost immediately, Sam can feel the cool, unsettling seep into his veins. “So your… um, partner would have to leave fairly soon.”

“I'm okay with that,” Sam chimes in, trying not to scratch at the uncomfortable feeling of the needle beneath his skin.

“Partner?” Dean sputters. “We're not gay, lady!”

Sam wonders if Dean realizes exactly how many dicks he drew on Sam's sheets. While sitting by his hospital bed. Humming softly. Holding his hand.

That's right. Dean has been holding Sam's hand. And Sam sees the exact moment Dean realizes, a moment that coincides precisely with the pointed glance the doctor shoots their joined hands.

“We're brothers!” Dean protests, dropping Sam's hand quickly.

Sam tries not to miss it. Dean's hands are calloused (Sam's callouses flaked off years ago, just a memory now of a life digging graves and firing guns and fighting tooth and nail to survive), and just a little sweaty (because he's wearing three layers topped by a leather jacket in Texas, the idiot). And he taps his fingers in time with whatever he's humming (Metallica, so much Metallica. Sam heard Master of Puppets playing from a dorm window his second week at Stanford and couldn't help but turn around, search for the Impala, just on reflex).
Not that these things make Sam smile or anything. Or are comforting, at all, because what sort of person would be comforted by their brother humming “Fade to Black” and tapping out the harmony with his fingers on their hand? How could that possibly feel like the closest definition Sam has of 'home'?

Sam's trying to figure that out when the doctor interrupts his musing.

“My apologies,” she drawls, checking Sam's IV. “I'll bring that admission paperwork.”

“Is there any way we can just let this,” Sam gestures to the IV awkwardly. “Finish, and I'll just, you know, keep an eye on it?”

“Tell you what,” the doctor answers, giving them a considering look and making a note on Sam's chart. “Give that about an hour to work its way into your system and then, if your range of motion and vitals are good, I’ll send you home with the good drugs. That sound alright?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Sam nods, letting his head fall back on the crinkly hospital pillow and shifting his legs to try to fit into the tiny hospital bed.

“Hey, doc,” Dean adds as she makes her way out of the room. “You wanna hit the lights, let Dougie Howser here get some shuteye?”

“Dean,” Sam protests halfheartedly. He's not so tired that he misses the look the doctor shoots them as she hits the light switch.

She thinks they're fucking.

Hell, she probably thinks they're fucking right now, but honestly? Sam just doesn't have it in him to care. He barely has it in him to make sure Dean's stopped drawing dicks on everything before he lets his eyes close. Sam can't even pretend to not know why he's suddenly so exhausted.

This past week… losing Dean, then trying to find him alone, then getting him back, just in time to have him slipping away through Sam's fingers no matter what he did?

'Rough' is an understatement.

But Dean's here now. He's here, and he's got his hand carelessly thrown together with Sam's again on the faded hospital sheets, humming something low and soft in the cool dim of the hospital room, and suddenly it's all Sam can do to force his eyes open and look at his brother.

“You don't have to stay,” Sam mumbles, his offer sounding halfhearted even to himself. “Go get lunch or somethin'.”

“And miss out on all the hot nurses?” Dean quips with a deliberately wicked grin. “Not a chance, Sammy.”

Dean isn't looking at the nurses. He's not even facing the floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto the hall. He's looking at Sam, pale and tired in a hospital bed, with nothing but a dripping IV and industrial white walls as a backdrop.

“Thought I'd offer,” Sam shrugs, his eyes slipping shut, embarrassingly relieved that he won't have to wake and find Dean gone again, that he won't feel that sharp, heart stopping fear that finding his brother, saving him from the things that go bump in the night, having him here, with him again, was all just a dream that died in waking.
Dean's response is lost in an indistinct hum that morphs into the chorus of some soft-rock song that Sam's sleep-muddled brain can't quite place, his mind getting lost between the cool, dim hush of the room, his aching exhaustion, and Dean, at his side, as comfortable and familiar as coming home.

Dean's here.

He's here and he's safe, so, for now, everything is okay.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

In which things are short but sweet.

Dean's not surprised that it takes Sammy all of five minutes to fall asleep once the doc kills the lights. Even with his epic crash-out last night, his little brother was still nowhere near 100%, and with Sammy's mini-meltdown in the car…

Well, here's hoping that sleep and antibiotics'll get Sam back on the road to not-crazy, because the hotel room that Dean woke up in, covered in blood and case notes, with a maimed little brother splayed out beside him? Sammy's meltdown when Dean went to the fucking dollar store, then again in the Impala? That was not o-fucking-kay. Even for them.

As far as Dean's concerned, it doesn't matter if Sammy is two or twenty-two, the kid needs a goddamn keeper.

He needs watching out for, because otherwise, he takes his hard head and good fucking intentions and does the stupidest shit imaginable.

Case in point? Their current screwed-up little predicament. Sam drives himself to the brink with stress, nearly becomes lunch for a fucking vampire, narrowly escapes losing the use of his right arm through an insane combination of recklessness and stupidity, and for what? Dean? Dean, whose fault it was they were in this shithole of a situation in the first place?

No. Just, no.

The kid needs someone to pull him back sometimes, to remind him to eat and sleep and not dig a bowie knife into his forearm at the first sign of trouble.

Dean is so lost in his thoughts that the first gritty chords of "Smoke on the Water" nearly scare the shit out of him. He scrambles to dig the phone from the pocket of his jeans, muting the ring before Deep Purple drags Sammy from some much-needed rest.

Dean has every intention of letting the little fucker go to voicemail, but then he sees the Caller ID flashing across the phone's screen.

Bobby - Home

"The hell is Bobby calling for?" is Dean's one thought before the phone is at his ear and his eyes are flicking to Sammy, still out cold.

"Bobby?" he answers quietly, careful to keep his voice low enough that it won't wake Sam. Normally his little brother's a light sleeper, but the kid didn't so much as twitch through the Michael Bay marathon Dean caught on the cheap, flickering hotel TV last night, so Dean's pretty sure he'll stay out for the count.

"Dean, that you?" asks the rough voice on the other end of the line, and it really has been way too long since Dean's heard from Bobby, he and John's most recent falling out too fresh in everyone's
“Yeah, of course,” Dean nods.

“Good to hear from ya, boy. How ya doin’?” Bobby laughs, and he sounds glad. Deep, to the bone glad; the kind that comes after long nights of worry, after knowing that no good news can be coming, then hearing it anyway.

“Walkin' and talkin',” Dean answers, smiling a little despite his confusion.

Hey, he just spent ten days being breakfast, lunch, and dinner for a really annoying vampire. It's good to hear that someone besides Sam is invested in his well-being.

“S'been a while, Bobby,” Dean continues, carefully dancing around the hunter's feud with John. “I forget your birthday or somethin'?”

“Sam didn't tell you?” Bobby barks. All the laughter in his voice is gone, replaced with surprise and more than a little anger. “He called me, halfway through his little round of MASH the home game! I swear, between your little run-in with the vampire and Sam trying to save ya, you chuckleheads scared about twenty years off my life!”

Dean hears the fast, angry clink of ice cubes on glass as Bobby takes a swig of whatever liquor makes dealing with the aftermath of Sam's crazy go down easier.

“He alright?” the older hunter grumbles, irritated, but Dean was raised on irritated hunters and gruff appreciation for the good things in life. He can hear the concern in Bobby's voice, and knowing that the old hunter was worried about him is nothing compared to knowing that he had Sam's back while Dean was benched.

“Did a number on his arm, but he should be fine,” Dean answers, unable to stop his eyes from skimming over his little brother in the hospital bed in front of him, reflexively checking the bandages on his arm, the IV in his hand, casting over his face looking for signs of worry, discomfort, or a need for high quality pain meds.

“Good,” Bobby responds, all gruff, manly relief. “Don't know whether to thank the idiot or smack him around for the trouble, but that's good.”

“Yeah, well, that's Sam for ya.”

And Dean grins in spite of himself, because that's just the kind of day he's been having, torn between wanting to smack the stupid out of Sam and doing something that would completely destroy Dean's “No Chick Flick Moments” rule.

“Winchesters,” Bobby grouses on the other end of the line. “No goddamn sense to split between you.”

Any other day, Dean would rise to the bait with at least one quip defending the Winchester name, but Sam, out like a light up until now, is starting to stir on the bed, his forehead creasing in the dim.

“Thanks, Bobby. Catch up with you later,” Dean mutters quickly, ending the call and killing the glow of the phone as quickly as possible.

“Dean?” Sam mumbles, blinking sleepily. “What's-”

“Ssh,” Dean hushes, carding a hand through sleep tousled brown hair before Sam can work himself
back to full awareness. “S'nothing, Sammy. Go back to sleep.”

And miracle of miracles, Sam does, relaxing back on the starched hospital pillow and turning his head into the soft pressure of Dean's fingers in his hair. Sammy's un-IV-ed hand comes up to wrap loosely around Dean's, their fingers tangling loosely on the pillow, and it's like the world shrinks, narrows down to this one moment in this one hospital bed, with nothing but the two of them, and Dean? He nearly drowns in the sudden, fierce rush of being so damn glad to have his little brother back, safe and sound and here beside him, scrunching his face into the pillow like the kid he very nearly is, and clinging to Dean's hand like it's the only thing worth holding onto in the world.

Because it's Sam.

Sam, who came for him when no one else would. Sam, who believed in Dean long after Dean himself had given up. Sam, who's still enough of a hunter to chop a vamp's head off with gardening tools but is, at the moment, drooling into the pillow case and clinging to Dean's hand like he's five again, wanting Dean to check the closets for monsters before they turn out the light. And Dean, as helpless against a sleepy, clinging Sam at twenty-six as he was at nine, does what he can't help but do, curls his fingers gently into Sam's and scoots closer to the hospital bed, close enough to feel the soft, steady heat of his brother beside him, close enough to be the first thing Sam sees when he wakes up, close enough so the world stays small, just the two of them.

Because it's Sam.

And because it's not a chick flick moment if one of them is unconscious.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

In which there are fights over food and around food but not WITH food, which is a shame.

It's more than an hour later when the doctor finally reappears, apologizing halfheartedly about being called away for a consult that ran long.

From the smear of hot sauce on the front of her scrubs, Dean would bet his favorite gun that consult took place at the Tex-Mex joint across the street, but as long as it ended up with Sammy getting some much-needed shut-eye, he's willing to let it slide.

A handful of prescriptions and a motion test later (Don't think Dean doesn't see how much effort it takes Sam to wiggle his fingers like that. When they get back to the car they're having a serious talk about dumb-ass stunts with pocketknives and how you DON'T FUCKING PULL THEM), and they're back on the road.

“I-10 is the other way,” Sam notes absently, picking at the bandage on his hand while trying to look like he's not picking at the bandage on his hand.

“Not looking' for the I-10,” Dean replies, lightly smacking Sam’s wrist to get him to stop his fiddling while weighing the merits of Taco Casa versus Luby's Cafeteria. On the one hand: tacos. Sam could get a taco salad. On the other hand: convenient substitute for diner food. Sam could get a salad not made of grease and ground beef.

Dean pulls into Luby's.

“Guess we missed the two for one taco special, huh?” Sam remarks mildly, levering open the passenger door with a wince, because apparently, treating fresh stitches with caution isn't something they teach you at Stanford.

“We can hit it on the way out of town tomorrow,” Dean shrugs, striding towards the entrance to the restaurant before Sam can unfold his Sasquatch limbs from the passenger seat.

“Dean!” Sam protests, slamming the door to the Impala harder than he needs to. Dean's baby's in fantastic shape, but no car should have to suffer through Sam's temper tantrums like that. “We're not spending the night here! We've barely spent four hours on the road today!”

“Yeah, we spent four hours on the road, then three and a half in the ER making up for it,” Dean counters. “We keep going like that, you'll be in an iron lung before we hit New Mexico.”

“That doesn't even make sense, Dean,” Sam persists as they cross the parking lot. “And neither does sitting around East Bumfuck, Texas because I got a little dizzy!”

“You ripped open half your fucking arm just driving, Sammy,” Dean interrupts. “You're sleep deprived, infected, and you can't keep a fucking slice of pizza down without hurling it back up again and then some. You wanna sell your whole 'I'm fine' kick, pitch it to someone who didn't see you lose a fight to a slice of meat lover's.”
“That was a day and a half ago, Dean” Sam grits out as they stride to the hostess station.

Dean doesn't bother flirting with the pretty redhead at the podium, just holds up two fingers and asks for a booth before digging back into Sam.

“Yeah, well I don't see you gunnin' for a rematch Mr. Sprite-and-soup's-fine-for-me-thanks. And don't think I didn't hear how well your little date with the protein bar went last night. Last time I heard hurling that intense, there was an Exorcist movie marathon running.”

“I'm fine, Dean,” Sam insists, his eyes narrowing. Clearly baby brother thought he'd kept his little display of digestive pyrotechnics under the radar.

“I don't think you are,” Dean presses. “You're not eating, you're not sleeping, you carved a damn hole in your arm on a whim! Now tell me Sam: Is that just how they roll at Stanford or have you legitimately lost your damn mind?

Before Sam can answer with anything more than a furious stare, their waiter is at the table, forced cheer in his voice that says he heard at least the tail end of their conversation.

“Welcome to Luby's guys, can I interest you in-

“Bacon cheeseburger for me, extra onions,” Dean bites off, never breaking from he and Sam's glaring match, “and the soup and salad for Sasquatch here, dressing on the side, thanks.”

“Anything to drink?” the waiter squeaks, pen shaking a little as he takes down their order.

“Two of whatever you've got on draft,” Sam barks, narrowing his eyes at Dean, head tilting to ask if he really wants to get into this here. In public. With witnesses.

“Just one draft,” Dean corrects, raising his chin in a silent 'hell yeah I do'. “Antibiotics, Sammy. He'll have a Coke.”

“Real mature, Dean,” Sam sneers after the terrified waiter scurries away.

“Oh, did you want something else?” Dean drawls with a smirk. “They have chicken and stars on the kids menu. Chocolate milk, too.”

“I'm not a child, Dean,” Sam bites out, the mother of all bitchfaces running rampant on his face. “And I didn't do anything you wouldn't have done in the same situation.”

“Really?” Dean asks, incredulous. “Really? I would have starved myself? Run in that house with no idea what the hell was in there? Carved my arm up all the hell for no good reason? Covered it up so it got even more fucked up?”

“Everyone said you were dead, Dean,” Sam hisses, leaning across the table, his eyes dark and furious. “Not kidnapped, not missing, dead. Dad was gone, every other hunter we know either wouldn't return my calls or said it was a lost cause. I had no witnesses, zero leads, and it was days and days of nothing, like you just, just vanished and it was only a matter of time before I found you dead in a ditch somewhere, and the last thing I ever said to you was gonna be- when I saw his car I just, just- What was I supposed to do, Dean? What was I supposed to do?”

He plants his elbows on the scarred tabletop and shoves his hands through his hair.

“Sammy…” Dean breathes.
“No, fuck this,” Sam explodes, shoving away from the table. “I'm waiting in the car.”

He nearly bowls over their waiter as he stalks to the door, legs eating up the hideous restaurant carpet in long, angry strides.

“Draft and a coke?” the waiter asks, nearly spilling beer all over Dean's jacket as he tries to juggle their food, set down the drink, and watch Sam's exit at the same time. “Um, is he okay?”

“Low blood sugar,” Dean answers distractedly, watching through the window as Sam furiously jimmys the door to the Impala, then flings himself into the front seat so hard she rocks with the force.

Dean knows Sam had it tough these past couple of days. For all intents and purposes, it was the kid's first solo hunt. Not only that, but it was his first time back in the saddle after four years out of the game and looking for family to boot. He understood from Sam's bare bones descriptions that it hadn't exactly been an easy one, but this…

Well, let's just say that it's entirely possible that Dean was not in the right here. But before he can explore all the ways his being an insensitive jackass have scarred his baby brother, possibly for life, Dean has a cheeseburger with extra onions kissing his elbow and the waiter is asking him if there's anything else he needs.

“Can we, ah, get all this to go?” he asks awkwardly.

This guy is gonna get one hell of a tip.

~

Sam's still in the front seat, fuming silently, when Dean reaches the car, plastic takeout bags in tow. He doesn't say anything as Dean cranks her up and pulls back onto the highway, instead studiously refusing to do anything but glare out the windows.

The only sound as they pull into traffic is the steady rumble of the Impala's engine and the insolent crinkle of takeout containers in the back seat. They probably would have been more secure in the front, where Dean could also sneak a few fries on the way in, but he can't shake the feeling that if he put that salad next to Sam right now, he'd be picking bits of lettuce of the dash for weeks.

Luckily for everyone, Beaumont is rife with cheap, tacky hotels located just off the Interstate. Dean picks the first one that looks like no one in the joint would bat an eye at two guys (one of whom was very obviously choked recently, the other of whom is perhaps a bit too good looking) and a takeout container of salad getting a room together.

The Silver Spur fits the bill pretty well. There's no Magic Fingers, but probably only because the coin feed would clash with the Western decor. If Sammy weren't giving him the silent treatment and glaring daggers at nothing, Dean would count this day as a win.

As it is, he just drops his duffle on the bed and strides past Sam, his panties still firmly in a twist, to open the mini fridge. The only sound in the room is the laconic hum of the air conditioner and the obstinate crinkle of the take out containers as Dean tries fruitlessly to wedge them in the too-mini mini fridge.

Behind him, Sam whumps angrily down on the bed, snatching up the remote on the night stand and hissing a little as his stitches strain. Dean wants to tell him to stow the Wolverine crap, take it a little easier and save them a second trip to the hospital, but he knows that would just explode into another fight, so he bites his tongue and goes back to the takeout boxes, which have begin to crack from his
efforts to pen them into the fridge.

Sam said he wouldn't have done any differently, if he was the one missing and Dean had to find him.

Would Dean have dropped everything to come look for Sammy? Absolutely. That's not even a question. Dean would have left a hunt cold if Sam was on the line, civilians be damned. He would have burned rubber and hauled ass to the last place Sammy was seen and put foot to ass and gun to face until everything that stood between him and his baby brother was either dead or cleared the fuck out of the way.

That's not even a question.

But if the answers weren't coming, if the witnesses knew nothing and the leads dried up and Sammy was still missing, would Dean unravel like Sam did? If none of the hunters they knew would help and if Dad abandoned them for a lead on a case and Sam was still gone, would Dean go to shit like Sam had? Stop eating, stop sleeping, give himself completely over to the hunt until something turned up?

Again, not even a question.

And finding a lead on Sam, knowing where he might be, would Dean wait to scope out the house or break down the fucking door and burn a clip into whatever the fuck had his little brother, intel be damned? If he found Sam broken, bleeding, maybe dying, would Dean do what was safe or would he do what was sure to save his brother, his own wellbeing be damned?

He would do whatever he had to do to bring his brother back alive.

Whatever it took to save Sammy.

Dean has onion grease and tomato dripping over his fingers and may be the biggest jerk known to mankind.

He ends up just dumping the food onto the uncracked lids of the takeout containers and nuking Sam's soup in a coffee mug, slapping the lot onto the wobbly barn wood table and calling it a day.

“Hey, Gigantor! Grub’s on,” he calls over to Sam, who is watching the Discovery Channel like the dolphins have personally injured him.

“No,” Sam refuses, upping the volume to try and drown Dean out with ocean sounds and dolphin clicks.

“Bullshit,” Dean dismisses, “All you've had today is dry toast and Sprite. Get over here and eat your damn rabbit food before it gets cold.”

“No,” Sam refuses, upping the volume to try and drown Dean out with ocean sounds and dolphin clicks.

“Get your ass over here, eat, and hear my girly apology, or I'm coming over there and shoving a fucking tomato down your throat,” Dean demands. “One way or another, you're not taking these meds on an empty stomach.”

Sam quirks an eyebrow at the promise of a girly apology and makes his way to the table, flopping into the rickety motel chair and crossing his arms expectantly as Dean takes a bite of his cheeseburger.
“Well?” Sam prompts. “Let's hear it.”

“I don't even get to eat first?” Dean asks incredulously. “This is, like, halfway to cold already, Sammy.”

Sam just bitchfaces at him, arms still crossed.

“Fine,” Dean huffs, tossing down his burger. “You were right. If it were you in that cage, I'da done the exact same thing. Now shut up and eat your damn food.”

“That's it?” Sam laughs incredulously. “That's your girly apology?”

“What, I do it wrong or somethin’?” Dean asks through a mouthful of french fries and ketchup. Just 'cause Sam is gonna hunger strike his way through this feel-fest doesn't mean he has to. “Sorry we can't all be in touch with our lady parts, Samantha. I need to watch a few more Lifetime movies to get on your level, or can I just have some yogurt and a pedicure?”

“You're an idiot,” Sam says with a grin, adding dressing to his salad and then, as an afterthought, throwing the banana pepper at Dean's head.

Dean tries not to be proud that Sam nails him, despite taking the shot with his left hand.

The rest of the day is quiet. They watch the Colts beat the Texans on the fuzzy motel TV. Sam insists on redressing Dean’s bites individually as opposed to letting Dean wrap his arms and neck in gauze like a mummy. Dean insists on dosing Sam with antibiotics and painkillers and checking his arm for swelling and redness at precise four hour intervals.

Gauze and medical tape are wasted. Insults are thrown. Chinese is ordered for dinner. Sam bets he can keep down two egg rolls and half of the kung pao chicken and loses. Dean lets him pick the movie they order from pay-per-view anyway, citing Sam's youth, frailty, and possible possession of a vagina as his reasons.

All in all, they've had worse days.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

In which Dean gets an unexpected phone call.

The twittering buzz of Sam's generic ringtone drags Dean unwillingly back to the land of the living. For a sharp, mean second of big brother pettiness, he wants to just let the stupid thing ring until Sam wakes up, but then he looks over, sees the circles still etched under his baby brother's eyes, the bruises that peek out from the neck of his t-shirt, the thick, white bandage that wraps his arm, going almost all the way from wrist to elbow...

If Sam can go through that for Dean, Dean can answer a fucking call.

“Yeah?” he grumbles into the cell, shuffling past Sammy and into the postage-stamp sized motel bathroom.

He answered the phone before it woke Sam up. No one said he had to be nice about it.

“Um, is Sam there?” a hesitant voice on the other end asks. Dean's Upstairs Brain, not exactly on all four cylinders before breakfast and coffee, registers ‘chick’. His Downstairs Brain, not under caffeine's thrall, quickly connects 'chick' to 'playtime', and before Upstairs Brain can get “Why is a chick calling Sammy's phone so early?” out, Downstairs Brain is swooping in.

“No,” Dean answers. “You've reached Dean, the handsomer and far more charismatic brother. What can I do you for?”

“Dean?!?” the voice sputters. “Dean?! Dean, Sam's brother Dean? He found you? You're all right? Oh my god!”

“Sammy put me on a milk carton or something…” Dean purposefully trails off, trying to get the name of this random chick who knows intimate details of the Winchester family soap opera.

“Jess,” she supplies at the unspoken prompt. “Jessica, Sam's girlfriend, I was there when your Dad showed up at our apartment to tell Sam about you. What happened? Are you okay? And where's Sam?”

Dean really wishes he'd just pressed 'ignore'. As hot as this chick sounds, she's Sammy's and asking questions about the case to boot. Now Dean has to come up with a cover for his entire disappearance, something he'd probably suck out loud at on a good day, to someone who may or may not know about things that go bump in the night.

Fuck. He hasn't even had coffee yet.

“Sammy's still asleep,” he stalls, scrubbing his free hand across the itchy stubble on his face, trying to think of something quick. “It's been a pretty rough couple of days… You, uh, mind if I have him call you back when he wakes up?”

“No, that's fine,” Jess answers. “He- Is he okay?”
She sounds hesitant, like she's not sure she should be asking Dean about this, but she wants to know too badly to really care about how awkward it is.

Dean thinks about Sam on the other side of the thin motel wall, too-tall frame spilling over the edges of the sagging queen bed, hair tousled and spiked with sleep in the midmorning sun.

Even here, on the other side of the bathroom wall, with the thin, tinny whine of the fan droning in the background, he can't entirely blot out the sounds of Sam hitting the wall of the basement, Sam being choked by the vampire, Sam screaming as Dean's fingers dug into the ruined meat of his arm. Sam in a hospital gown, pale and washed out by fluorescent lights as an IV dripped antibiotics to flush out the poison in his arm.

“It's been a rough couple of days,” Dean repeats grimly, “and no one was there to keep an eye on the kid.”

“At least tell me someone's been making him eat,” Jess sighs, pulling Dean out of his self-loathing with her tone of weary frustration.

Apparently someone else's been trying to steer Sam away from his habit of subsisting entirely on protein bars and espresso.

Dean wonders how much success this Jess girl has been having with that. Ten years of guerrilla warfare, and he's made absolutely zero progress in breaking Sam of the notion that Triple Red Eyes and Power Bars constitute a balanced meal. From the weary exasperation in this chick's voice, she's not doing so well with it, but that's not surprising. She's had, what, a year with Sam? Eighteen months, max?

To be honest, Dean's still trying to deal with the fact that Sammy - careful, research junkie, pain in the ass Sammy - went and got himself a live-in girlfriend so fast. What the hell could this Jess chick have that had think-out-every-option-read-the-manual-back-to-front-that-plan-is-stupid-Dean Sam packing up and playing house like this?

“Don't worry,” Dean says. “I don't let him get away with that crap on my watch.”

The 'don't worry' makes it sound more reassuring than Dean means it to be, but this is his territory. Of course he doesn't let Sam get away with not eating, hasn't since he could make a sandwich or pour a bowl of cereal or, hell, throw a bottle in the microwave. It's just as much his job to make sure Sammy at least eats something for lunch and dinner as it is to make sure there's someone covering his back on a hunt or keeping him and Dad from tearing each other's throats out.

There's never been a time when taking care of Sam wasn't Dean's job, wasn't priority number one.

“That's good,” Dean hears on the other end of the line, along with a rustling brush against the receiver. If he had to guess, she's nodding or some shit. Dean wonders what color hair Sam's girl has, how she wears it so it swings against the phone when she's talking.

In the past, Sammy's always gone for the nerdy bookworm chicks. Awkward girls who were probably gonna be pretty one day but, at the moment, were too bogged down in braces and changing bodies to have really hit their hotness stride.

Dean figures this one is more of the same. After all, Nerdvana that is Stanford, how hot could the chicks really be? Dean would bet his Master of Puppets tape that despite the fact that Jess is a hot girl name - something that can't always be counted on but is usually a good indicator (Usually. There was that Candi in Nebraska with the lazy eye and the backne.) - his brother's girlfriend is probably
some brunette dwarf that sleeps in headgear and plays the cello.

Double or nothing says she's owned a cat, worked in a library, or written sappy poetry at one point or another.

“So, you'll have him call me when he wakes up?” Jess asks, less worried now, but still not at ease.

Dean really hopes Sam didn't saddle himself with one of those clingy types. Considering Sammy's been with Dean for a few days now and this is the first time she's called, it's not likely, but that doesn't mean it's impossible, either.

“Yeah, no problem,” Dean agrees, trying to figure out of it would be a dick move to conveniently forget she called until he and Sam are on the road again.

“And Dean?” Jess adds, interrupting Dean's attempts to remember the stretches of Texas interstate with the worst cell coverage. “I'm really glad you're alright. Sam needs his big brother, you know?”

Shit, Dean realizes as he murmurs something in the affirmative and hangs up the phone.

He's gonna have to tell Sam she called as soon as he wakes up.

He might even end up liking this girl.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

In which old wounds are opened.

Some part of Sam had hoped that finding Dean - knowing that he was alive and safe - would stop the nightmares. That with Dean by his side and highway beneath the wheels of the Impala, every mile bringing him back to school and Jess and normal (or as normal as Sam's life had ever been) would banish the cold sweats, the shaking, the hot, terrifying flashes of things that were. Things that might be. Things that could have been.

Unfortunately, it doesn’t really seem to be working out that way.

He'd been fooled back at the hospital, when exhaustion and painkillers and Dean, warm and solid and safe at his side, had lulled him into a deep, dreamless peace, but now he's back to tossing and turning again, trying and failing to shake the barrage of twisted, terrifying images that tear through his head.

He dreams of Louisiana, of not being able to find Dean, not knowing if he was alive and well or dead or dying, lost or found or gone forever beyond Sam's reach. Of never knowing, never believing that there was anything left between them, anything left to salvage after that last, awful fight, after years of silence and regret and stubbornness.

He dreams about the cage, of the vampire's charcoal drawing of Dean's terrified eyes looking out between the bars, except it isn't a drawing now, isn't just smudged black lines of charcoal on thick, yellowed paper. It's sharp and vivid and real, too real, too sharp to be anything but a dream, and Sam is crouching, reaching, stretching, and even though the cage is small, too small, tiny, he can never quite reach Dean, can never seem to get a hand on his brother, can never touch, can never hold on, and Dean's looking at him with round, green eyes, wide and shocked and scared, scared like Sam's never seen him, never wants to see him, as he tries to pick the lock.

But his hands are sweaty and trembling, and he's weak and useless, and he keeps fumbling the pick over and over again, just can't get a grip on it, can do anything but screw up, fail Dean over and over and over again as the panic, the fear grows, swells, takes over them both, make the air thick and heavy.

He can smell the blood, heady and sharp and getting stronger by the minute, threatening to suffocate him, to suffocate them, and the vampire is coming, he can hear him, slow and confident and inescapable, unbeatable, and he's just outside the room, and Sam can't get his hands to work right, he can't get to Dean, can't reach him, can't save him, he can't—

And then, like he's been ripped from one dream and shoved into another, he's lying, pinned like a bug on his back, frozen as he stares at Jess on the ceiling, her face pale and stiff and horrified. Blood seeps out to stain her white nightie, drips sluggishly on Sam's face, cool and clammy and familiar, as the flames spark, start, spread, lick across her hair and face and the lace of her nightgown, catching, burning, swallowing her up before his eyes as he screams and screams and can't do a goddamn thing to stop it.
He jolts awake, panting against her name on his lips, and turns instantly to look towards Dean's bed. It's empty, and for a second, hot, irrational panic twists in Sam's gut like a knife before he hears a soft thump and a muffled, wheezing curse from the bathroom.

Peering through the slightly cracked door, he can make out Dean's back reflected in the mirror, his cell phone pressed against his ear as he leans against the sink.

Sam settles back down with a muted sigh, letting his eyes slip closed again. He can hear the faint sound of the phone ringing against his brother's ear, the noise amplified by echo-y motel bathroom acoustics. There's the rumble of a man's voice on the other end, too low to distinguish, and then Dean lets out a slow, labored, “Hey, Dad.”

Sam's eyes snap open in surprise. For a second, he thinks that John actually has chosen to pick up the phone for Dean when he wouldn't for Sam, and he isn't sure if what he’s feeling is more anger or relief.

"It's me," Dean continues awkwardly, his voice weary, worn, and it becomes abundantly clear that he isn’t talking to Dad but to his voicemail. “I’m alive. Just wanted to let you know. Call me back if you can, okay? Bye.”

God, if that turns Sam's stomach, he can only imagine what it's doing to Dean and seeing it? Watching his brother's blind faith in the man fail, crumble, and then rebuild, resolve before his eyes as Dean takes the blame, puts the fault at his own doorstep as he twists, molds, forces the truth to bend and reshape to shore up the pedestal he's put their father on.

It's watching a vampire of a whole different breed drain the life out of his brother, and Sam is just about sick of it. He wants to grab John Winchester by the shoulders and shake him until his eyes cross. Or maybe just give him a good, solid kick in the jewels.

But he’d have to find him first, and even if he did, no matter what he said - or kicked - Sam knows he wouldn’t be able to change John’s mind about anything. Wouldn't be able to get across how fucked up this all is, the number it's doing on Dean, on Sam, on everything.

It's a lost cause. One Sam wrote off the second he sent his first college application, dropped in the mail with bated breath and a nervous glance back over his shoulder at Dean getting Funyuns and Mountain Dew in the convenience store on the corner.

And now he's back in it. Back to watching Dad let Dean down again and again, forever threatening to topple from the ivory tower his brother's built for him, only for Dean to shove him right back up there with excuse after excuse, stubborn refusal after stubborn refusal.

He wants to tell Dean that their dad is an idiot – that he's wrong and selfish and useless for anything not hunting, that Dean is worth saving and protecting, that any decent father would see it the way that Sam sees it, would come for him, protect him, no matter what—but he knows exactly how that would go over. It’d only send Dean on the defensive, have him making excuses for John and firing back at Sam and putting them right back at each other's throats, and the last thing Sam wants right
now is to drive Dean away when he just got him back.

When Dean sighs, slowly turns to face the mirror with a wince and an indrawn breath, Sam closes his eyes and lets his breathing slow, evening to mimic the deep in-out of sleep.

It'll kill Sam, just a little, to leave Dean to face this alone, but the fragile peace that's been forged between them can't really stand another fight at this point. If Sam jumps in now, has to look Dean in the face after their father's let him down for the umpteenth time, he's not gonna be able to keep his mouth shut, not gonna be able to not point out how awful, how wrong it all is - that Dean is his son, almost died on his hunt, and John's ignoring him like a damn telemarketer - and if he says that, starts that, there's gonna be a fight, and it's gonna be loud and messy and awful, and Sam just can't handle that right now.

Hell, considering all the hisses and grumbles as his brother makes his way from the bathroom to the bed, Dean probably can't handle it right now either.

This suspicion is more than confirmed as Dean limps by Sam to lower himself on the bed by the door, cursing as sitting back against the headboard irritates one bone-deep bruise or another. Sam can hear the muffled sound of Dean picking up the remote, flicking on the TV to thumb the volume extra low and flipping through the channels for a minute before he settles on a rerun of “Walker, Texas Ranger.” Sam listens in long enough for Chuck Norris to tame a bear using nothing but a steely glare and a soundtrack of tribal flutes before he stretches and gives a groaning yawn that hopefully doesn't sound too fake.

“You're up early,” he mumbles, shoving a hand through his hair to get the worst of it out of his eyes

"I'm a go-getter," Dean shrugs, and Sam sees how much the movement costs him, immediately notices how drawn his face is, the shadows under his brother's eyes, the tight line of his mouth, the awkward set of his shoulders against the headboard, his arms and neck resting carefully, just a bit too carefully to be entirely natural.

His brother's either given up on pretending he's better, or he's actually getting worse, which is all kinds of bad, considering what he's been through.

“You look like shit,” Sam observes, his eyes narrowing.

“Thanks, Sammy,” Dean snorts, levering himself forward with a wince to dig something out of his pocket. “You say the sweetest things.”

“Seriously,” Sam presses. "Take some pills, get some more sleep."

"Yeah, that'd be awesome," Dean snorts, finally fishing Sam's phone out of his pocket and tossing to over. "But someone's phone woke me up at the ass crack of dawn. Your girl says to call her back, by the way."


"Way to go, Sammy," Dean snorts. "Guess you're out for Boyfriend of the Year."

"Shut up, Dean," Sam mutters absently, trying to figure out of Jess'd be in class right now, or if he can call her back. God, it's been what? Four? Five days since he's talked to her? No wonder she's checking in. "Did she sound pissed?"

"She sounded like a babe," Dean smirks, ignoring both Sam and the Texas Rangering going on in the background. "One day you're gonna tell me how a guy who can't talk to a chick without turning
bright red and stuttering scored a live-in girlfriend in all of five minutes. She didn't show up to your first date with a U-Haul, did she?"

"You're an idiot," Sam says, trying not to laugh as he punches in Jess's number and puts the phone to his ear.

"Smart enough not to stick around for this conversation," Dean grins, levering himself from the bed with a hiss as the movement strains his bites. "Trust me dude: Phone sex. It heals all wounds."

Without thinking, Sam snorts and aims a half-hearted punch at his brother's shoulder.

He doesn't expect Dean to react at all, outside of a retaliatory shove or hair-ruffle, so when Dean wobbles and very nearly faceplants on the bed, Sam drops the phone and is on his feet in an instant, completely ignoring Jess's confused voice echoing into the disheveled sheets.

"Dude, what the hell was that?" Sam demands, bracing Dean as he lowers himself to the bed.

"I'm fine," Dean mutters, shrugging Sam's grip off. "Just feelin' it a little this morning. S'nothing."

"Yeah, 'nothing' doesn't have you almost eating carpet when I touch you on the fucking arm," Sam snaps, shutting his phone and grabbing the keys from the nightstand. "Get a shirt on. We're going to the hospital."

"No," Dean flatly refuses, starting to cross his arms and then thinking better of it with a pained wince.

"Dean, you look like crap, you're falling over-"

"Yeah, my insides got sucked out by a vampire the other day," Dean snips. "I'm a little under the weather."

"I'm serious, Dean!" Sam bursts out, but Dean doesn't give him the chance.

"So am I," he throws back, not moving an inch. "Coffee and breakfast's gonna do me a hell of a lot more good than an IV right now, and you know that."

"Dean—" Sam protests, but his brother cuts him off again.

"I'm serious, Sammy."

And no matter how drawn Dean's face is, no matter how dark the circles beneath his eyes, there's steel in his spine and in his voice, the same stubborn, fierce strength that's always there, always been there.

"Calm down. Call your girl," Dean orders. "I'll be back with coffee and doughnuts in ten."

And Dean may be all stubborn steel, but Sam is his brother, cut from the same cloth, and two can play that game.

"Yeah, if you think I'm letting that happen, you are brain damaged," he snorts, snatching the keys from the table and clenching them in his fist.

"Whatcha gonna do, Sam?" Dean challenges, standing slowly but steadily. "Drag me kicking and screaming to the ER? Tell 'em your big bro's vampire bites hurt real bad and he's still reelin' after the back-alley blood transfusion you gave him? We'd be in padded rooms by lunch, and I don't know
about you, but a straight-jacket? Not really a look I wanna try and pull off."

He's right. He's right and Sam hates it, because it means that he can't do a thing to help his brother. Can't do anything but sit and watch and wait and worry, and he can't even do that, because now that Dean's got it in his head to go out for food, there's not going to be any stopping him.

At least, not with the handcuffs all the way out in the trunk of the Impala.

"I still say you shouldn't be driving," Sam grumbles, not meeting Dean's eye.

"Yeah, what do you want me to do, officer?" Dean teases with a grin, shoving at Sam a little as he tugs on a shirt and gingerly shuffles into yesterday's jeans. "Stand on one foot and touch my nose? Say my ABC's backwards?"

"You're not fine," Sam persists, not rising to the jab as he steadies Dean when he stands up too fast.

"But I'm getting there," Dean says, taking the keys from Sam and tucking them into his pocket. "Get some rest. Call Jess. I'll be back in ten, promise."

"You better be."

Dean doesn't have a response to that, just rolls his eyes and snags his wallet on his way out, like Sam is being a hysterical child, worried over nothing and making his life difficult because of it.

It rankles Sam, irritates him that Dean's gone right back to treating him like an annoying little kid, but he's not here, so they can't fight about it, and he's already screwed up talking to Jess twice today. Sam has no choice but to swallow his anger, to tamp it down with all the other unhealthy, repressed crap he keeps locked away, and hope to god that whenever it does surface things don't blow up in his face too badly.

~

The call to Jess goes fine. She’s so happy that he and Dean are both okay and on the way home that she doesn’t even mention that Sam didn’t call. He tells her not to worry and that it’ll probably take them a few days to get back to Palo Alto. Sam doesn’t expect they’ll be able to spend more than ten hours driving a day in the state they’re in, if that. Conservatively, they’ll pull into town sometime on the 31st.

“Your Stanford interview’s on the second,” Jess reminds him. “Do you need me to try to get it pushed back?”

With the search for Dean - finding him and saving him and his brother being the same stubborn, annoying ass he's always been - Sam's completely forgotten about the interview. He’s not anywhere close to prepared for it, but he can’t even imagine how trying to get it moved would look.

“No, no, it’ll be fine,” he says, wracking his brain for which prep materials he's got, which ones he still needs, which ones he has, but needs more current editions of. “I’ll still have a couple of days to get ready for it.”

“If you’re sure,” Jess answers, and Sam can hear the uncertainty in her voice. “Is Dean gonna be staying here for a while, then? Becca’s got a blow-up mattress we can probably borrow.”

“Yeah,” Sam nods, even though she can't see it. “Yeah, if you don’t mind, can you ask her? I’m not sure how long he’ll be there, but he doesn’t need to sleep on the couch.”
“Okay,” Jess chirps. “I’ll pick up some spare blankets and stuff, too.”

Sam can hear the sunny smile in her voice, wishes so hard that he could just hold her, kiss her, travel back to three weeks ago, where his biggest worry was getting the newest issue of the Stanford Law Review on time and convincing Zach that Tequila Tuesdays and Theology exams don’t mix.

And he feels like the biggest traitor, the world’s worst brother, because three weeks ago Dean was waking up caged in a basement with a chloroform hangover and a monster ready bleed him dry.

“Thank you, Jess. You’re the best,” he manages, doing his best to remind himself that it wasn’t his fault, he didn’t know, that it’s not going to happen again, not now, not ever.

“I know,” Jess says loftily. “Drive safe, okay? I’m glad you’re coming home. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too,” Sam gets out, holding on to the laughter in her voice, the smile he can hear, sunny and bright, for all that it’s hundreds of miles away. “I’ll see you soon.”

He latches onto the warm feeling in his chest and lets it push the fear, the guilt, out of his mind.

Jess is fine. Dean is fine. Everything else, Sam can deal with.

~

Considering how well-trained they are at packing up and shagging ass, it takes them an embarrassingly long time to get ready to leave, between Dean insisting that Sam eat breakfast and Sam insisting on changing Dean’s bandages and neither one of them wanting the other one to drive.

“We tried letting you drive yesterday, Sam,” Dean growls, tossing the lone duffle Sam had let him grab into the trunk. “And in case you forgot, we lost an entire day of travel time because you ripped half your arm open on the gear shift!”

“Yeah, because the stitches were sloppy and done with dental floss,” Sam huffs, throwing in his own bags, and yeah, maybe he’s not so careful about his arm, but he’s got one cut. Dean’s a freaking roadmap of bruises and puncture wounds. Sam is more than in the right on this one! “I’m fine now, and anyway, I’m not the one who lost so much blood that they’re still—”

“I’m fine!” Dean insists, slamming the trunk shut and trying his hardest not to wince. He’s moving better after breakfast and painkillers, but Sam can still see how much every move costs him, how hard it is to pretend that he’s not hurting, not feeling every inch of what that monster did to him. "Walkin' and talkin'. You were in the hospital yesterday."

“For a minor injury!” Sam says, ignoring Dean’s scoff. “Anyway, if my arm starts hurting, I can always wake you up and—”

“You aren’t driving, Sam,” Dean snaps. “End of discussion.”

It’s the perfect impression of John Winchester, and Sam bristles, hates it. Because ever since Dean found out about the cut on his arm, he’s been doing exactly what Sam was afraid he’d do. For the last day, it’s been like Sam’s seventeen again. Dean’s ignoring his own health in favor of taking care of his little brother, he hasn’t even mentioned Dad, and he just won’t listen to Sam, much less trust him. It’s driving Sam crazy, and more than that, it isn’t healthy for either of them. He’s not even sure at this point if Dean knows where they’re going, if he’s planning to take Sam back to Stanford or what, and he’s not really sure how to start that conversation either.

“You know, I’m—” he starts, but then Dean’s phone goes off, startling them both.
“What the…?” Dean digs it from his pocket and thumbs it open, wrinkling his brow.

It’s an incoming text message, and Sam crowds in next to Dean to see what it says.

*From: Unavailable*

*Subject:*

*Message: 35, 111*

Sam blinks.

"Are those… coordinates?” Sam asks, squinting at the text in the weak morning sun.

“It’s Dad,” Dean breathes. “It’s gotta be.”

“You think Dad’s texting you?” Sam asks incredulously. “Does he even know how to text?”

“Who else could it be?” Dean demands.

He hits Dad’s number, and Sam moves in closer so that he can press his ear against the phone next to Dean’s.

“We’re sorry; you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again.”

Dean swears, tries it again and gets the same response. He still has the phone pressed against his ear when Sam returns with the GPS and a map and dumps them onto the trunk of the Impala.

“It looks like the coordinates are to a place called Black Water Ridge, Colorado,” he tells Dean, tracing the map with his finger. “We know anybody there?”

Dean shakes his head.

”Never heard of it,” he looks over Sam’s shoulder at the map. “How far?”

Sam pauses, stomach sinking because he can't- he can't think- not seriously, right?

“Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘Why?’” Dean mimics, looking at Sam like he's lost his mind. "Dad’s sayin’ to go there.”

“Maybe,” Sam emphasizes. Dean just gives him a skeptical look. “And even if he is, does that mean you have to go?”

“What are you talking about? Of course it does,” Dean scoffs, makes a move to grab the map, and Sam snatches it out of his reach.

“Dude, what is your problem?” Dean demands, glaring at Sam over the trunk of the car.

“My problem,” Sam answers sharply, setting his jaw and getting ready, because if they can't put this fight off any more, he's at least going to make a good go of it, “is that after everything that just happened, the man says jump, and you don't even stop to ask how high! He left you to *die*, Dean!”

Dean’s face is stone, jaw set, shoulders square, and his voice is tight, hard, when he finally answers.
“You said there was a job he had to take. Something important.”

“More important than you?!” Sam demands. "More important than making sure you're alive?"

“And if he’s giving me coordinates like this,” Dean continues stubbornly, ignoring Sam, and it's so like Dad, so classic John Winchester, and Sam just hates it, hates how Dean can turn himself off, can shut down and becomes this cold, awful copy of their father, how it always happens when they get an order like this. “Then it means he needs backup.”

Sam sighs, shoulders slumping as the fight drains out of him, because no matter how much he might hate how Dean gets when it comes to Dad and 'Orders' and 'The Job', Dean is his brother.

Hurting him, destroying these illusions he's built up around their father, it's not fun. And sure, it's gonna win him this argument, but goddamn it if this one isn't gonna hurt Dean like hell.

“I don’t think so, Dean.” Sam shakes his head, going to pull open the door of the Impala and drag his bag out from the backseat.

Dean waits, watching him curiously with arms crossed as Sam digs around until he pulls out an object they're both intimately familiar with: Dad's journal.

“Why do you have that?” Dean demands, eyes sharp.

“Dad left it in the hotel room,” Sam explains, opening up the journal and pulling out a folded piece of paper. “This was with it.”

Dean takes the note, reading it with a deep frown.

"Sam,

I've got to go. I've tried to wait but I've got a lead on something big. There have been signs. Signs I can't ignore anymore.

This isn't a hunt I can put off, Sam. It's big. Important.

Find your brother. Don’t look for me. You'll understand one day.”

Dean puts the note down, scrubs a hand over his mouth, and starts flipping through the journal.

He won’t find anything. Sam knows that already.

There aren't any more notes in there. No more answers, no explanations, just the same old jumbled hash of lore and legend and loss, the same things that have traveled with them their whole lives.

“Come on,” Sam presses, trying desperately to make Dean get it, to make him understand. “You tried to call him this morning and he didn't answer. You tried again and suddenly his phone's disconnected. Now he's sending us coordinates from an unknown number for some place out in the middle of nowhere? I mean, if he wanted to see us, why not just pick up the phone and say so? Why the run-around?”

Dean purses his lips, nods, eyes still fixed on the journal.

“So it’s a hunt,” he says finally, not meeting Sam's eye. “I still gotta go.”

Sam wants to smack him. Wants to snatch that stupid journal out of his hands and just whack his brother upside the head until he sees sense or reason or the light at the end of the goddamn tunnel,
because this is nuts.

“Dean, those coordinates are in the middle of the woods!” Sam exclaims. "You could barely get your pants on this morning, you really think you're okay to hike up a fucking mountain?! The condition you're in, you'll be lucky if you even make it up there, much less hunt down whatever the hell it is Dad's sending you after!"

“So what am I supposed to do, then?” Dean demands. “Ignore it? Let innocent people die?”

Better them than you, Sam thinks but doesn't say. Not because he doesn't believe it - he does, with everything he's got – but because if he said it out loud, Dean would never forgive him.

“No,” he says instead. “You’re supposed to wait until you’re actually in the condition to help those people. You seriously think you’re fooling me with your whole ‘I’m fine’ act? You spent ten days in a cage too small for most dogs. You had catastrophic blood loss. You are not fine! You’re definitely not in the condition to go wandering off into the wilderness after some mystery monster.”

Dean clenches and unclenches his hands. Sam's right and he knows it. He just doesn't want to hear it.

“And what about me?” Sam pushes, already hating himself for playing this card. “After everything that’s happened, you’re just gonna put me on a bus for California? Give me a handshake and wish me the best of luck? Or are you expecting me to go hiking up the mountain after this thing, too?”

And really, that’s all it takes. Dean may be stupidly willing to risk his own life for the cause, but he’d never take a chance when it comes to Sam's safety. No way is Dean going to drag Sam along on a hunt or send him off on a Greyhound when he won’t even trust him to take his own antibiotics.

“I can drive you back to Stanford,” Dean says, and Sam doesn’t think he’s imagining the touch of misery in his voice.

“And then you can stay with me for a while,” Sam tells him. “Until you’re okay to hunt. You can probably do a lot of the research from my place. I can even help you.”

Dean makes a noncommittal noise.

So, he's not too enthused about that idea. Fine. Sam'll figure out a way to convince him to stay a while once they get back to Palo Alto. Hell, he’ll nail Dean to the floor if he has to. There’s no way Sam is going to sit back and watch Dad send Dean off to risk his life yet again. Not now. Not when Sam just came so close to losing him for good.

They finish packing up and pull out of the parking lot in uncomfortable silence. Dean clicks on the music, trying to play it cool like Sam can’t see the way he's shifting in the seat, trying to find a position that doesn't irritate one wound or another as they bypass the I-35 in favor of I-10.

In Dean's mind, that text is as good as direct orders from Dad, and Sam can't remember the last time he's disobeyed the man, even on minor things, much less something like this. And as much as Sam wishes Dean was taking time off to take care of himself, he doesn't have any illusions about who Dean's actually doing this for.

“Man, I knew you were awake,” Dean says suddenly, interrupting Sam's thoughts.

Sam turns to stare at him.
“Huh?”

“After I tried to call Dad,” his brother clarifies. “Seriously, has that fake sleep routine ever worked on anyone? Sorry, kiddo, but you couldn't act your way out of a paper bag.”

“That’s not what you said when I was in those plays in high school,” Sam points out, the hint of a smile just playing at the edge of his mouth.

Dean lips turn up at the memory, the shadow a grin sneaking in.

“Well, it was kind of cute when you were fourteen,” he says. “Now it’s just sad.”

They’re silent for a moment.

“Why the act, anyway?” Dean asks.

Sam blows his bangs out of his eyes.

“I dunno, Dean. I figured that’s what you’d want.”

His brother just raises an eyebrow at him, and Sam tries to explain:

"Let’s just say you’d like it a lot better than the other option.”

“So basically it was either pull your Sleeping Beauty act or hug it out,” Dean jokes.

“Basically, it was either that or say some things you really weren’t going to like,” Sam says before he can stop himself. “Like that Dad’s a complete bastard for treating you like this.”

“Sam,” Dean protests, wincing.

“But I’m not gonna be that way,” Sam says, and it’s suddenly important that Dean understand: “Dad may not answer you when you call, but I always will.”

"Which is exactly why you told me to never call you again,” Dean nods. "No, I get it, makes perfect sense."

Sam presses his lips into a thin line. He’s been wondering how long it would take for that particular conversation to come up.

Two years ago. God, that fight...

“I was mad. I said something stupid,” he says. “So sue me. I didn't mean it.”

“Really,” Dean says flatly, and Sam turns in the seat to look him in the eye as best he can.

“Yeah. Really.”

Dean turns to look at him full on, little crease forming between his eyebrows.

Okay, so maybe 'Sorry' isn't really gonna cut it here.

"Listen, I know I said some things,” Sam begins. And it's not enough, the understatement to end all understatements, because he crossed the line - crossed so many lines - did it all because he wanted it to hurt and because he knew how.

He regrets it now.
Hell, he regretted it when it happened. But he was just getting into a rhythm at Stanford, just getting comfortable, realizing that he could do this, that he could keep up with the scholarship and complete his degree. That *maybe*, just maybe, if he worked his ass off, take it further, maybe get into Graduate School, get an actual Law Degree, that he could really *help* people, not just kill whatever was about to eat them, not just make sure they survived but actually stick around and help them *live*. And through it all, Dean was there, calling or dropping by, sending letters or texts, weaving himself in and around Sam's new life, always a little awkward, the gap, the distance between them new and unfamiliar and made harsher, more painful, by all the things they couldn't say, all the things they could never say for this new, fragile balance to hold.

Dad.

The life.

The night Sam left.

And it worked, as long as they never scratched the surface, as long as neither of them leaned too far, tipped too much into talking about the past or the future. They were tiptoeing along the tightrope of the present for two careful years, but it wasn't perfect, there was always that tension, that feeling of teetering, of always being on the edge.

Sam could feel it. Could feel all of the things Dean was stopping himself from talking about, was stopping himself from saying. He could see the tension in his brother's eyes when he ducked out to take a call from Dad, when they danced too close to one of the hundred things they couldn't talk about now that Sam had left the life.

Had left the family.

And no matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, Sam couldn't ignore it, couldn't not see the question rise in his brother's eyes when they grabbed a beer together at the edge of campus, when he picked up the phone after a long night of studying to hear his brother's voice, exhausted and happy, asking him how his day was over the distant crackle of a salt and burn.

He couldn't help but see the same question, the same thought, written, wished and then crossed out, over and over again, and Sam knew - knew deep down, in the darkest part of himself - that if Dean ever worked up the courage to ask it, he would never be able to say no.

Sam knew that if Dean ever asked him to come back, to leave Stanford and Pre-Law and normal behind, to get in the passenger seat and pop in Zeppelin as they tore across the country for a salt and burn, that he would say yes.

If it was Dean asking, asking because he wanted it, not because he needed it or because the job required it or because Dad ordered it, but because Dean *wanted* him there, Sam would never be able to say no.

And he could see Dean working himself up to it, could see the dream, the idea of a normal life and having something and somewhere to call his own, something more than a trunk full of weapons and their father's war, could see everything he was only just allowing himself to want slipping away with every inch Dean gained, every time that question came just a little bit closer to making its way out, and it *terrified* him.

So he ruined it all.

The next time Dean was in town, the next time they got together in an off campus bar, too nice to be
a dive but just seedy enough that it was home after a few beers, Sam let a fight crop up on the drive home, when they were just buzzed enough to be stupid, just enough booze and bravado in their systems to keep cooler heads from prevailing, and when it got worse, he got worse, took Dean and Dad and their whole lives to task for every sin they'd ever visited on him and their family and the world and by the end, by the time the dust cleared and the lines were drawn, he'd said every awful, hateful thought he'd ever had about his brother, their family, their lives, out loud and to his brother’s face.

To the one person who would believe every word. Who would take it as gospel and never forget.

And when he was done, he said to never call. To never write. To never come by. Because he didn't want Dean any more. Didn't want anything to do with him. Didn't want to see his face or hear his voice or know where he was or what he was doing there.

It was too much. Too much and not enough and the number of times Sam almost picked up the phone, picked it up and dropped it again and hated himself a hundred times over for ever doing that, saying that, letting his brother believe that. God.

"I didn't mean it and I shouldn't have said it, Dean," he breaks off, because he has to understand, he has to. "I shouldn't have— No matter what I— You didn't deserve that. You didn't."

Sam sighs, shoves a hand through his hair, pushes himself to continue, because he started this shit, started it two years ago by being a jerk and a bitch and a fucking coward all rolled into one, and now it's on him to get it out here, it's his job to finish it, to undo the mess he's made of their lives.

"I was mad. I was frustrated and scared and I took it out on you, and I shouldn't have. But you've been there for me my whole life, Dean," Sam pushes. "For everything. And no matter how mad I am, no matter how scared I am, no matter how frustrated I am, if you call, I'm gonna pick up. If you disappear, I'm gonna come find you, and if some fucking vampire has you in a cage—"

"You're gonna kick the door down and take its head off with a fucking shovel," Dean interrupts, nodding.

"… I used the window," Sam mumbles.

"Whatever, Rambo," Dean chuckles, shoving playfully at Sam's shoulder. "Just remind me to never piss you off when you're around gardening tools."

"You're an idiot," Sam shakes his head, punching Dean in the arm, careful not to aggravate any of his bites this time.

"You love it," Dean breezes, an easy grin on his face that slips, just a little, becomes something more important, something deeper, thoughtful

“So, what?” he starts, more serious now. "After all that, you're sayin' if I'd've called, you would've still picked up?"

“Yes!” Sam exclaims, then adds in a more level voice: “I can’t promise I wouldn’t have been a jerk about it or whatever, but... yeah."

He takes a deep breath, catches Dean’s gaze and hold it, makes sure his brother is really paying attention, because this is important. Maybe the most important thing there is.

"You’re my brother, Dean," he says. "I am always gonna pick up."
Dean blinks before turning back to the road, and they're both silent for a long moment.

“Huh,” he says finally.

“Yeah,” Sam returns.

They’re quiet for a long time after that, but Dean’s fingers loosen up on the wheel a little bit and that cocky little grin is back to lurking at the edges of his mouth, so overall, Sam counts it as a win.
In which Dean does an uncomfortable amount of thinking.

Dean lets the quiet stretch out, thumbs the radio through the 90's until he hits the adult contemporary and soft rock stations, and then watches Sammy lose his war with sleep by inches.

The kid worries too much. Dean'd be fine on a hunt. Maybe not great, but he'd figure somethin' out. Enough to do his job. He’s banged up, not fucking helpless.

Of course, with Sammy in the mood he's in, the kid would probably truck out after him, do something stupid and self-sacrificing, and then get laid up with a gory and entirely preventable injury.

*Again.*

Dean glances down to his brother's bandaged arm, stretched carelessly across his lap, fingers loose with sleep and curling gently. The gauze stands out against Sam's jeans, thick and rough and damning, a bright, impossible white in the midmorning sun. Like a fucking beacon.

Like he could ever not see it, like he'd ever forget the red, raw ruin beneath all that white. The story it tells, the mark Sammy's gonna carry for the rest of his life, all that damage is on Dean's head, as stark and inescapable as the dressing on Sam's arm.

He really should have changed the bandage for Sam before they left the motel. Should have double checked the redness and his range of motion, but it'd been enough of a chore to get the kid to stop fussing over him long enough to take the fucking antibiotics, much less sit still and let his gaping wound be examined.

And then they had to go get that damn text from Dad.

God, that was a can of worms Dean'd be happy to have never opened.

Things aren't exactly great between him and Sammy. He knows that. But they’re getting better, little by little, especially after this latest Big Gay Feelings talk.

Hell, Dean’s still trying to wrap his head around the idea that if he’d just gotten out of the car one of the times he’d pulled by Stanford, if he hadn’t been such a chicken shit - too afraid of what else Sammy could say to prove that he’d never needed Dean, had never wanted him in his life, afraid to hear that everything they'd been through, everything they'd been to each other, was lost, gone, nothing - those two long years of painful silence wouldn't have existed. If he'd just given Sam a call...

Sam would have picked up.

He would have been pissed off and bitchy (which, when is he not, these days?) but he would have picked up.
That's… something. It's worth something. Fits somewhere in there with Sammy dropping school to dive back into hunting and showing up out of the blue to save Dean's ass from a vampire.

Talk about two things that Dean never would have predicted in a million years, but are pretty goddamn good to know anyway. Admittedly, it would have been a hell of a lot better to know two years ago, but Dean'll take what he can get, file it away with everything else he never knew about his baby brother.

Everything else that's bridging the gap between them, little by little.

Dad’s still one hell of a touchy subject. And that text? It didn’t just touch on everything they’re not talking about, it punched it right in the fucking face, and yeah, Dean’s no idiot. He knows they’d have had to talk about where the hell they were going eventually, but they could have at least pretended that everything was okay a little longer.

Dean can admit, in the quiet vacuum of the Impala with his little brother safe and dreaming quietly in the seat next to him, that this, right here, with Sammy? It feels good. Even with the crap between them, said and unsaid, to have his brother with him again, chasing him around with Neosporin and never eating enough, fussing and bitching and generally driving Dean crazy?

Well, it's a good thing. Something he thought he'd never have again.

Something that's gonna be pretty fucking hard to let go of when they reach California.

These past two years, hunting with Dad or, more often than not, hunting without Dad? Alone? Just the same diners and the same motel rooms and the same parade of fucked up shit that happens to perfectly good not-at-all fucked up people?

Not. Fun.

Sure, there have been good days. Nice bars with good booze and warm, willing girls in the mix. There have been the hunts where things go right, where the lore matches and the history fits and bones are burned and bullets meet their mark before anyone else dies, but the times between, when it's just Dean and the empty passenger seat? Same five albums clicking away to fill the stark silence of a suddenly too-big car? Going days, sometimes weeks, without talking to someone who knows him as anything other than his bullshit alias of the minute?

Well, it's the kind of anonymity that's fun for an hour or a day, but'll drive you crazy, you do it too long.

And Dean? Dean's been doing it for too long. Way too long.

He's aware enough to admit that's half the reason he jumped on the Black Water Ridge job so fast. Hunting with Sammy beside him, having more time to work on this thing that kept them mad at each other for so long, waking up every morning to his little brother, drowsy and sleep tousled, his stupid floppy hair sticking out every which way and completely useless before you got him food and coffee?

Dean could think of worse ways to live.

He looks over at Sam. He's still out of it, for all intents and purposes, but not as easily as before. There's a frown on his face and furrows in his brow that weren't there a minute ago.

Dean knows what's going to happen next. He's seen this show enough times over the past few days to have the cues down pat.
First Sammy frowns, like there's something that's not quite right, but he can't put his finger on it. Dean always hopes he's wrong about that frown, that there's just an itch in the waking world that sleeping Sammy can't scratch, or that he's about to wake up and rag on Dean for watching him sleep like a creeper.

He never does.

That's the thing about Sammy: once he's out, he's out. So when his face scrunches up like that, when he starts tossing his head and murmuring into the darkness, he's not just trying to get comfortable or figure out why his fifth grade soccer coach is dancing the Macarena in the middle of Bobby's kitchen. He's falling headfirst and heels dragging into the same nightmare again, the one that always goes from frowning to distraught moans and terrified whimpers, and always ends in Sam jolting awake, not screaming, not lashing out, just frozen in shocked, horrified dread at whatever follows him into his dreams every night.

Dean hates that Sam is having this same damn dream over and over again. He can't stand that saving Dean's life left Sammy so fucked up that he can't even sleep, and it absolutely burns him, from somewhere deep inside, that Sam refuses to even acknowledge the nightmares in his waking hours.

It's Dean's fault. It's got to be.

Sam didn't have nightmares like this before he left, didn't have them the few times they met up before the fight two years ago.

Bad enough Dean screwed up and Sam had to drop everything and spring his busted, broken-down ass. Bad enough that his brother's gonna carry scars from this shit show for the rest of his life. Sammy shouldn't be forced to relive the awful shit Dean just put him through in his sleep, too.

Sammy was safe at Stanford. Happy, too. In the handful of times they'd seen each other those first two years, it was clear enough that apple-pie normal fit Sam, gave him a soft, steady purpose that he never had hunting. There were no nightmares, no impossible to explain injuries, no shady bars or skeevy motel rooms. Just marble columns and manicured lawns and Sam, smiling without a shadow in his eyes for the first time in what seemed like ages.

Back then, seeing Sam so happy away from hunting had been nothing short of painful. It didn't just sting, seeing him fucking flourishing so far away from Dean, from Dad, from the life Dean hungered to bring him back into. It killed something in Dean, some half-formed idea of home and family and someone needing him around half as much as he needed them.

But now? Now, the idea that there's somewhere safe for Sam - somewhere he can go far away from all this, where he won't starve himself on a whim, won't have to push himself to the edge of sanity just to get by, where blood and scars and psychotic breaks aren't just another day at the office - sounds pretty fucking fantastic.

Of course, that safe, soft slice of apple-pie normal, that place where Sam doesn't have nightmares and won't keep driving himself to the brink over and over again ever time his fuck-up brother drops the ball... Well, it's about as far from Dean as far can get.

He's never had anything like the life Sam's built for himself at Stanford. Wouldn't know what to do with himself if he did. And it's not just the hunting, it's the awful, uncomfortable feeling that settled over Dean those few times he'd seen Sam before that fight blew everything all to hell.

Here was Sam, fresh new life at one of the best schools in the country, laughing and smiling and fitting in like this place with its the marble floors and hallowed halls and smooth, educated
entitlement was something he was born to, something he was headed to all along.

And then there was Dean: Repeat offender. High school dropout. A grimy, unshaved drifter with 23 bucks and a stack of fake credit cards to his name.

Hell, half the time he was in Palo Alto, he was stuck with the awkward feeling he shouldn't actually sit on the furniture because he might get road dust and gunpowder all over their polished, perfect world of privilege and matriculation.

The Sam who fits in at Stanford has no place in his life for Dean, who's a thousand times more at home under the hood of a car than in a classroom. That Sam is all careful vowels and measured phrases, crafting a perfect life out of test scores and scholarships. He's got no use for Dean, no place in his ideal, vanilla world for a twenty-something ex-con who leaves his socks in the sink and never misses a shot.

It was awful visiting Sam and seeing him becoming someone so different, so far removed from the little brother Dean grew up with. Every time Dean came back, Sam was smoother, more polished, more of this strange, new person who only shared memories with the Sammy Dean grew up with, his grinning, dimpled partner in crime who lived his life in motels and on freeways, crammed hip to shoulder with Dean, laughing and teasing and fighting like the world was just he and Sam and the next stretch of blacktop.

Dean's man enough to admit to himself that's at least part of the reason he didn't end that stupid goddamn fight before it got out of hand two years ago.

Here was New Sam, all fresh-pressed and clean-cut, crisp polo and smooth, unscarred denim. The rumpled, floppy-haired kid he'd used to be, that scrawny, snarky brother swimming in Dean's hand-me-downs in the passenger seat and rolling his eyes as he scribbled on a legal pad or thumbed through one book or another, trying not to laugh at Dean singing along with the radio, was nothing but a memory now.

And then there was Dean, the same as he'd always been - Dad's leather jacket on his back and a perpetual mix of blood and engine grease beneath his nails - out of place and out of his depth. And for all that they were together, sitting with elbows and knees an awkward half-inch apart, they might as well have been in different states, on different planets, they were so far apart. Dean honestly couldn't tell you what was worse: being away from his brother or being with him, physically next to him in some sad excuse for a dive on the edge of yuppie-ville, but still being as far away as if he were on the fucking moon.

And it was awful. Awful and frustrating and wrong, because for all that Dean had thought he knew Sammy like the back of his hand, he couldn't understand why his brother had thought that their lives were so bad that he needed to become this. Why he'd decided that what he was - what they were - was so much less than this soft, oblivious, civilian stack of trust funds and libraries.

It was frustrating and confusing and painful as hell, kept Dean tense and awkward and at the bottle, straining and bitter, and when Sam shot his mouth off, let out just one little jab that hit too close to home (God, Dean can't even remember what he said now, what it was that set it all off. How fucked up is that?), he didn't bother to keep his mouth shut. He didn't push it down or shove it away or call it a night, didn't do the smart thing or the careful thing or the right thing, didn't listen to reason or experience that told him to shut the fuck up in the name of keeping the peace.

He'd have done it for Sammy. But for this new asshole? The crisp, clean, distant civilian sitting next to him at the bar, awkwardly picking at the label of his prissy microbrew and trying to think of what to say next with a hard, frustrated twist at the corner of his mouth?
Well, it didn't seem worth the trouble.

Which just goes to show what an idiot Dean is, because apparently the second the shit hit the fan, all the priss and polish in the world couldn't keep down a lifetime of training, couldn't keep whatever it was between them from undoing two years of stupid on Dean's part, because when the blood washed off and the desperation cleared, Sammy was there, was back, was changing bandages and checking temperatures like it was just another hunt gone rough. Like he'd never left. Like they'd never fought.

Like no time had passed at all.

It was like Dean had woken from his worst nightmare to find the thing he hadn't even let himself wish for shoving a fucking thermometer in his ear, starved and exhausted and beat all to hell, but warm and alive and there, and it hurts, kills, because this is Dean's life, and good shit like this doesn't happen.

Not without a price.

As good as it is having Sam with him, annoying him and fussing over him and bitching over Dean's food and his music and his goddamn socks, just like he always did, it can't last.

Because Sam can't stay.

And it's not that Dean doesn't want him to, because he does. It's all he's ever wanted.

It killed Dean when Sam walked out four years ago. It killed again him when booze and stupidity had smashed what little bit of their relationship they'd been able to salvage, just like it's gonna kill him to let his brother out of that passenger seat in a couple days, to have to put his one sure good thing in the Impala's rearview and not look back, but if it's for Sammy? If it means he doesn't ever have to become the desperate, ragged shade of himself Dean woke up to in that hotel room ever again? He'll do it.

It'll destroy a part of Dean. The solid, central part of him that's always had a job, that's always known exactly what he was supposed to do, who he was here to protect. The part that still remembers soft, blonde curls and sandwiches with no crusts, and a warm voice singing the Beatles when the shadows scared him.

The part that picked up his baby brother all those years ago and never really put him down.

But the kid's been through enough.

He never wanted this life, not really, and no matter how much Dean might want him here, he wants Sammy safe and happy more. Knowing Sam is protected and taken care of at Stanford is worth the empty car, the deserted motel rooms, one alias bleeding into another as Dean fights a war on their father's orders in their mother's memory.

Sammy's happiness is worth that.

His life is worth that.

To spare him what he can, Dean wakes Sam up before the nightmare can go full-bore Elm Street. After all, if he's only got from Texas to California to have Sammy in the passenger seat again, all bitchface and “Asshat,” and “We aren't listening to Zeppelin II again Dean, I will literally jump out the window and hitchhike to civilization,” then he's damn sure gonna get all he can out of the time he's got.
Jess is plastered to the ceiling, eyes sad and hair burning, when Dean drags Sam from the nightmare, his brother's warm, heavy hand on his shoulder the only real, safe thing in the world for a long, hard moment.

When Sam can shake the tight, clenched feeling from his limbs, can tell himself he doesn't smell the hot, acrid burn of flesh and hair and plaster anymore, he looks around at the low, dry scrub and bristly trees, and is about to ask Dean how long he's been out when he sees how much effort it takes his brother to move his arm back to the gear shift, how moving to accommodate that pain sets off a dozen other tics and twinges of hurts ignored.

“You didn't take any pain meds this morning, did you?” he demands, taking a long, hard look at how gingerly Dean's holding himself in the seat, the stiff neck and uneasy shifting that Sam knows means his brother is hurting, definitely more than he has to be, and has been for a long time.

“I may have...” his brother begins, but Sam glares, and Dean folds like wet cardboard, “forgotten to do that. Somehow.”

“Pull over,” Sam demands, fishing in the back seat for the first aid kit and a bottle of water.

He knew this would happen. Knew it. He is fine. Absolutely fine. But as long as Dean can see the bandage and thinks something is even the least little bit wrong with Sam, it's overprotective overdrive, and to hell with health or safety or physical comfort. Sam's pretty sure Dean could actually be on fire, and he would just move so that none of the smoke or cinders got on Sam and keep mother henning until he was nothing but a black stain on the carpet.

Stupid, self-sacrificing dumbass.

“What? I'm fine, Sammy,” Dean protests, making Sam want to bean him in the head with the bottle of opiates in his hand. “I can still drive.”

“Well, you're not gonna,” Sam tosses back, fighting to get the stupid childproof cap off with his left hand.

Again.

“You sure about that?” Dean asks, watching Sam's fight with the pill bottle with measured interest.

“Don't make me pull the key out, Dean” Sam warns, his eyes narrowing as he gives up on wrenching the cap off the bottle without tearing his arm open. Again.

“What?” Dean sputters. “Sammy, that wouldn't even-”

“I don't care! I respect your unhealthy obsession with this car,” Sam explains heatedly, “but so help
me, if it's a choice between the two of you—"

"Alright, alright, I'm pulling over. Untwist your panties, Samantha, Jesus," Dean bitches, guiding the Impala onto the shoulder.

Sam's out and stomping to the driver's side door before she comes to a complete stop.

"Just shut up and take care of yourself for once in your life!" Sam snaps, forcing the pills on Dean and shoving himself into the driver's seat.

"Alright, that settles it," Dean says decisively, popping the painkillers in his mouth and kicking back a healthy swallow of the water as Sam pulls back onto the blacktop. "Take the next exit."

He nods to the sign informing them that the next handful of turnoffs will drop them off in San Antonio.

"What?" Sam gapes, jerking his head to glare at Dean.

"You're moodier than usual, Bridget," Dean begins, impatiently fixing the bandage over a bite on his wrist. "And we've been on the road non-stop since breakfast, which means your bloodsugar is low. If you want to have any hope of holding down dinner, we need to get food in you ASAP. So, I say again: Pull. Over."

"I'm not—"

"Sam, I don't know whether you're about to punch me or start crying because you just got your period and the mini mart didn't have your favorite brand of lady products. You really wanna tell me how you're not eighteen kinds of mood-swingin' right now?"

"I was gonna say 'I'm not eating gross diner food again,'" Sam grumbles rebelliously after a long pause, glaring at the long ribbon of asphalt in front of them.

"Yeah, sure you were," Dean laughs, confident and cocky, and cranks up "Iron Man."

Just because Sam was about to yell at Dean for being a domineering jerkass - a move which, in light of the allegations of his moodiness, does seem a bit of an extreme response to what was basically 'Let's pull over for lunch.' - doesn't mean that Dean can get all smug about it.

They end up going for sandwiches somewhere in San Antonio that Sam strenuously denies is a cafe. He's sick of takeout, though, and if he has another soggy, soup-saturated cracker, he's gonna hit someone. Probably Dean.

Knowing his brother, he'd probably deserve it, but it's not getting any earlier in the day and going to sleep anywhere near a Dean Winchester who felt he had been somehow wronged would run the very real risk of waking up sans eyebrows.

Or other things.

Sam is pretty sure that since Dean's so gung-ho about treating his arm with kid gloves, he'd be safe from retaliation. But then again, he was pretty sure at sixteen that Dean would never actually put Nair in his shampoo, too.

Look how that one turned out.

Sam can remember, with perfect, unforgiving clarity, being gawky, sixteen, and completely bald,
Dad and Dean bursting into hysterical laughter every time they saw him for over a month.

Not something Sam's looking to revisit anytime soon. But then, the Dean that's sitting across from him now, flipping through the laminated not-a-cafe menu to find the biggest, grossest sandwich the place offers, is not exactly the same one that couldn't go through with a salt-n-burn for weeks without cracking up at the way Sam's bald head gleamed in the match-light.

The closer Sam looks at his brother, slouched in the booth across from Sam, arms everywhere and boots crammed against his sneakers beneath the cracking formica table, the more it hits him that Dean's burst of adrenaline, purpose, whatever it was that's gotten him swearing and swaggering through the past few days, has worn off in a big way.

Dean's pale and drawn, less the grinning brother Sam is used to and more the limp, listless wreck he pulled from that basement in Louisiana. And sure, Dean's splayed across the booth as usual, but it'd take a better actor than Dean ever was to hide how much the casual act costs him, how every move and motion sets off another chain of tugged bites, beaten bruises, and pulled muscles.

Either Dean's complete shit at picking out painkillers or he didn't take nearly enough of them. One way or the other, it's clear he's hurting in no small way, and of course, in typical Dean Winchester fashion, he's keeping his mouth shut about it.

Because Sam doesn't have enough on his plate before. Now he's gotta deal with Dean's "'Tis But a Flesh Wound" routine. Great.

It pissed Dad off when they were kids for the exact same reason it's driving Sam up the wall now: There's no way to tell with Dean. Absolutely no way. It could actually be no big deal, or he could be ignoring fucking arterial spray because, in his mind, Dad or Sam needs the attention more.

It's macho bullshit, and Sam has exactly zero patience for it. Not now. Not when he found Dean bleeding out in a fucking cage three days ago more dead than alive.

And sure, considering how long Sam hid the cut on his arm, maybe he's a hypocrite. Maybe he's the biggest fucking hypocrite in the world, but it played out exactly like he knew it would:

Dean found out Sam was hurt and went from zero to insanely overprotective in two seconds flat. And while that's understandable, Sam is fine. His arm is healing, his bruises are fading, and he no longer looks like death warmed over.

The same cannot be said for Dean, who’s trying and failing to put mustard on his sandwich without wincing in pain.

Sam decides then and there that he’s not just driving from here to wherever they crash for the night, he’s going to repay Dean’s nannying from the past couple of days with interest.

If his brother thinks Sam’s going to let him out of his sight in anything less than perfect health, he’s got another thing coming to him.

There’s no way in heaven or earth that Sam is letting Dean tear off half-cocked and still bleeding after whatever is waiting for them in Black Water Ridge. With their luck, it’s eight feet tall and armor plated, and knowing his brother's stubborn, stupid devotion to whatever suicidal mission Dad shoots his way, Dean would probably insult its mother and try to bare-knuckle box it.

The idea of finding Dean, saving him from Dad’s blind devotion to the mission, only to lose him the second he’s well enough to drive off, of facing weeks of awful, unknowing silence and then a phone call in the small hours of the morning, telling him Dean’s missing... Dean’s injured... Dean’s...
No.

Just. No.

Sam will not do this again. Dean is staying with him, where Sam knows he’s safe and taken care of, where Sam knows some god-awful nightmare isn’t going to snatch him away and destroy the only real family he’s got in the blink of an eye.

He’s got the interview in a few days. He can keep Dean at the apartment until then, drag him kicking and screaming back to good health, and search up every scrap of information there is on Black Water Ridge while he’s at it at one of the nation’s best research libraries.

Honestly, between the university’s archives, interlibrary communications system, and subject matter specialists on almost every world religion and culture, researching whatever wicked thing Black Water’s way comes is going to be the easy part.

It’s getting Dean to stay in one place for three days that’s going to take everything Sam’s got.

When they get back to the car, Dean moves automatically to the driver’s seat, stopping short when Sam plants himself firmly between the driver’s side door and his brother.

“Aw, come on, Sammy,” Dean protests. “I feel fine!”

Sam just crosses his arms and glares.

“Fine, but I’m driving tomorrow, ya killjoy,” Dean grumbles, tossing him the keys and making for the passenger door, trying and failing to hide how much his brisk stride costs him.

“Over my dead body you are,” Sam mutters, unlocking the car and sliding into the seat.

“You say somethin’?” Dean demands, narrowing his eyes at Sam.

“You should double up on the painkillers,” Sam supplies brightly, firing up the engine. “You’re still moving like a ninety year old man.”

“Nah, Sammy, I’m good,” Dean dismisses, digging through the cassette box with deliberate focus.

“Take the pills, Dean,” Sam grits out.

This, this right here is what’s gonna drive Sam insane. Dean’s in pain. He knows it. Sam knows it. But Dean’s not gonna do anything about it, he’s just still gonna put himself through hell for no good goddamn reason.

“No,” Dean answers stubbornly.

“Fine,” Sam bites out, pulling onto the Interstate.

If he has to play dirty, he will. Dean is bringing this on himself.

“Zepplin sucks,” Sam announces loudly as the Impala barrels down I-10. “Really, really sucks. It’s like the world’s worst vocalist and the world’s most up-his-own-ass guitarist got together to have hideous, pompous, lyrically indigent babies for nine albums of audio torture.”

Sam waits for Dean’s mouth to pop open to defend his beloved Zep, then pops the painkillers in and claps his hand over it to keep Dean from spitting out the pills.
He gets a dirty look and a long, hot, sloppy lick over the palm for his troubles, but Dean swallows the meds and settles back into the passenger seat with a pair of sunglasses before he crosses his arms over his chest and sulks, so Sam counts it as a win, even as he grumbles and scrubs his hand against his jeans.

~

Sam is being a bitch.

First with his little tantrum outside of San Antonio, then insisting on driving despite the fact that his last stint at the wheel landed him in the emergency room, then that stunt with the painkillers.

It’s like some malicious intelligence picked up on Dean’s nostalgia for the days when it was just him and Sam and saddled him with a Sammy in a bitch fit to end all bitch fits.

So Dean was a living, breathing buffet for a sociopathic vampire. He’s over it. A little sore, maybe, but fine. It’s not like he was in the hospital or anything, unlike someone he could mention (SAM).

So really, Sammy should stop with the coddling and let Dean recover in manly, dignified silence.

Not that there aren’t upsides to Sam’s sudden need to pamper Dean to within an inch of his life. Apparently vampire bite victims get to pick the music even when riding shotgun, and Sam doesn’t even roll his eyes when Dean decides that it’s a crime that they’re halfway through Texas and haven’t eaten anything served on a tortilla yet, so since Sam’s delicate constitution has apparently recovered, they’re both eating Tex-Mex for dinner.

Dean figures out just where ‘accommodating’ stops and ‘stubborn’ starts with this new mood of Sammy’s right after that, though, when his baby brother announces that they won’t just be hitting the nearest Burrito Barn and moving on for the night, but are finding a hotel and bedding down.

At the oh-so-late hour of seven-thirty.

“Oh, come on, Sammy!” Dean groans. “What am I, five?”

“You need rest,” Sam insists, glaring, “and I’m not redressing those bites in a truck stop bathroom. We’re getting dinner and a hotel, and if you shut up about it now, we can go for beers after.”

Dean raises and eyebrow, universally acknowledged brother-speak for ‘And if I don’t wanna shut up, dickbag?’

“Dean, fight me on this and I will destroy every cassette tape you own,” Sam promises, answering the challenge in his brother’s eyes.

“You wouldn’t!” Dean huffs defensively, his eyes darting to the mangled shoebox of tapes at his feet. They can both see Zeppelin II on top. Exposed. Vulnerable.

“Try me,” Sam laughs, not a little wickedly. “You’ll be getting the Led out with pliers and a flashlight.”

Dean decides to slump against the window and feign sleep for the rest of the drive. For the music.

As he leans against smooth leather and cool chrome, though, it’s not the tapes at his feet that his eyes flick to, but the barest hint of white teeth in the darkness, his brother’s half-smothered grin flashing in the gloom.
Bright and just for him, even after everything.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

In which Dean gets a good, long look at himself.

The Swiss Clock Inn in Fort Stockton boasts two queen beds, a noisy ice machine right outside their room, and a cuckoo clock theme, the last of which is uniquely terrifying in and of itself.

But what it lacks in quiet and taste level, it more than makes up for in its proximity to the interstate and the full-length mirror by the bathroom. It's chipped at the corners, and odd spots have gone dark here and there where the reflective coating has flaked from the back, but it offers Dean the first chance he's had since Sam busted him out to take a good, head-to-toe look at himself.

He waits and does it after he sends Sam out for tacos, bolting the door and shucking his shirt and jeans the second he hears the rumble of the Impala clear the parking lot.

After a long, hard look in the full-length mirror, he decides it could be worse.

The bites are… well. They're hard to miss. Two dozen ragged little circles, angry red stabs surrounded by sickly bruising where the vampire’s mouth forced the blood to the surface, but abandoned it to rot beneath the skin.

The first one was at Dean's right wrist. The second and third, too. Then he had gone to the left wrist once, then back to the right. Three there, at the elbow, then another at his left elbow. Four on the right of Dean's neck, tracing down his jugular. He had started high, nearly at Dean's ear, then worked his way down over the course of a day and a half.

Dean can still feel the bristle of his hair scrubbing against his face as the vampire chewed Dean's neck like a dog.

The first bites the vampire made healed jagged, the teeth marks ripped and widened as Dean fought through the bars, thrashed and jerked furiously, trying to shake his captor off and lash out at the same time, to deal back some of the pain, the frustration of being trapped, sealed away and snacked on like a fucking bag of Doritos.

It’s easy to tell those early angry, older bites from the ones that came later, the ones that were administered as the fight was slowly being bled out of Dean. They show rage and resistance and the fast, hot fight of a hunter. But the later bites? The ones over his carotid and the smattering of bites on each of his thighs? The places where the vampire saved for last, knowing that Dean's blood would be pumping so thin and weak near the end he would have to chew at a major artery to get any at all?

Those are damn near perfect imprints of fang, neat and precise in their horror.

A dark, bloody impulse tears through Dean as he looks at the perfect little patterns of teeth, the sudden, crazy desire to snatch up a brand or a blade and tear through those flawless, infuriating little circles and destroy the fingerprints of his time in that fucking basement.

The metallic scrape of a key in the door derails Dean’s train of thought.
And all of a sudden, Sam’s there, absently dropping a takeout bag on the wobbly hotel table as he stares at Dean from across the room, his eyes glued to the angry arcs of red sliced across Dean’s neck and arms, tracing the bruising, the bloody teeth marks, scabbed and inescapable in the harsh light of the motel fluorescents.

“Dean...”

“That was fast,” Dean mutters uncomfortably.

Why does he feel like grabbing his clothes from the bed and dragging them on as fast as his ruined arms’ll let him?

He’s Dean Winchester. He doesn’t do body-conscious.

Especially not around Sam, who’s seen in him in every possible state of undress since forever. Sam, who’s dealt with Dean bloodied and bruised a hundred times before, who cleaned these bites when he pulled Dean out of that damn basement. Sam, who’s seen them before and shouldn’t be looking at him now like the bottom just dropped out of his world.

Even as Dean thinks that, he knows it’s not fair. It’s different. When the job goes wrong, when people you love get hurt, you do what you have to. You disinfect ‘em and stich ‘em up and drug ‘em all to hell, and then it all goes beneath bandages and clothes, covered up and hidden away.

It’s not for days, sometimes weeks that the shock and panic fades. Then reality sets in, normal creeps back into life, and you have to settle with the damage done.

And accept the scars left behind.

“It’s Texas,” Sam answers, eyes still glued to Dean’s maimed skin, no longer blank with shock, but heavy with some awful, unnamed emotion. “There’s a taco joint on every corner. Dean-”

“Don’t start, Sam,” Dean cuts him off, shrugging back into his shirt with a pained wince.

Whatever Sam has to say, whatever comment he can possibly have on the fact that Dean looks like something out of ‘World’s Wildest Animal Attacks’ isn’t something that Dean hasn’t already thought of.

“I’m sorry,” Sam whispers, and the words come out thin, strangled, as he sits heavily on the end of the bed nearest to Dean, collapsing like a puppet with its strings cut.

“‘For what?” Dean asks, trying to connect the heartbroken, anguished expression on Sammy’s face with the still-healing bites he’s staring at. Sure, they’re not pretty, but it’s nothing to get all weepy about, right?

“Not getting there sooner,” Sam presses, his face awful and miserable and guilty, so guilty, as he shoves his hands through his hair.

“What? Sammy-”

But Sam cuts him off, caught up in whatever fit of crazy has him convinced that this mess was his fault, surging up from the bed to pace the negligible length of the hotel room.

“Dean, he had you for a week before I even knew you were gone!” he bursts out, dragging the words from somewhere deep inside himself. “That’s seven days where I was sitting in some bullshit liberal arts seminar, and you were being slowly eaten alive!”
“Sammy, you didn’t know!” Dean protests, suddenly, uncomfortably reminded of Sam in Louisiana, of the panic and hyper-awareness, mood swings and thrown lamps and the sleepless, restless anger dormant in his baby brother, suddenly awake and intimately inescapable.

“But-” Sam throws back, whirling, and Dean is there, decimating the distance from the mirror to Sam in two quick strides, clapping a hand on his shoulder to catch him, to stop the anger, the furious, guilty pacing any way he can.

“No,” Dean interrupts firmly, putting all the force and weight he can muster into the word, because this is Sam. Sam who worries, who can’t keep his mouth shut or let anything go, and who is currently tearing himself up over something that is wholly and completely not his fault. “No. Did you start out the second Dad told you?”

Dean can see the protest in Sam’s eyes, the awful, anguished twist of guilt that renews, springs up and has Sam opening his mouth.

“Shut up,” Dean cuts him off. There’s only so many ways you can say ‘It’s my fault’, after all. “Did you look as hard as you could, everywhere you could?” he presses, knowing the answer, knowing Sammy.

He doesn’t need to know the story, to hear the blow-by-blow of however Dad got Sam from Stanford to know that Sam put everything he had into finding him. He doesn’t need anything more than the results, the exhausted, bruised, beaten, half-starved baby brother that he woke up beside in that hotel room to tell him that Sam put everything he had into this one, pushed himself past the breaking point...

Gave more than Dean would ever have asked him to give.

Definitely more than he deserved.

“Yeah but-” Sam protest, stubborn as ever, because apparently logic is only useful when it’s being used against Dean.

“Answer the question, Sammy,” Dean presses, glaring at his little brother expectantly, just waiting for Sam to bend on this one, just a little, for him.

“Sammy’s a chubby twelve year old,” Sam mutters petulantly, and Dean knows he’s won, and not even at the cost of calling his little brother ‘Sammy’. If he really cared, he’d have started bitching about the nickname a week ago.

“And apparently a logic-starved douche who refers to himself in the third person. You-”

Dean hates the flush that creeps up his neck, the words stick in his throat. Hates that he can’t even get this out smooth for Sam, of all people. He practically raised the kid, for fuck’s sake.

But then, two years is a long time. And feelings were never exactly the Winchester strong suit.

“You came through for me,” he finishes gruffly. “You got me out. That’s all that matters.”

“You sure?” Sam asks softly, meeting Dean’s eyes as he fiddles with the edge of the bandage on his arm.

“Yeah, Sasquatch, I’m sure,” Dean rolls his eyes, snagging the med kit from the bed. “Now get your ass to the table. Tacos are getting cold, and that bandage needs changin’.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

In which Jess blatantly misses a chance to do the thing.

New Mexico and Arizona pass by in a dry, monotonous blur of dust and desert as Sam’s guilt blurs the days into minutes.

Despite the awful, heavy feeling in his gut, he tries to take in as much as he can. The steady rumble of the Impala, the warm, worn leather under his hands, against his cheek as the miles stream by, and Dean, safe and sound in the driver’s seat beside him, grinning and joking and singing off-key to the same cracked, busted cassettes as always.

Dean said the scars weren’t important. That the only thing that mattered was that Sam got him out. That they both came through it in one piece.

And maybe for Dean that was true. Maybe Dean could walk away, count it as a win, and not lose a minute’s sleep over what happened in Louisiana, but Sam?

Well, Sam isn’t Dean. He isn’t Dean, and he isn’t Dad, and denial? Shoving it all away until violence or alcoholism forces it to the surface? Well, that’s never exactly been a strategy he’s excelled at.

The fact is, Dean almost died in that basement, and someone, somewhere has to be held accountable.

The vampire that snatched Dean, that caged him, tortured him, and chewed away his life bite by bite? He’s taken care of, and if there is any justice in the world, he’s rotting in a particularly vicious circle of hell. But Dean was in Louisiana on orders, and he wasn’t targeted because he was alone or a hunter. He was targeted because he was a hunter’s son.

*John Winchester’s son.*

And he was left alone in that goddamn cage for a week, with no one even looking for him, because their sorry excuse for a father couldn’t be bothered to call and check to see if his kid was alive.

Sam has no doubt in his mind that he’ll see their dad again one day. Considering the way his life’s been going lately, probably sooner rather than later. And when that day comes, Sam is gonna make him answer for every bite on Dean’s body. He is gonna make their father pay for every day Dean thought no help was coming, and he’s gonna charge interest for every day he was right.

Because you don’t do that. You don’t say family is everything, then abandon your oldest son, the one who follows every order you’ve ever given without hesitation, to the monsters.

To go chasing some bullshit lead in the middle of the night.

You just don’t do that. Not to family. Not to *Dean.*

*Especially* not to Dean.
But then, Sam knows he’s not completely blameless in all of this.

Because Dad took off after a case, like he always does, and Dean took off on orders, like he always will, and Sam wasn’t there to have his back, like he always used to be.

Dean was alone.

John would have never sent Dean by himself if Sam were around, and even if he tried, Sam’d be stealing a car or buying a bus ticket or just bitching at Dean until he caved and brought Sam along anyway.

He can hate their father all he wants to, can lay everything from this latest fiasco to the changing of the winds at John Winchester's doorstep, but the fact is, Dean was alone because Sam left him alone. He left him alone, and it ended with his brother caged, watching Death come on slow in a Louisiana basement.

Hell if he’s gonna make that mistake twice.

In the seat next to him, Dean is quiet. Has been since Arizona turned into California under the long, black body of the Impala.

Sam had even let him drive, hoping that being behind the wheel of his Baby would shake Dean out of it, whatever ‘it’ is that's had his brother tense and too-quiet through San Jose, all the way to the outskirts of Palo Alto.

“Turn left at-” Sam begins.

“I remember,” Dean interrupts quietly.

Sam doesn’t say anything after that.

~

Jess is scooping tablespoons of chocolate chip cookie batter onto a pan when the home phone rings. She drops the spoon back into the batter with a plop and darts across the kitchen, juggling the phone with her palms so she doesn’t get it covered in cookie grease.

"Hello?" she chirps once she’s got it sandwiched between her ear and her shoulder.

"Hey, Jess."

Jess represses a pang of disappointment.

“What’s up, Brady?” she asks and runs her hands under the faucet, rubbing them dry on her apron.

"Not much,” he replies easily. "Is Sam there?"

"No, he’s still out of town,” Jess sighs. “He’s supposed to be back today, though. Want me to get him to call you when he gets in?"

“That’s okay,” Brady says. “I wasn’t calling about anything important. Just haven’t been able to get him on his cell the last week or so. Wondered what was up.”

Jess nods sympathetically, even though Brady can’t see her.

“Yeah, well, I’m sure Becky told you guys all about the thing with his brother,” she says, smiling a
little when Brady makes a noise of agreement; Beck’s never been great at keeping secrets. “The whole thing really stressed him out, and it’s a long drive back from Louisiana, so he hasn’t really been in touch with anyone.”

“Even you?” Brady asks, sounding surprised.

Jess’ smile widens. Brady’s the one who’d introduced her to Sam at that party all those months ago, and apparently he’d been the one who’d pushed Sam to ask her out after that, too. He’s definitely no romantic in his personal life, but he’s always made an exception for her and Sam. She can’t help it. She just thinks it’s really sweet.

“It’s fine,” she assures him. “I get it. I’m just glad he found his brother, you know? Sam doesn’t talk about him a lot, but you can just tell how much he loves him.”

“Yeah,” Brady agrees. “He used to talk about him a lot more before you guys got together. Think they had some kind of epic fight during Christmas break our sophomore year; Sam sort of stopped talking about him after that. He wouldn’t ever tell me what happened, though.”

Jess makes an affirmative noise; Sam’s never talked about it with her, either. She puts the call on speakerphone and goes back to scooping her cookies.

“Did you ever meet him?” she asks.

“Who, Sam’s brother?” Brady’s tinny voice replies. “Nah. Have you?”

“Not yet, but I guess now’s my chance. After a few days, he and Sam will probably both be sick of me,” she laughs.

“He’s staying with you?” Brady asks, sounding shocked.

“Yeah… Why are you so surprised?”

There’s a pause, and then she can hear him shrug on the other end.

“No reason. Guess they made up. That’s good.”

“Mmm,” Jess slides the pan into the oven, sets her egg timer to count down the minutes.

“How long is he staying?”

“I don’t know, a few days?” Jess tells him, and then adds: “Hey, are you still coming to that Halloween party tonight? I’m not sure, but maybe I can convince Sam to bring Dean along. You could finally meet him!”

“Sorry,” Brady replies. “Change of plans.”

“You sure? Luis says he knows some bar that’s doing dollar shots. There’s supposed to be a costume contest and everything.”

“Nah, I can’t,” he tells her. “Maybe I’ll stop by sometime soon, though.”

“Okay,” Jess says, grinning. “See you then!”

“See you,” Brady says and hangs up with a click.

While she waits, Jess piddles around the apartment. She starts in on the fall-themed charcoal sketch
she has to show on Monday and then quickly abandons it in favor of working on another of her oil paintings of a lily (and so help her, if Sam makes another joke about her “Georgia O’Keeffe period”, she’s going to kill him).

She considers calling Sam at least twice, but talks herself down. Jess is not and is never going to be that girlfriend, as long as she can help it.

Still, when she hears the rumble of a classic car engine and the muffled chords of “Smoke on the Water” filtering up the back staircase, she remembers Sam’s tipsy ramblings about his big brother’s unhealthy obsession with muscle cars and mullet rock and practically throws her paintbrush onto the pallet.

She checks herself in the mirror quickly (No paint smears, hair mostly under control, no chocolate smeared on her face from “testing” her cookie dough) and pads out onto the landing, peeking out of the window to see if her suspicion is correct.

There’s a big, gleaming black car pulling up outside. The music blares for a few seconds longer, engine growling, before the driver puts the car into park and shuts it off. Jess watches as the passenger door swings open and her Sam emerges, looking ragged, worse for the wear, shoulders tense, but here and, thank God, safe.

The driver’s door swings open, then, and she gets her first glimpse of Sam’s brother Dean.

He’s… really not what she was expecting.

She’d met Sam’s dad already, so she knows Sam’s family isn’t made up entirely of giants, but still, from the way Sam had talked about his big brother bossing him around and protecting him his whole life, she guesses she’d expected someone tall and broad and made up of lean muscle like Sam.

To her surprise, however, Dean looks like he isn’t much taller than she is.

His hair isn’t brown, like Sam’s or their father’s, either. It’s dark, but more of a dirty blonde than a chestnut, cropped short like John Winchester’s had been and spiked up with enough hair gel that she’s pretty sure a good gust of wind wouldn’t even rustle it. He’s got on a faded army jacket, ripped jeans, and biker boots, and she’s pretty sure he’s trying for swagger, but he’s moving around way too weary and stiff to pull it off.

In fact, they’re both moving too gingerly for Jess’ liking – less like they’ve spent too long in the car and more like they’ve been beat to hell, and you’d best believe that once she gets the pleasantries out of the way, she’s going to be pumping Sam for information as to why.

She watches as they round the back of the car. They seem to be arguing about something, heads tucked close together over the open trunk, shoulders bumping. There’s a total lack of personal space there that she’s never seen Sam exhibit around anyone else, not even her.

It’s strange, and she feels a little voyeuristic watching them like this, their elbows knocking together as each of them gestures to make whatever point he’s defending.

Sam says something, poking a thumb at their apartment building, and then they both turn to glance up at it.

‘Oh, shit!’ Jess thinks and ducks instinctively out of their eye line before wincing. ‘Crap, why did I do that? I should have waved! Why didn’t I wave?!’

Now they’re definitely going to think she was spying on them like a creep.
‘It’s fine,’ she tells herself. ‘Just go down there, and they’ll think you were just moving away from the window to come help with the bags.

‘Yeah, because people usually duck down and crawl down the stairs on all fours. Totally natural. Good one, Jessica.’

She runs a hand through her hair and, rolling her eyes at her own stupidity, half-jogs her way down to the back door, giving Sam a broad smile (which she hopes communicates how much of a loving and supportive girlfriend and not a nosy freak she is) as she emerges from the stairwell.

“Hey!” she chirps and watches as he dimples up, striding forward to draw her into a very tight—though one armed—hug. “Oof! Missed you too.”

Sam seems to realize he’s crushing her and pulls back, smile a little sheepish now.

“Sorry,” he says. “It’s just good to see you.”

Now that she can see him up close, Jess notices that he’s paler than usual, dark circles apparent under his eyes, and then she glances down and—

“OH MY GOD!”

Sam starts but doesn’t stop her from tugging his jacket aside and getting a good look at the finger-shaped bruises across his neck. Jess isn’t stupid. She knows exactly what those are.

“Sam, what happened??”

“Um,” Sam flounders, before big brother jumps to his aid.

“It’s a long, complicated story that I’m sure Sammy here would love to tell you all about,” he says, shooting Sam a cheeky look as he says the last part. “But I think we should get these bags inside, first, don’t you?”

Jess bites her lip, then nods.

“I’m Dean, by the way,” he says, giving her a winning grin. “And you must be Jessica.”

“Yeah,” she says, shaking his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Oh, no, it is nice to meet you,” Dean says, giving her a long once-over. “And can I just say, hearing you over the phone did not do you justice.”

Jess would be annoyed by the obvious come-on, but Sam is rolling his eyes over his brother’s shoulder like he’s twelve, and it’s kind of making her want to laugh. She settles for giving Dean an unamused look, then extricates her hand and heads over to the trunk.

“Let me help you carry your bags up,” she says, reaching for the black duffle closest to her.

“Not that one!” “No, don’t!!”

Jess starts backward.

“Sorry,” Sam says, dimples on display again. “I just mean, I think Dean’s bags are pretty heavy. Why don’t you just get mine?”

She stares at him.
“Um, okay?”

He’s acting so weird right now. What is going on?

She swings Sam’s bag over one arm, and Sam grabs his laptop bag and then reaches for the duffle, only to have Dean stop him.

“We don’t really need to bring my stuff in, do we?” he asks significantly, and Sam’s nostrils flare.

“Of course we do,” he says. “You’re going to need your clothes if you’re going to stay with us, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, well, about that,” Dean coughs. “I don’t think that’s really necessary. I mean—”

“Oh, no,” Sam cuts him off with a tight smile. "Dean, we wouldn’t dream of letting you leave without staying at least a few nights! Would we, Jess?"

“No way!” Jess grins, picking it up. “I borrowed an air mattress from my friend, and I’ve got everything all set up for you. You can’t leave now!”

“I just,” Dean tries. “I just really should get on the road.”

“Oh, come on!” Jess insists. “We’ve barely met each other, and I’ve been dying to get to know you. I mean, just think of all the embarrassing Sam stories we could swap! Would we, Jess?”

“Well, guess that settles it,” Sam says, shooting Dean a little smirk Jess knows she’s not meant to see. “I’ll just grab this.”

Dean’s hand shoots out like a viper, grabbing Sam around the bicep.

“I’ll stay,” he says in a low voice. “But you’re not carrying my freaking bag up the stairs.”

“It’s fine,” Sam tells him, mouth tightening.

“Bullshit,” Dean growls, snagging it from the trunk and then, as an afterthought, yanking the laptop bag off of Sam’s shoulder.

Sam huffs in frustration, trying to tug it back, but Dean just avoids his grasp and slams the truck shut.

“Lead the way,” he says to Jess, flirty grin plastered back on his face like it never left.

Jess glances between the two of them, eyebrows furrowed, before turning and heading up the stairs. She tries to tamp down her frustration.

Okay. So Sam’s hurt, he and his brother are fighting over God knows what, and they seem totally intent on keeping her in the dark about why. And from the smell that greets her when she opens the door to the apartment, her cookies are burning.

So far, so good.
This is so not what Dean signed up for.

It’s not like he’d thought he could just drop Sam off on the front lawn and speed off. (Not exactly like he wanted to do that, either.) But he’d thought it would be enough to get his brother back to his apartment – move his stuff in, make sure he could trust Sam’s girl to look after him, check that Sam’s place was protected – before slipping out and heading to Black Water Ridge. The longer he stays the harder it’s going to be for him to leave, and like it or not, he has to leave.

And to top it all off, Dean’s somehow found himself in the middle of the most domestic fucking scene ever.

He shifts awkwardly on the couch as Sam’s girlfriend – “Just ‘Jess’ is fine! Relax. Here, let me get you something to eat!” – puts down a plate of chocolate chip cookies (“Oh, shoot, these’re burnt! I’ll just whip up another batch for you guys while you get settled in, okay?”) and hands him a perfectly chilled can of Coke and a glass full of ice for him to pour it into.

“Thanks,” he says gruffly and promptly stuffs an entire cookie in his mouth to save himself from having to say anything else.

Sam is giving him a disgusted look from his seat on the couch next to Dean, and Dean smirks at him around his mouthful of dessert.

‘Your move, little brother.’

He half-listens to Sam and Jessica’s conversation as he glances around the apartment. He’s seen Sam’s place a half dozen times from the outside, but this is the first time he’s been in. It’s pretty nice for a couple of college kids, he guesses. No luxury townhouse, but it’s definitely a step up from the kinds of places he and Sam were used to staying as kids. There’s a half dozen art prints hanging on the walls and a shit-ton of potted plants, which Dean is willing to bet are Jessica’s. He’s spotted two bookshelves since he got in, too, overstuffed with old books with rough, worn covers, and Dean knows for a fact that those are Sam’s. Little know-it-all, Dean thinks, and smiles a little behind his drink.

“—sure you can go to the interview?” Jess is saying, and Dean’s ears perk up.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” Sam replies. “I don’t want to cancel.”

“Interview?” Dean prompts.

Sam looks over at him, surprised, like maybe he forgot Dean was still there.

“Yes,” he says warily. “I have an interview Monday.”

Dean furrows his brow.

“You really think you’re gonna do a job interview looking like that?” he says, gesturing toward Sam’s neck. “Seriously, Sam, I’d blow it off if I were you.”

Sam squares his jaw and draws his shoulders back, already on the defense.

“It’s a law school interview,” he says stiffly, “and there’s a full ride on the line, so no, I can’t just
‘blow it off.’"

Dean raises an eyebrow.

“Law school?” he parrots.

Sam’s nostrils flare, and he nods, clearly waiting for Dean to make fun of the idea.

“I think Dean may be right, Sam,” Jess interjects, brow furrowed. “Can you really go to the interview with those marks all over your neck?”

Sam sighs.

“I think it’ll be fine,” he says. “My dress shirt has a pretty high collar, and anyway, can’t I just borrow some concealer from you and cover them up? I don’t think they’ll really notice.”

Ah, yes. The concealer trick, preventer of many CPS visits during Sam and Dean’s childhood.

“I guess…” Jess says. “Sam… what happened? You still haven’t told me.”

“Um,” Sam starts. “Well…”

He clearly hasn’t been using the extra time to come up with a cover story. Dumbass is lucky he has a big brother who’s such a natural.

“Well, Jess,” Dean says. “Like I said, it’s kind of a long story, but basically? I was out hunting and came across some bad dudes making a drug deal in the woods.”

The girl’s eyes are as round as saucers. Out of the corner of his eye, Dean can see his little brother staring at him with his head cocked to the side, obviously trying to figure out where the hell Dean is going with this.

“Anyway, they caught me. Hell if I know why they didn’t just kill me. Thought they could get something more out of me – ransom or something, I guess. Dragged me around with them for about a week, and I’m thinking ‘This is it,’ you know? ‘These guys are gonna kill me.’”

That part’s not too much of a stretch, anyway. Dean swallows hard and presses on.

“And then, out of nowhere, this dumb bastard shows up,” he pokes his thumb at Sam. “Busts in like the freaking riot police and takes out the guy who’s keeping me locked up.”

“What?!” Jess demands, looking to Sam for confirmation.

“Yeah,” Dean says. “Apparently he tracked us down and instead of, like, calling the police or going to get help he just… came on in.”

Sam glares.

“I told you already. If I’d left you there, you could have died, and I was not going to let that happen. And anyway,” he adds, clearly for Jess’ benefit. “I tried talking to the police. They didn’t believe me. I told you that already.”

“Sam,” Jess says in a choked voice. “Oh my god. You could have— Did you- Did the police at least get the guys who did it?”

“Oh yeah,” Dean tells her. “Yeah, they’re definitely taken care of.”—heady gush of blood, the
scrape of metal against cement—”Don’t you worry about that.”

She still looks like she’s going to pass out, and Sam reaches out with his left hand, enclosing hers in it. She blinks at him for a moment, then pulls her hand away and smacks him on the shoulder.

“What were you thinking?!” she demands shakily, smacking him again twice, and Sam winces, even though it couldn’t possibly hurt. “You moron, oh my god, Sam!”

She hugs him tight for a long minute, and then stands up abruptly and strides back into the kitchen to bang around doing God knows what.

He really kind of likes this chick.

“Really?” Sam hisses. “You couldn’t think of something less dramatic than freaking ‘Commando?’”

“Okay, first of all, don’t kid yourself; you’re no Schwarzenegger. And second, exactly how did you want me to explain away the fact that somebody clearly choked the life out of you in the last few days, huh? And you know she’s eventually going to have to see the hatchet job on your arm, right?”

Sam looks away, but before he can answer, Jessica is back, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand and pasting on a shaky smile.

“Sorry about that,” she says, sinking back into her seat. “I just- I’m glad you’re okay. Both of you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dean tells her, crunching on his ice.

The conversation’s somehow even more awkward after that. It's pretty difficult to switch back to small talk about what he does for a living after that bombshell. Not that Jessica isn't trying. She's back to winning smiles and pleasantries whether she's feeling it or not, but Dean can't help but wonder if the shadow in her eyes is, at least in part, anger at him for getting her boyfriend hurt. There's no way to tell for sure, and if it is, he's not exactly going to argue.

“So, Sam,” Jess says after a while. “I know you may not feel up to it, but there’s still that Halloween party tonight if you want to go. I know everybody would love to meet your brother.”

Is it seriously Halloween? Dean frowns, sinks down into the couch, sagging under the weight of the knowledge that he’s lost nearly a month to this thing.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, Jess,” Sam says. “I think we’re both going to be too tired for that. Anyway, you know I hate Halloween.”

Dean scoffs, and Sam glares at him out of the corner of his eye.

“Anyway,” he continues, smiling fondly, “you should still go. I’m sure it’ll be fun.”

“Are you sure?” Jessica asks. “I could stay in, make you guys some dinner.”

“Nah,” Dean jumps in. “Go out! Have some fun! In fact, Sam, you should go. Spend some time with your girl. Don’t worry about me. I’ll have some beers, watch the game…”

“Oh, Dean,” Sam says, still smiling though the expression’s all hollowed out. “I wouldn’t do that. Don’t worry, I’ll stay home and keep you company.”

Damn. There goes that escape plan. Well, Dean didn’t really expect it to work, anyway. Despite the accusations Dean's been throwing his way the past few days, Sam's about as far from stupid as you can get.
Jess excuses herself after that to get ready for the party, and Sam and Dean spend a few long moments staring each other down like gunslingers before Dean decides to forgo mocking Sam’s career plans (a lawyer, really?) in favor of grabbing the remote and clicking through a few crappy football games before setting on a neutered showing of the Tomb Raider sequel.

“Did she just make an MP3 out of a glass ball?” Sam bitches after a while, clearly settling back into obnoxious little brother mode. “Ugh, why are we watching this?”

Dean smirks.

"I can give you two good reasons."

He leers at a close-up of Jolie's substantial rack before wiggling his eyebrows at his brother. Sam pulls a face.

“You’re disgusting,” he says. “Isn’t there anything else on?”

Dean bites into two cookies at once.

“National Treasure’s on FX,” he says, spitting crumbs all over Sam’s jeans. “You like that better?”

Sam makes a disgusted face.

“Please,” he scoffs.

“Aw, c’mon, Sammy,” Dean grins, swiping the cookie bits off of Sam’s thighs for him. “History, libraries, dead old dudes. I figured you be on that and inside it without even buying it a drink first. Doggy style.”

“Okay, first, there’s nothing ‘historical’ about that movie,” Sam says, reaching over Dean to steal the rest of his Coke. “And second, again, you are disgusting.”

Dean shrugs, grinning wider.

“Also, I’m pretty sure Angelina Jolie’s bra could out-perform Nicholas Cage any day.”

“Hey, blasphemy!” Dean exclaims. ”Come on, Raising Arizona? Con Air?”

“City of Angels,” Sam rebuts.

“I don’t even know what that is,” Dean tells him flatly.

“It’s a Meg Ryan movie,” Sam says, rolling his eyes. “Nicholas Cage plays an actual angel.”

“Ah. Well, that explains it. I didn’t see that because of all the testosterone I have,” Dean smirks and asks innocently, “but I’m assuming you did?

Sam kicks out and hits him in the ankle.

“Hey, hey! Watch it, I’m a wounded man!”

Sam snorts.

“Oh, yeah, now you’ll admit it.”

Dean opens his mouth to retaliate, then comes up short as Jessica emerges from the bedroom in the
most mercifully skimpy costume Dean’s had the privilege of seeing since that strip club in Tallahassee. God bless college girls.

He whistles.

“Hellooo, nurse!”

The look Sam throws his way is pure murder, but Dean happily ignores it.

“What do you think, Sam?” Jessica asks, unbothered by the attention.

She twirls on her heel, and Dean can see the crinkle of red petticoat peeking out from below the skirt. Man, has it been way too long.

“You look beautiful,” Sam says, and Dean has to clamp down hard on a laugh.

Jessica excuses herself to grab something from the bedroom, and Dean takes the opportunity to pounce.

“You know, Sammy, you really should go with her,” he says, splaying an arm across the back of the couch behind Sam. “Take a break, spend some time with the lady. Live a little.”

Sam stares him down.

“Okay,” he says coolly. “I’ll go. But you’ve gotta come with me.”

Dean snorts.

“Oh, yeah, that’s a great idea,” he says, pulling down his collar to draw attention to his bandages. “Shine these bite marks up, and I can go as a vampire attack victim! Jess can help. I mean, she is a nurse.”

Sam glares.

“That’s not funny,” he says, standing and walking towards the bedroom.

“Come on,” Dean tells his brother’s back. “It’s a little funny.”

Sam’s answer is the firm thud of the door closing.

Sam keeps up the whole wounded missus act for a good half hour – as long as it takes for Jess to get out the door – and he’s clearly not happy with Dean after, either. Still, he at least listens to Dean’s coaxing and sits back down on the far end of the couch, even if he all but says out loud: ‘I’m sitting here because I want to, not because you told me to.’ It makes Dean want to smile more than it pisses him off. Some things never change.

“So,” he says, when they’ve hit their second commercial break in under fifteen minutes. “Law school.”

Sam stiffens up.

“Yeah,” he says, refusing to look away from the TV. “Law school.”

“Hmm,” Dean says. “You already get accepted?”

“That’s what the interview’s for,” Sam says, cautiously getting more involved in the conversation,
“but I pretty much know I’ll be accepted. If I nail the interview, I could probably swing a full ride.”

Dean smiles and hopes it doesn’t look too much like he’s swallowing nails.

“That’s real good,” he says. “Full ride to law school, guess you’ve gotta be pretty damn smart to swing that.”

“Well, you have to have good scores,” Sam acknowledges. “I have a 4.0 GPA. And I made a 174 on my LSAT.”

“174 out of what?”

“180,” Sam says, rubbing the back of his neck.

Dean whistles.

“Pretty good, Sammy,” he says. “M’not surprised though. Geek like you; you were always good at those tests.”

Sam shrugs.

“Come on,” Dean urges. “How many kids can say they swung a 34 their first time taking the ACT?”

His brother blinks at him.

“You remember that?”

“How could I forget? Man, those nerds in the honor society hated you. They’re working their asses off, taking all their test prep classes, and then here comes this drifter kid, been in the school like a week and BAM.”

Sam’s giving him this little tentative grin.

“So… You’re not going to make fun of me about the law school thing?”

“Oh, hell yeah, I’m gonna make fun of you,” Dean says. “You’re going to school to be a freaking ambulance chaser, man, how could I not?”

“You know, not all lawyers are jerks, Dean,” Sam returns.

“Yeah, just the good ones.”

Sam rolls his eyes.

“I just… I guess I expected some kind of, ‘This isn’t you. You’re not a lawyer, you’re a hunter,’ speech.”

It’s not a direct quote from one of their arguments, but it’s pretty close. Dean, sighs, clamps down on his urge to say that, hell yeah, Sam isn’t a lawyer. He’s a Winchester, he should be with his family, not in some picket-fence house in the ‘burbs getting paid to help bad guys off the hook.

“S’your life,” he says, instead, and adds in his head: And I want you to be happy. I want you to be safe.

Sam looks totally floored.
“Thank you,” he says softly, after a moment. “Really.”

Dean feels a thrill of guilt. He knows normal kids get told over and over again, “You can grow up to be whatever you want.” He remembers Mom saying it to him, too, before. It’s a lesson he’s sure neither he nor John ever repeated to Sammy.

Because a hunter’s life is not his own. A hunter’s life belongs to whatever creepy crawlies he comes across, to whatever vendettas he holds, and there’s no such thing as hunters’ children; there’s hunters and there’s civilians, and if your parent’s a hunter, well then, you already know which side you’re on.

Hunters don’t grow up and go to college. Hunters don’t grow up to be lawyers. They hunt and they hunt and then one day they die. No matter how many times Dad said this was all only temporary, that once they found the thing that killed Mom it would finally be over, a part of Dean has always known that it’s never going to end. The only thing that made that bearable was knowing that at least he’d have his family with him.

Now, he guesses he won’t.

Sam’ll always be a Winchester. He’ll always be a hunter. But Dean will let him pretend. He’ll let Sam live his precious normal life, especially if the alternative is watching Sam hurt himself again or watching his sanity snap like a twig. Sam can go be a lawyer, and Dean…

Well, Dean’ll deal. He’ll have to.

“Aw,” he quips, breaking the moment. “You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

Sam shoves him gently, huffs an annoyed little breath, calls him a jerk, but he stops giving Dean the cold shoulder, lets him take the remote control and flip through to find something to suitably distract from the way they’ve pulled together in the middle of the couch like magnets.

They finally settle for a marathon of tame Halloween movies on ABC family (and Dean’s gratified to find that Count Dracula does not, in fact, give him ’Nam-style flashbacks). Dean puts his feet up on the coffee table and settles back in, feeling dozy, while Sam subtly snugs into Dean’s side, a distant echo of how they used to watch TV as kids.

Dean doesn’t think Sam’s noticed he’s been doing it, but he’s been that way lately. Grabbing at Dean’s wrist, knocking their knees together, fingers lightly plucking at Dean’s clothes at random moments. Dean doesn’t want to say he’s been dependent, not quite needy either, but he’s been… different. Touchy.

And yeah, Sam and Dean had been extremely touchy as kids, to the point that even Dad had noticed and told Dean to take it down a notch. But of course, when Sammy started insisting on being Sam, he’d traded all that little brother clinginess for exasperated looks and a bucket load of sarcasm, and even though Dean guesses they’re still a lot closer physically than most families (comes with living in each other’s pockets for eighteen years), this is… unusual.

Sam’s eyes droop shut during a commercial for allergy pills and his head lolls onto Dean’s shoulder. Dean relaxes, lets his fingers dangle down so the knuckles brush subtly against the back of Sam’s neck. He’s not gonna complain. After what Dean’s been through, relaxing on a couch with all 6’4” of his big little brother curled up against him like a toddler? Well, there are worse places to be.

Like he said, it’s unusual.

Doesn’t mean it’s bad.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

In which Sam makes good on one promise and breaks another.

Sam wakes up about halfway through *The Nightmare Before Christmas* to find Dean snoozing next to him. He peers blurrily at the numbers on the VCR. It’s only 8:30. He guesses that’s a testament to how exhausted they’ve both been.

He’s tempted to just go back to sleep, but he’s spent the last few days waiting for Dean to fall asleep before getting up and doing his own thing, so he figures why break the streak now?

He stands up gingerly, pushes Dean gently so he’s lying down on the couch, hefts his brother’s legs up. Dean snorts, grumbles sleepily and then settles on his stomach, drooling slightly into one of Jess’ precious throw pillows.

Sam’s considering whether to bring his laptop in here or just go into the bedroom when it occurs to him that he’s broken his promise to keep in contact with Bobby. He fishes his cell out of his pocket and, grabbing Dean’s phone off the coffee table to check the number, puts in a call.

The phone rings for a few beats before Bobby picks up with a grouchy “Yeah?”

“Hey, Bobby, it’s Sam Winchester.”

“Sam,” Bobby rumbles. “Y’ alright, boy?”

“Yeah,” Sam says. “Yeah, we’re fine. I just wanted to call and check in. Things have been so busy I kind of forgot to keep you updated.”

“Mmm. From the way your brother made it sound, it ain’t exactly been roses for you the past few days. Not that I’m surprised, considering.”

“You talked to Dean?”

“Yeah, a while ago. He didn’t tell you?”

“No,” Sam says, “but then again, he doesn’t tell me much.”

He aims a soft kick at the spot on Dean’s ankle that he’d nailed earlier. Dean snorts in his sleep and rolls over onto his side, hand sneaking under the pillow to grope for a knife that isn’t there.

“’M not surprised. You Winchesters always have been some secretive bastards.”

Well, Sam can’t really argue with that one. He takes the phone and heads into the kitchen, pawing through the cabinets in search of something he can make for dinner.

“How’s yer brother?”

“Better than he was, but he’s still pretty beat up,” Sam sighs, pushing aside a dented box of Hamburger Helper. “But of course he thinks he’s fine.”
Bobby grunts.

“And how’re you?”

“Me? I’m all right.”

“So, you think you’re fine,” Bobby mimics.

Sam puffs an exasperated breath out of his nose.

“Okay, so I’m not exactly at 100%, either,” he admits. “I’m still a lot better off than Dean. If you ask him, though, I lift anything heavier than a set of car keys and I’m gonna split myself wrist to elbow.”

“Mmhmm,” Bobby says. “I got a theory says that might have something to do with the fact that, a couple of days ago, you actually slit yourself from wrist to elbow.”

Sam pinches his lips shut. It’s not surprising that Bobby would side with Dean on this. Bobby’s always gotten along better with Dean than with Sam, just like John does. Sam tries not to take it personally.

He hears the sound of the refrigerator opening on the other line, then the clinking of bottles, before Bobby sighs.

“You two got somewhere to stay?”

“He’s staying with me,” Sam says, feeling strangely defensive, “at my apartment in Palo Alto.”

If Bobby’s surprised at that, he doesn’t say anything.

“You heard from your daddy yet?” he asks instead.

“Tch!” Sam scoffs, smacking a can of green beans onto the counter with unnecessary force; he shakes off the pain that jolts through his arm. “He’s still keeping himself off the grid. That didn’t keep him from finding time to send Dean coordinates for another hunt, though.”

Bobby swears.

“Of all the damn fool— Sam, you give me those coordinates, and I’ll find somebody in the area who can check it out.”

Sam glances through the doorway to where Dean is sleeping on the couch. He wishes…

“Dean’s not going to go for that, Bobby. Dad gave him a job, so he’s gonna do it. And I think part of him’s still convinced Dad’s waiting to meet up with him there or that he’s left some clue about why he’s gone missing.”

“But you don’t think so.”

Sam takes another cautious look into the living room and then cups his hand around the mouth of his phone.

“Don’t tell Dean, but I’ve been doing some research into the area during the last couple days,” he tells Bobby. “It’s in the middle of the wilderness with a pretty big grizzly population, but I went through local records and made some calls, and it turns out a handful of people get ‘attacked by bears’ every twenty-three years.”
“And this is the twenty-third year.”

“Yeah. There’s a survivor of an attack in the fifties who may still be alive, so our next step would be to interview the guy, find out exactly what he saw, and hopefully take whatever it is out before it goes back into hiding.”

“Our?” Bobby repeats after a moment. “Thought you were in school.”

“I am,” Sam tells him, “but Dean doesn’t need to do this hunt alone.”

“And how about the hunt after that?” Bobby asks knowingly. “He gonna be okay to do that one on his own?”

No, Sam thinks instantly. No, of course not. He has to have someone watching his back after what happened; someone has to be there to save him.

“Uh huh,” Bobby says, taking Sam’s silence as his answer. “And how ‘bout the one after that? The next one? And the one after that?”

Sam frowns, brow furrowed.

“What do you want me to say, Bobby?” he asks helplessly. “He’s my brother.”

Another sigh.

“Don’t want you to say nothin’,” Bobby says. “Just... You’re out, Sam. Most hunters would kill to be where you are. Getting back into the life... You sure that’s what you wanna do?”

And there it is. Sam knows how it is with hunters: You’re in or you’re out. Are you going to be a law student or a hunter? A civilian or a warrior? Are you going to be normal, be safe, or are you going to protect your brother?

What the hell kind of choice is that?

“I know I’m not your daddy—”

“No,” Sam cuts him off sharply. “You’re not my dad.”

There’s a long pause, and Sam kicks himself.

“But I understand what you’re saying,” he adds hastily. “And thanks for looking out for us, Bobby, but I’m not seeing any other option here. I’m not... I’m not dropping out of school. I’m not going back to being a hunter. I’m just helping my brother, and I have to help him, Bobby. I have to.”

Bobby coughs.

“Yep,” he grumbles. “Stubborn asses, the whole lot of ya. But you do what you think you’ve gotta, boy. Just be smart about it.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Hmph,” Bobby intones, probably just suppressing another dig at Sam’s proclivity for home surgery. “Call me if you need anything.”

“I will,” Sam says warmly. “Thanks again for everything, Bobby.”
Bobby grunts a goodbye and hangs up with a click.

The worst part of it is that Bobby’s right, Sam thinks, tossing the green beans back in the cabinet and slapping the worn, warped door shut with a soft *thunk*. Most hunters would kill to be in his shoes.

Out. Out of the life, out of the job, out of endless shitty hotel rooms and gross diner foods and never, ever knowing if it's gonna be this monster that gets you or the next…

This is what Sam's wanted ever since he knew he could have it. Ever since he realized that being born into this war didn't mean that he had to fight it.

But now? Now that being *out* means leaving Dean *in*, alone? Alone and unguarded, fighting the nightmares of the world with no one at his back? No one to protect his blind side? To take the night watch? To make sure he and that stupid car make it from one case to the next, happy and intact, scarfing burgers and blaring obnoxious music and never, ever leaving Sam wondering if maybe *this* time, maybe *this* monster...

Well, picket fences and blissful ignorance just don't have the same shine.

Not anymore. Not now that he knows what it means for Dean.

Sam dials the pizza joint down the road, and tries to decide if he’s giving in or growing up.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

In which everyone... indulges. Not for the faint of heart, or the strict of morals.

In retrospect, Jess realizes, those last four tequila shots might have been a mistake on her part.

In her defense, dollar shots are dollar shots, and tens were made to be broken, but really, it could be waaaay worse. When she'd left the bar, Luis was singing karaoke into an empty Coors Light bottle and Becca was making out with her third Superman of the night.

By comparison, Jess's inability to climb the stairs to her apartment without both hands on the rail and zen-like concentration really isn't that bad. Really. Especially when you consider the heels she's been rocking tonight.

That's right, rocking. And don't think half the bar didn't appreciate that fact. Half the bar, and Sam's disconcertingly pretty brother.

Jesus Christ, that mouth.

Jess is a loyal girl. As in, it would take several sticks of dynamite and, like, wolves to spilt she and Sam up, but if the opportunity arose and Sam were open to, say, a ridiculously hot, no-strings-attached, tie-me-up-tie-me-down, semi-incestuous three-way, she'd be down with that.

Waaay down with that.

Jess is probably more drunk that she thinks, because she's pretty sure, as she fumbles her weirdly elusive keys, that she can hear the soundtrack to her brother-touching dream-hookup on the other side of her apartment door.

That, and Frankenstein, who was not included in Draft A of the fantasy.

“OW! Not like that, you moron! It doesn't go there!”

“How do you know?”

“How do you not know? You've been at college for how long now?”

“Not like there's a manual. Move it, already. I'm cramping over here.”

“Aw, poor baby. Too big for ya? Told you to let me take it, but nooo, I've got this end, Dean, you just do your thing.”

Her key, sympathetic to Jess's burning need to see what's behind Door #1, finally makes its way into the lock, and Jess is treated to the sight of Dean, a small mountain of beer bottles and pizza boxes, and Sam, trapped between the bookshelf and the window by a half-inflated air mattress.

Jess doesn't know whether to be amused or grateful they didn't try anything more complex than blowing up an air mattress. They'd have probably burnt the whole place down.
She sighs, unplugs the air compressor that's slowly trapping her boyfriend against last semester's life-drawing sketchbooks, and thumbs the release valve on the mattress, failing to suppress a smirk as both boys flush a dark, embarrassed red.

“Um, thanks Jess.” Sam mumbles, scrubbing a hand through his hair and stepping over the sagging polyurethane. “How was the party?”

“Dollar shots, handsy frat guys,” Jess shrugs, smiling when Sam gets his defensive face on, “but nothing I couldn't handle. Wish I could say the same for you and the mattress.”

Dean snorts into his beer bottle.

“Don't act like you weren't just as clueless, Pretty Boy,” Jess shoots Dean a look. “Now, step back and observe how awesome is carried on the x-chromosome.”

Jess is drunk and in heels, and it still takes her less than a minute to get the air mattress laid out with military precision in front of the coffee table, the compressor happily puffing away as the thing swells like a fat green marshmallow.

“Just unplug when it looks like it's gonna explode,” she tells Dean over her shoulder, scooping the borrowed bedding off the stack of textbooks and unused tubs of gesso by the couch and dumping it unceremoniously into his arms. “Now, unless you need me to woman-splain how to clean up the pizza and beer mess all over my living room, I'm gonna go have sex with my boyfriend. No? Okay, bye!”

Dean is still processing when Jess grabs the front of Sam's hoodie and hauls him into the bedroom, but before Jess slams the door in his face she can see the beginning of another flush rise on his face, those obscene lips of his parted in a smirking, surprised 'o'.

Score one for impressing the in-laws.

But then the door is shut and the lights are dim and it's been so, so long since she's had Sam here, tall and warm and solid beneath her fingertips, soft and gentle as he presses her up against the door to give her a sweet kiss as his hands find her waist in the dark.

“Are you sure, Jess?” he whispers against her neck, his hands already going to the pins in her hair, her nurse's cap quickly falling victim to Sam Winchester's quick, clever fingers. “You, um, mentioned tequila…”

“Like Dean put down all those beers by his lonesome, baby?” Jess teases, finding the zip to Sam's hoodie and demolishing it, because Sam isn't the only one in this relationship with quick, clever fingers.

She's an artist, after all.

“Fair enough,” Sam chuckles, and the time for gentle is over.

Because this? This they're very good at.

Sam might be awful at social interaction on a large scale, and Jess might be completely unable to care about the subtle nuances of upper-level legal theory, but together they work, and this?

They've never had to work at this.

Sam is a hurricane, sudden and swift, and lifting all six feet of Jess (5'11” and in heels, and Sam can
still look her in the eye. Take that Christie Warner, who said a freaky giraffe like Jess would never find a cute guy tall enough for her.) like she's nothing. Like she's air. And she is, wrapped around Sam like he's everything, like he's the only thing on this earth she needs. Precious and perfect and all hers.

He's got her pressed against the door, her legs locked around his waist and holding on for dear life because Sam, god bless him, doesn't just kiss with his mouth or his hands, but his whole damn body, rocking and pushing and grinding against her like this is their mission in life, like he was born for this, putting all that fire and focus inside him into here and now. His fingers are at her jaw line, in her hair, framing and tilting, strong and sure and possessive and he's just taking her mouth, like it's been years since they kissed last, not weeks, like this is all he needs, all he's ever needed, and his hips are matching his tongue, driving, thrusting, pushing her higher and higher through fabric and jeans and it's been so, so long that Jess has to either get him naked or die.


Sam races from her mouth to her neck, and thank god that it's the season for scarves and high necklines, because her yoga class is not ready for a hickey of the magnitude Sam is laying on her, hot and heavy and right over her pulse, his mark in her blood, pounding and pulling and with just enough bite. Jesus Christ, she can feel it in her toes. And his mouth is working and his hands are moving, claiming, making a hard, possessive pass from her hips to her ass and lower before taking her weight and throwing Jess on the bed.

Because while Sam might not be much of a talker in bed, boy does he listen.

And because Sam listens, because he's quick - quicker than anyone Jess has ever met - he's got his shirt off and his jeans down and it has been far, far too long since she's seen all this hot, sculpted muscle uncovered and under her lips like a living, breathing work of art.

And Jess knows a masterpiece when she sees one, knows that something like this has to be relished, savored, so she can't help but sit up, slide to the edge of the bed and get her hands, her mouth, on every inch of that hot, uncovered skin, tracing fingers, running lips over abs and pecs and every uncovered scar whose story she doesn't know, won't ever ask for.

The burn across his ribs, the star-shaped pucker on his hip, the sharp, heady arc at his shoulder, and a dozen smaller, easy to miss patches and slices of fragile, reformed flesh.

Jess might not know their stories now, but she will. Someday.

When Sam is ready, he'll tell her.

The big-ass bandage on his arm, though? That she's gonna be less patient about.

She does not squawk as she grabs Sam's hand, right below where the bandage starts. Jessica Lee Moore has never squawked in her life. Will never, if her boneheaded boyfriend spills right the hell now.

“What the hell is that?!”

“Just a scratch, Jess, promise,” Sam murmurs, kneeling to press soft, insistent kisses to her temple, to her neck, her collarbone and lower as his other hand surges around to make short work of her apron ties, of the zipper running down her back. “I'm fine.”

“But” Jess protests as her dress disappears over her head, and then there are Sam’s hands and Sam’s mouth where before there was only fabric, hot and wet and hard, so hard, and she can't remember
why she ever wanted him to do anything other than *that* with his tongue and his teeth and oh *Jesus Christ*…

~

Dean'll give Sam credit: He found himself a hell of a girl.

And if the sounds coming from the other side of the apartment's paper-thin bedroom door are any indication, Sam knows exactly what a lucky guy he is, because he is showing his lady some serious appreciation...

*Serious*...

*Very* serious...

Jesus Christ, Sam. Come up for air or something. Give the girl a goddamn break.

Not like Dean can blame the kid, though. He'd been away from Jessie the Cookie Baking Amazon for a couple weeks, and in that damn nurse costume, the girl'd looked like a *Maxim* centerfold in living, breathing, lip-glossed 3D.

Sammy may be a socially awkward nerd of the nth degree, but apparently the kid is human.

As is Dean, a fact that is becoming steadily harder to ignore as he lays on the borrowed air mattress and can't help but listen to the increasingly... *happy* sounds coming from his little brother's bedroom.

He should be sleeping. Or trying to drown out Sammy with the TV. Or fucking... *anything*.

Anything but listening, imagining the flush on Jess's face and what *exactly* Sam must be doing to her to draw out those long, desperate cries.

What she must be doing to him to pull those half-agonized, half-amazed groans from his baby brother's throat, those soft, almost-stifled whimpers Dean recognizes from a hundred too-long showers and a time when he and Sam were growing but not grown, before vampires and fighting and Stanford and doors and distance between him and his little brother.

God, Sammy'd *kill* him for this, is probably gonna come out bitching and blushing tomorrow morning anyway when the beer's out of his system and he realizes what a show he and Jess put on, but Dean is only human and if it's been a long time for Sam it's been a *hell* of a long time for Dean, who'd been in a little bit of a dry spell even before being fucking vamp-napped had ruined his chances with that hot blonde from the diner in Louisiana.

Jerkin' it is one thing. Man's gotta do it and all, but this? This is different. Even with desperation and the the warm, slow buzz of alcohol in his veins, Dean can't ignore the fact that this, what he's thinkin' about doin' here?

It's pretty much a Kinsey 6 of wrong.

Because Dean *knows*, can't help but know, hates himself for knowing, as he traces his hands down to the waist of his jeans, lets his head fall back as he teases the fly loose and tries to remember the curve of - Katie's? Cassidy's?- ass, that no matter who he pictures right now, no matter how many waitresses or co-eds or yoga instructors he drags up from his memory, it's always going to come back to the sounds on the other side of the door, to Jess's mile-long legs wrapped around his baby brother's trim, tanned waist, to Sammy, tall and lean and oh, so smart, grabbing her, teasing her, driving her to the edge, over and over again.
Because if those sounds are any indication, apparently his baby brother's got stamina to *burn*.

Dean shoves the guilt, the shame to the side, closes a hand around himself and has to swallow a groan of his own, because *goddamn* it, it has been way, *way* too long, fear and blood-loss and transfusion hangovers and *catastrophic fucking bruising* stealing any want he might have had in the wake of that damn basement, but he's here now, here and hard and *Jesus Christ*, it might be *bad* and it might be *wrong*, but it's like he's in the same room with them, can hear *everything*, can practically fucking *see* them: Jess's hair everywhere, legs locked, hands clutching; Sam's eyes clenched tight, *moving*, *working*, everywhere at once, all clever hands and hot, laser focus; and Jesus Christ this shouldn't be as hot as it is, shouldn't have Dean arching, tightening, working himself faster, *harder* as the sounds on the other side of the door pick up, as the pace rises and the blood starts to beat in Dean's ears, as the heat *grips* him, *pulls* at him, starts to bleed into his face as sweat pricks his hairline, traces down the small of his back as his hips arch, *thrust* into his hand, into air, into the sounds on the other side of that door.

Jess, hot and sweet and wound tight, panting, twisting, *begging* for it, getting it, getting everything Sam has to give her and *more*, if the hard, insistent pounding of the headboard against the thin wall is anything to go for, and Dean, jaw clenched against a groan, sweat slick and on the edge as he listens, *hears*, *feels*, and fists himself, his fingers sweat slick and desperately quick, tight and fast, up and over, but not hot enough, not tight enough, not wet enough, not *real* enough, not until—

"*Sam!*" Jess screams, crying out as she comes, catches and burns, and Dean's over the edge, falling and clenching and twisting on the squishy, inflated bedding, spilling over his own fingers and onto borrowed sheets in hot, bone-deep spurts as the orgasm tears through him, wrenches out from his spine to plow every thought but white, hot oblivion from his mind. He bites his lip to keep from opening his mouth, to keep from giving Jess a run for her money as the pulses tear through him, as he comes hard, harder than he has in a hell of a long time, as he sees the face of fucking God on a Palo Alto air mattress, keeping up his hand through the waves, riding the high for all it's fucking worth, coming down slow, panting, sweat cooling on his skin as white lightning oblivion fades into fuzzy, vague aftershocks, fritzing through Dean like static on a crappy motel TV, warm and distant and tugging, pulling him away from the mess cooling on the sheets, away from guilt and responsibility and recrimination and towards sleep, towards *fuck-it-all* and worry-*about-it-in-the-morning* and who-the-hell-has-to know and if-all-else-fails-drink-it-away.

'Cause it's late.

And it's gonna be hell slipping out before Sammy wakes up tomorrow morning.
In which no one gets what they want.

Jess wakes up at 6:30 to an empty bed, angry shouting, and the mother of all hangovers.

“I'm just getting doughnuts, Sam!”

“Bullshit, Dean! You don't even know where the doughnut place is!”

“I'll find it! I just want some alone time, Sam! What are you, five? You need to follow me around, 24/7?!”

“No, I wanna know why you need a duffle bag to go get doughnuts! Is it for the doughnuts, Dean? It can't be, cause it's full of your shit!!”

*It's too damn early for this,* Jess thinks and pulls one of Sam's uglier flannel shirts over her camisole, hangover pounding in her head as the world tilts unsteadily on its axis and sunlight burns her eyes.

A few long strides have her out of the hellish glare of the bedroom and into the loud, screaming inferno of the living room. Sam and Dean are shouting at the top of their lungs, Dean with a death grip the strap of a duffle bag and Sam holding a set of keys angrily out of his reach. They both fall silent as Jess stalks into the room, snatching the keys from Sam's hand and glaring through the tangled length of her hair.

“You're. Walking,” she snarls, dropping the keys down the front of her camisole and grabbing a bottle of water from the fridge before slamming the bedroom door and immediately regretting it. Too loud.

*Waaaay* too loud.

~

Sam and Dean stare after Jessica, their fight - at least for the moment - totally forgotten.

“Dude, you remember that llorona we killed in Texas like, six years ago?” Dean asks blankly, his eyes still wide at Jess's heel-face-turn from the smart, smiling girlfriend of the night before.

“Yeah?” Sam nods, eyes flicking to the bedroom door.

“It looked *just* like that.”

“Yeah, right before it shoved dad's ass through a window,” Sam snorts, taking the duffle bag from Dean and tossing it on the couch, smirking a little as he notices Dean's eyes flick to the bedroom door, then eye the window warily.

“Jess like doughnuts?” Dean hazards cautiously, as if feeding Jess would somehow appease her hangover-induced rage.
“Yeah, anything with sprinkles,” Sam grins a little at his brother, who’s charged in, fearless and guns blazing, to more hunts against more nightmares than Sam can even count, and yet is, apparently, terrified of a 130 pound girl with a hangover.

“You gonna…” Dean trails off, jerking his head at the bedroom door.

“Yeah, no. I'm comin' with you,” Sam shakes his head, grabbing one of Dean’s shirts and his jacket from the night before rather than venture into the bedroom with a testy, hungover Jess to get fresh clothes.

“What's wrong Sammy, scared of your girlfriend?” Dean laughs, not missing a thing.

“Terrified.”

~

Jess is still in the bedroom when they get back to the apartment.

“You wanna go in there or...” Dean jerks a head towards Sam and Jess’s room as he sets their coffees on the kitchen counter.

“Nah, I'm good,” Sam shakes his head, busying himself with pawing through the mountain of napkins in the plastic Krispy Kreme bag, wincing at the crinkle of plastic and shooting a wary glance at the door.

“Chicken,” Dean snorts, tossing Sam a handful of sugars and a packet of creamer as he takes over the task of liberating the doughnuts from their plastic prison.

“She's fine,” Sam protests, ripping open a sugar packet and dumping it in his coffee. “Hungover and... irrationally angry... but fine.”

“She's still got my keys, dude,” Dean bitches through a mouthful of custard and chocolate icing.

“Because God forbid you not be able to sneak out of here in the dead of night, haul ass to Black Water Ridge, and get eaten,” Sam retorts, tossing an empty creamer pack into the abandoned doughnut bag with a sharp, angry plastic rustle.

“That's not-”

“That's exactly what you were trying to do, Dean!” Sam interrupts, barely missing sloshing coffee all over the kitchen floor. “Don't lie to me! You waited till I was asleep so you could sneak the fuck out in the middle of the night, just like Dad!”

The dig hurts Dean, Sam can see it in the way his brother’s eyes narrow, his face hardening with a stubborn, angry set to the jaw that is all John Winchester.

Good.

It should hurt, having what he was about to do thrown in his face, being reminded of exactly whose playbook he was using there.

“People are dying, Sammy!” Dean bites out, all 'duty' and 'honor' and ‘the family business’ and Sam is just so goddamn sick of it, because why?

Why does it always have to be Dean sacrificing for these people, these helpless faceless masses? Why does it have to be his brother on the front lines, breaking and bleeding and, one day, probably
someday soon, dying for the cause?

“Yeah, and if you don’t slow the fuck down, you’re gonna be one of them!” Sam throws back, helpless and angry in the face of Dean’s stupid, suicidal drive to follow their Dad’s orders, to be on the front lines, come hell or high water.

“What am I supposed to do? Stick my head in my sand and ignore it?” Dean snaps. “Lie on my ass here, listen to you and your girl fuck ’till the cows come home?”

“Oh what the fuck ever!” Sam scoffs. “You really gonna come down on me about that? Consider it payback!”

“For what?” Dean barks.

“For what?! You’re seriously gonna act like you don’t remember all those times when we were teenagers?” Sam demands incredulously. “Dean, I still get a shame-boner every time I hear the phrase ‘Don't worry, he's sleeping.’”

“Okay, that's not even the point, here,” Dean dismisses, which makes Sam even angrier.

Who the hell is he to just waive a whole damn argument? Who died and made him Dad?

“Oh yeah, then what is? Me foiling your great escape?” Sam challenges, not backing down an inch. He has a point to make, dammit, and if Dean hasn’t realized by now that his going on that hunt is as good as signing his death certificate, it is Sam’s God-given duty as a brother and the only sane member of their fucked-up little family to drag him kicking and screaming to the same conclusion.

“Whatever's up at Black Water is bad mojo, Dean!” Sam presses, angry and desperate and if Dean would just believe him, could just listen and see reason-

Sam can’t watch him twenty-four seven, and he can’t just let him stroll off to die, and Dean is his only brother, his only... anything and he needs him, here and alive and now, and that won’t happen ever again if he trucks off to martyr himself for their dad’s stupid, suicidal vendetta.

“The shape you're in, it'd chew you up and spit you out bloody!” Sam continues, hard and fast and fervent, because Dean has got to get this through his thick skull. "I don’t care if it pisses you off and I don't care if it hurts your pride, I'm not sending you off to die! Not while you're still hurt! Not while I can stop it.”

“If this is 'cause I screwed up in Louisiana-” Dean cuts in, hard and defensive, and Sam just can’t take that right now, he can’t.

“I don't care that you got snatched, Dean!” he interrupts, because this has never, ever been about Dean’s competence as a hunter. “I care that you can't climb a fucking flight of stairs without getting dizzy! How do you think you're gonna do on the side of a mountain trying to fight who the hell knows what?!”

“I'd figure somethin' out,” Dean mutters sullenly, crossing his arms and leaning against the kitchen counter, mouth tight and eyes hard and so, so much like John that it kills Sam, throws him right over the edge.

“Something that would get you killed!” Sam explodes angrily, a match to gunpowder, suddenly livid, and then, just as suddenly, exhausted, turning to ashes and cinders in the face of the same damn fight, over and over again.
"... Listen, I know I can't stop you from going on this one," Sam sighs, shoving a hand through his hair. "Or the next, or whatever, but Dean, please. You're..."

And Sam has to take a breath, to bear down hard on the well of everything Dean is, what losing him, watching him walk away and knowing what was coming and not being able to stop it, not being able to help Dean, to save him, would do, would mean.

"You're the only brother I got," he forces out. The words aren't enough, don't cover everything Dean is - don't even cover half of what he means, has always meant, has suddenly become to Sam - but they're the best he's got, and even then, they don't get across the awful, gaping hole the what-if's of Dean's leaving, his taking off for Black Water, opens in Sam.

"Take care of yourself," Sam presses, pleads, tries to convince Dean even though he knows, knows it won't work, isn't working. "Heal up, first... Just for a couple of days. 'Cause you go off on a job like this at half-strength-"

God, how is it that fighting with Dean can just take everything out of him like this?

Sam scrubs his face in his hands, trying to get a grip on his rapidly fraying composure, because Dean isn’t listening or responding or anything, he’s just staring at him, hearing but not listening, stubborn and solid and looking more like Dad by the second. Dad, who would rather eat lead than admit Sam was right, and Dean is just like him, and Dean is determined to go on this hunt solo.

Just like Louisiana, where Sam spent a week not knowing whether or not his brother was alive or dead, a week searching car trunks and ditches and storm drains and motel rooms, always one second away from finding his brother’s body bloody and broken. Always running through their last conversation in his head, hoping, praying to god that the last words he'd hurled at his brother wouldn't be their last. Always playing through in his head what could have happened to Dean. Always wondering how he’d find him, when, where, how far gone he’d be. Always, always, always...

Always one second away from having his whole world shattered.

It’s too much, just too much.

“I just-” Sam starts, only to falter, shoving his hands through his hair again, trying, trying to make sense of the desperation in his head, to make words out of the sharp, desperate flood of nodeandontleave rushing through him. “I can’t spend another week getting ready to find you dead in a ditch somewhere, okay?”

He looks up to meet Dean’s eyes. The steady, serious green anchors him, and he can feel the tears welling up in his eyes and he hates it, because when? When did he become this person?

When did having his brother there, safe and warm by his side, go from something he liked to something he needed? As crucial to Sam’s well-being as blood or oxygen, the flesh on his bones or the beat of his heart?

“I can’t just sit here while you're off dying or dead or worse,” Sam gasps, tears spilling out completely against his will. “I can’t spend any more time making lists in my head of the morgues I’m gonna have to call, Dean... I can't. I just can't-”

He chokes on the words, heart pounding double time in his chest, his breaths stammering quick, getting trapped in his throat before he can exhale.

And then Dean is there with a warm, calloused hand against Sam’s neck, steady and solid and here.
“Hey, hey, Sammy, it's okay,” Dean murmurs, dragging Sam’s good hand up to his chest, shoving the palm against the heat of Dean’s pulse. “I'm right here. See? It's fine. I'm okay.”

All Sam can do is nod and breathe, letting the momentum pull him forward, slumping to bury his face in the crest of Dean’s shoulder, to time each inhale and exhale with Dean’s slow, steady breaths. He takes in his brother’s heartbeat under his fingers, the heat of him, warm and alive and wrapped around him, holding him up, holding him together, surrounding him with the smell of cheap shampoo and worn leather, Old Spice and the lingering tang of gunpowder. Dean’s scent. The scent of family... safety... home.

Dean’s here. He’s here and he’s fine, at least for now, so Sam can unclench, can relax that little bit and just breathe, the shaky, unsteady in-and-out's timed to Dean's, until they mellow out, slow and solidify to keep pace with Dean, strong and secure, a warm wall of solid-brother-safe all around him.

Real. Here. Alive.

“C’mon,” Dean gruffs, pulling away after a long moment. “Need to redress that arm.”

“S’fine,” Sam mumbles, scrubbing a hand over his eyes.

“After last night’s sexcapades with Jess?” Dean smirks, eyebrows quirking. “That thing’s gotta be as dirty as my mind.”

“Dean,” Sam winces, blushing as he digs under the sink for the first aid kit.

“Aw yeah,” Dean nods, snagging another doughnut and bringing the box to the kitchen table to sprawl in a chair and leer at Sam with a wicked grin. “Little Sammy grew up to be a bad boy, huh?”

“You’re disgusting.”

Sam can feel the flush heating his cheeks as Dean cracks open the med kit, and snags the last custard cream doughnut in revenge, dropping in the chair next to his brother and pulling up his sleeve reluctantly.

“And how come I have to go first?” he demands through a mouthful of icing and filling. “You’re gonna need, like, ten times the gauze and tape I do.”

“‘Cause I’m older,” Dean answers confidently, peeling the old dressing away from Sam’s arm. “And ‘cause I’ve got all the bandages and shit. First lesson in ambulance-chasin’, Sammy. Possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

Dean waves the medical tape tauntingly at Sam before jerking his chin at the kitchen sink.

“Now, go get that cut cleaned. Times a’ wastin’.”

“Don’t rush me, jerk,” Sam grumbles, trying to squash a grin.

“Hurry up then, bitch,” Dean tosses over his shoulder, abandoning the tape to start building a house of cards from the gauze packets.

Sam can’t help but smile as he washes up at the sink. If this is falling back into old roles, letting Dean be the Big Brother taking care of the Little Brother, if this is safe and regressive and cheating, Sam doesn’t care. He doesn’t. Because his arm hurts and he’s tired of fighting and didn't miss how Dean never promised to stay, never promised to stop trying to leave.
He’s not gonna be able to keep Dean with him like this. Not forever. Not nearly long enough.

It doesn't matter if it's this hunt or the next, Dean is gonna slip away from him, and Sam's world will shrink down to waiting, one minute to the next, for that knock on the door, that late night call, that one article that catches his eye and brings his world crashing down.

Sam knows he's running on stolen time, but he’ll take what he can get, for however long he can get it.

Because the alternative? Not even worth contemplating.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

In which reading is fundamental.

Jess emerges from her cave long after the med kit’s been put away.

Sam’s arm is clean and freshly bandaged, no redness or swelling that’s worth worrying about. Dean still looks like a six-year-old went to town playing doctor, but with all the layers he wears, it’ll fly under the radar as long as no one looks too close.

Jess gets halfway through her chocolate sprinkle doughnut, before she see the clock on the wall and almost chokes.

“Oh my god! I didn’t realize it was so late!” she apologizes though a mouthful of pastry. “You guys are probably starving!”

Dean is, actually, and Jess is holding the only edible food in Sam’s apartment. You better believe that if Sammy had been a little slower on the uptake, Dean would’ve been all over that sprinkly son of a bitch. But nooo, someone had to be all ‘be fair’ and ‘you’re a guest dammit’ and ‘you’ve had six, Dean!’.

Jessica is a nice girl, but Dean is not a ‘fair play and restraint’ kind of guy. Not when baked goods are on the line.

Jess suggests some restaurant on the main drag she and Sam go to all the time, then springs back into the bedroom ‘for just a minute’ to get ready.

By the time she comes back out, Dean’s about ready to start chewing on the furniture, but her hair’s bouncy and Sammy looks like it’s Christmas morning as he gives her a kiss and slips a hand around her waist, so he decides to let it pass.

“Jess, can I get the keys?” Sam asks, trying and failing for subtle as Dean’s shrugging into his jacket.

“Hey, better idea,” Dean interrupts, not about to let Sammy snake his chance to get on the road sometime this century. “How about I get the keys?”

“Or we can just walk,” Jess suggests, looking at both of them like they’re crazy. “Guys, it’s, like, three blocks from here. Besides, parking downtown is a nightmare.”

“You are so right, Jess,” Sam agrees, shooting a victorious smirk at Dean before giving Jess an adoring kiss.

“C’mon, Sammy, I leave my baby alone any longer, she’s gonna start thinkin’ I don’t love her,” Dean whines, looking out the window to where the Impala sits idle in the parking lot.

“Dean, we are not driving just to indulge your unhealthy fixation with the car,” Sam bitches, locking up the apartment after they all file out.
“I’m an injured man, Sammy,” Dean tosses back, trucking down the rickety apartment steps behind Sam and Jess. “This could destroy my fragile health!”

“You’ll be fine,” Sam dismisses, herding Dean down the sidewalk while Jess grins at their antics.

“That’s not what you said last night!” Dean tries, but he knows a last ditch effort when he hears it, even when it’s from himself.

If Sammy didn’t break when Dean reminded him of his bites, he was never gonna.

Jess is chortling into her fist before Sam can even bitchface properly.

“I’m sorry,” Jess giggles as they both stare at her. “I’m not laughing at you being hurt, I promise. It’s just- is it wrong that I want to make a ‘That’s what she said’ joke right now?”

Dean grins, and the laugh that escapes him is as much of a surprise for him as it is for Sam, if the shocked look on his little brother’s face is anything to go by.

“I’m fallin’ for your girlfriend, Sammy,” Dean teases, ducking around Sam to sling an arm around Jess’s shoulders. “You better watch out.”

“Whatever.” Sam scoffs, falling into step beside Dean with a smile. “She’s got better taste than that, loser.”

“Apparently not,” Dean tosses back with a light shove to Sam’s shoulder. “She’s datin’ you, isn’t she?”

“For a year now,” Sam answers, a sarcastic tilt to his mouth. “And the longest relationship you’ve ever had was with who, Dean? The Impala?”

“Hush, Sammy. Grownups are talkin’,” Dean leans down, and Sam’s girl or not, Jess smells good; he’d never do that to Sammy, but it’s definitely been way too long since Dean’s had that particular itch scratched. “So, Jess, tell me about this restaurant you hippies are draggin’ me to.”

Jess smiles and reaches around Dean’s back to tangle her fingers with Sam’s.

“See for yourself,” she says and nods at the glass front window of the storefront they’re approaching.

At first, Dean thinks that the whole place is books, stacked high here and there, making chairs and table and shelves, all loaded to the breaking point with even more books. New books, old books, shiny college textbooks, and the worn, peeling leather bound volumes that Dean wouldn’t blink at seeing spread across Bobby’s desk in the middle of a research binge.

As they get closer, Dean can see that it’s not a bookstore but a restaurant, or at least some combination of the two. The books are everywhere, lining the walls to the ceiling on dinged, mismatched shelves, stacked high on listing, battered tables, piled at the foot of the squashy, broken-in chairs and couches Dean can see peeking out from odd nooks and crannies between.

As they walk through the door, the smell of fresh French bread and some thick, savory soup hits Dean and he just has to ask Jess as Sam nudges past them to investigate some exciting new stack of reading material.

“So, I’m not surprised he comes here,” Dean starts, as he watches Sam disappear into the stacks with what is dangerously close to lust in his eyes. “What I can’t figure out is how the hell you get him to leave.”
Jess grins, leading Dean to the counter in the back corner underneath an enormous blackboard, menu chalked on it in fluorescent purples and greens.

“We’ve had a couple of close calls with the management,” she nods, laughing. “They cut the lights on him a couple of times.”

“Lemme guess,” Dean smirks. “He had a flashlight?”

“Two!” Jess bursts out. “I still can’t figure out where he was keeping the second one!”

“I’ve got an idea,” Dean laughs, grin quick and wicked, “but Sammy’d never let me hear the end of it if I told you all his secrets.”

“If you told me all his secrets, we’d be here ‘til next week,” Jess shrugs with a good-natured smirk, turning to order from the aproned co-ed manning the counter.

“Can I get the soup of the day with a salad, dressing on the side, and the turkey bacon sandwich on tomato basil?” she asks, then rolls her eyes as Dean makes a face. “What?”

“Turkey bacon?” Dean scoffs. “Talk about your sins against nature.”

“Turkey AND bacon, Dean,” Jess laughs and shakes her head, blonde curls bouncing against the soft lavender of her sweater, “and it’s actually pretty good, if you wanna give it a chance.”

“I think I’ll take you up on that,” Dean nods as he scans the rest of the menu, trying and failing to find anything else with no salad, alfalfa, or soy in it.

_Hippies._

Dean could understand getting tired of diner food every now and then, he was with Sam there. That’s what takeout places were invented for. You got a night off from fries and burgers and a fortune cookie to boot. But really? Tofu? _Kale?_

This is a new low.

Dean’ll bend a lot for Sam, will do his best to wrap his mind around a whole hell of a lot of foreign concepts and ignore his best judgment if it means making his brother happy. He’s risked his ass, broken laws, and even, on one or two memorable occasions, broken bones and shed blood for the kid, but hell if he ever tries to follow, in any way, Sam’s obsession with rabbit food.

But then, Sam’s never been exactly the same as Dean, has he?

Dean used to think that it was Sammy not having known their mom, that not having that soft hand and warm voice meant that Sam just didn't understand things the way Dean and Dad did. But as time passed and Sam grew and **Dean** was the one making him sandwiches and giving him hugs and tucking him in at night, he started blaming himself, taking the squalls, the stubborn temper tantrums to his account for not watching after Sammy well enough, not taking good enough care of his little brother.

As Dean got older, as more and more of Sam started showing in the soft, pudgy toddler that was quickly growing into an annoying pest of a little brother, he just chalked it up to general Sammy weirdness, but it was always there. Every time Sam wanted to play soccer instead of prep ammo, every time his brother complained about having to do PT drills instead of homework. Every time Sam asked questions, whined at Dad’s orders instead of following them like Dean.
It used to make him angry, seeing Sam and Dad butt heads about stupid crap like curfews and haircuts alongside the important things. Sam not wanting to move right before exams. Sam not wanting to practice his shooting. Sam not wanting to learn how to throw a knife or shoot a bow or a thousand other things that Dean went along with willingly, enthusiastically, because he’d seen the consequences, seen what happened when you didn’t do your research or lay down salt or make sure you knew everything you could possibly know about what’s out there.

It ends in fire and having everything you thought you knew left in black, smoking ruins.

Sam was always the different one, always the one who wanted to be the normal kid Dean once was and would never be again.

You’re either in or you’re out.

Dean’s in. He’s in this war, and even if he never gets the thing that killed their mom, he’s gonna do his damndest to kill every evil son of a bitch he comes across, but Sam?

Sammy, who’s never fit in anywhere?

He fits here.

And maybe fitting in’s not worth much when it’s based on lies, when no one knows who you really are beneath the cover stories and made-up details, the fudged tales of friends and family you never had, never knew. The smoke and mirrors of a life you never led.

God knows lying’s never done Dean any favors.

Sure, it's gotten him through one job and into the next, kept him in scammed credit cards and sleazy dive bar hookups, but it's never filled that empty spot in him that’s always pulled, tugged just a little when he was away, when the passenger seat was empty and the air in the Impala was dead, no bitching or joking or brother beside him, and Dean can deal with that. Has never really felt shortchanged by something that just seems to be the cost of doing what they do, but powering past the lies? Making a life out of the ashes of Lawrence and whatever they’ve been able to scrape together along the way?

It’s worth something to Sam.

That’s all Dean needs to know.

“It ever bother you, all the secrets?” he asks Jess as he pays.

Sammy’s serious about this girl, steady and fixed in the way that Sam gets about these things, and Jess’s answer here, her response to the scarcity of truth in their lives, the lack of answers that’s a fact of life as a civilian surrounded by hunters, is really important here.

“They’re his to tell,” Jess answers, simply shrugging as she and Dean make their way to one of the scarred tables grouped around the service counter. “It’s not that I don’t care. I do, more than anything, it’s just- If he doesn’t want to tell me, he’s got a reason. Maybe it’s a big thing, maybe it isn’t, but I trust Sam. I love him. And I think trust can take the place of honesty, when it needs to.”

There’s no game in her voice. No bitterness or subterfuge, none of the thousand tiny cues Dean’s trained to sniff out in a witness that’s hiding the truth, that’s lying or trying to twist facts to mirror their version of what happened.

Sammy’s picked himself one hell of a girl.
“So you know he’s lied to you about his past?” Dean asks probingly.

Jess give him a ‘bitch please’ look, and Dean can’t help but grin a little at the blonde, lip glossed version of one of his baby brother’s favorite expressions.

“I know,” Jess nods, smiling to herself a little. “You’d think someone who lies so much about himself would be better at it.”

“You’re tellin’ me,” Dean snorts. “The kid’s hopeless.”

“Cute, though,” Jess grins as their order is called, striding to the counter to grab their plates before Dean can even get up. “I’ve got this, if you want to hunt down Sam?”

“Awesome,” Dean nods, getting a good look at the fresh, delicious stacks of bacon and turkey and homemade bread Jess is setting on their table before setting off to pry Sam away from his precious books.

He finds Sammy on the second floor, perched halfway up a ladder leaning precariously against two different bookcases, nose buried in a dusty paperback.

“Hey, Revenge of the Nerds, grubs on,” he calls, smacking Sam on the leg as he peers at the titles on the shelf next to Sam’s shoulder. *Understanding Marbury v. Madison? Undercover Anti-Populism? A Tribute to Judge Richard A. Posner?*

If these aren't the most boring books in existence, they've at least got to be in the top ten, and yet Sam's got his eyes glued to the page like any second the words are gonna turn into nymphomaniacal strippers.

“Yeah, in a minute,” Sam murmurs, thumbing through a few pages and squinting at a footnote in the shadow of the shelves.

If Dean had a dollar for every time he'd heard that one from Sam, he'd never have to run another credit scam again.

“Why do I not believe you?” Dean rolls his eyes, snagging the book from Sam and striding for the stairs, waving it tauntingly over his shoulder.

“Hey! Give it back, Dean!” Sam whines, using his freakish orangutan arms to try and snatch the book back from Dean as they troop down the stairs. “The interview is in twenty-three hours! I need to prepare!”

“What,” Dean scoffs, peering at the title, “they gonna quiz you on *When Lawyers Lose Themselves?* Jesus Christ, Sammy, the fuck is this? Harlequin Romance for nerds?”

“It's a law treatise, Dean,” Sam bitches as they wind through the stacks, “and it's by one of the administrators who'll be interviewing me.”

“Oh, I get it,” Dean nods sagely. “You're reading his shit so you can kiss ass a little better. Makes sense.”

“It's not kissing ass, Dean,” Sam fumes. “It's-”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean interrupts, waving the captured book idly as they clear the bookshelves. “Interview, full ride, golden ticket, all that jazz. I get it Sammy, really. You’re gonna knock ‘em dead, lawyer porn or no.”
“Lawyer porn, huh?” Jess asks as they slide into their chairs. “Should I even ask?”

“Probably not,” Dean winks at Jess, getting a grin out of her as he tucks the book out of Sam's reach and sets into his sandwich.

“If Dean would just let me prepare for my interview-” Sam complains, slopping dressing over his salad with much more force than necessary.

“Come on, Sammy,” Dean interrupts. “I know you. You probably figured out this guy was gonna be the one puttin' you in the hot seat months ago, ran out the second you knew, and started memorizing everything from his shoe size to his third grade book report. You really wanna tell me you haven't read this at least once?”

“Yeah, I have,” Sam admits, a slight flush staining his cheeks as he viciously stabs a cherry tomato, “but this one's annotated! And it has a new foreword!”

“Well, food first. Foreplay after,” Dean declares decisively, chomping down on his sandwich as Jess snorts into her diet coke.
In which Jess and Dean discuss Sam's shortcomings. And his not-so-shortcomings.

Not surprisingly, Sam dives face first into interview prep once they get back to the apartment, leaving Dean and Jess to amuse themselves with basic cable and Jess's DVD collection.

“So you're the Meg Ryan fan?” Dean asks, smirk playing at the edge of his mouth as he scans the bookshelf for something to watch. Aside from a few news programs and one truly awful procedural crime drama that Dean vetoed on the (entirely fictional) basis that it would give him 'Nam era flashbacks, the TV has proven a total bust as far as entertainment goes.

“Shut up!” Jess laughs. “When Harry Met Sally is a classic!”

“I knew you were too good to be true,” Dean shakes his head and starts flipping through one of the notebooks next to the stacks of DVDs.

It's full of sketches, mostly pencil, but there are a few here and there with messy, scrawled colors in bright chalks and pastels. Plants, mainly, but there are some of fruit, furniture. A handful of one seriously fucked-up teddy bear and woah! That's a naked chick.

Dean raises an eyebrow at Jess and keeps flipping through the sketchbook.

“We went through a life drawing thing in one of my classes this semester,” Jess shrugs. “It lasted a while.”

“Going to school to stare at naked chicks,” Dean smirks. “Maybe I should…”

His voice fades, trails off, because it's not naked chicks in Jess's sketchbook anymore. It's arms and hands and wrists and torsos, all male and all sporting some very familiar scars, just detailed enough that Dean can see the ghosts - the pale, pockmark puckers - of sutures that Dean put in himself. Jagged, pale fingerprints that life and Dean have left on his brother's smooth, tanned skin, rendered in careful lines of chalk and charcoal on the page in front of him.

“Sammy you male-modelin' son of a bitch,” Dean chuckles, flipping the page. “Tell me-”

... Holy crap.

Naked Sam.

Naked.

Sam.

“You might wanna skip the next couple of pages,” Jess suggests brightly, not uncomfortable at all, and Dean wishes he could say that about himself, because wow.
Just wow.

She's got Sam completely. That's his hair, stupid-long and going every which way, and his eyes, big and expressive, with that laser-focused intensity staring out from the page, and it all leads to Sam's chest, unfamiliar layers of muscle topped by achingly-familiar scars, and then it's Sam's long legs and trim waist and-

Damn.

“Bein' a little generous, aren't ya?” he clears his throat, eyeing the sketchbook skeptically in a few key areas.

“I'm really not,” Jess smiles, and it's just close enough to a purr that Dean feels super awkward, because, wow. Sam dating a chick who looks like she should be on the cover of Maxim suddenly makes a hell of a lot more sense.

And then Sam's back, scrounging around on the book case for something, pen shoved behind his ear with a legal pad clutched in one hand, and as Dean claps the sketch book shut, neither he nor Jess is mentioning the elephant in the room.

And Dean's eyes do not go to Sam's belt when he thinks that.

Do. Not.

“So,” Jess chirps making her way into the kitchen. “I was promised embarrassing Sam stories.”

Dean doesn't remember promising anything of the sort, but it's as good of an awkward fog clearer as anything, so he goes with it.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he drawls, straddling a kitchen chair and grinning as she starts the coffeemaker. “I start with those, we'll be here all week.”

He leans over, looks into the living room where Sam is still loading up on books from the bookcase.

“Right, Sammy?” he shouts.

“Hmm?” Sam mumbles. “Yeah, Dean. Sure. Jess, did you move my law reviews?”

“They're on the bookshelf in the bedroom, sweetie,” Jess smiles. “Next to the National Geographics.”

“National Geographics? Nerd,” Dean declares, striding to the fridge to get a beer.

“Hey, those magazines are mine,” Jess laughs as she measures out coffee grounds.

“He's a huge nerd,” Dean presses. “You know that, right? Tell me you're figured that out by now?”

“Just because he's smart.” Jess shakes her head, biting back smile as she pours water in the coffeemaker.

“Smart?” Dean scoffs. “Kid's a genius. Not the point. Point is, Mathletes? Drama Club? Debate Team? Total nerd activities.”

Jess laughs, pulling a cookbook down from the top of the refrigerator and opening it.

“Baby, you were a mathlete?” she calls into the other room.
“Dean, what are you telling her?” Sam demands, poking his head into the kitchen and glaring at his brother.

“We’re bonding!” Dean defends. “Thought you’d be all over that shit.”

“Since when does ‘bonding’ mean swapping humiliating stories about me as a kid?” Sam asks, narrowing his eyes.

“Since always,” Dean shrugs, as if stating the obvious, then pointedly scooting his chair around to face Jess. “Anyway, one time, Mathlete Sammy here was at some nerd convention-”

“It was a math competition, Dean!”

“Nerd. Convention,” Dean enunciates, continuing. “Answering his little nerd questions, when suddenly, he gets one wrong.”

“No I didn't!!” Sam breaks in.

“That's not what the moderator said, Sammy,” Dean grins.

“He was wrong!! The answer in the book was wrong!” Sam insists, striding into the kitchen.

“You say that,” Dean teases. “I'm not so sure…”

“It was a question about limits, Dean! I know about limits!”

“Anyway, I come back from taking a phone call, find Sammy in a shouting match with this guy, about to roundhouse kick an 85 year old man in the face, Chuck Norris style.”

“He wasn't even a math professor, Dean!” Sam shouts. “He was from the philosophy department! Not even as a head! He was an adjunct!”

“I don't even know what that means,” Dean announces, smirking.

“It means that he sucked at philosophy AND math!” Sam bursts out.

He stalks back out of the kitchen.

“I got that question right!” he calls from the other room, and Dean can hear the sound of his too-big little brother flinging himself into the chair angrily.

“Of course you did, baby,” Jess assures, taking sugar and vanilla from a cabinet.

“Alright, Jess,” Dean grins. “Your turn.”

“For my embarrassing Sam story?” Jess asks with a grin, tipping the vanilla and sugar into the mixing bowl. “I don't know… yours wasn't so embarrassing…”

“Did I mention I had to practically carry his freakishly-tall, angry teenage ass out?” Dean smirks. "And that he can't go back to ANY community college in Ohio?”

Jess dissolves into laughter at the counter.

“Okay, okay,” Jess gasps, getting eggs from the fridge. “I've got one. It was about six months ago, during spring finals. Sam's going completely nuts-"
“Lemme guess: Not eating, not sleeping, building himself a nest out of books and legal pads like some kind of geek-pigeon hybrid?” Dean breaks in, watching Jess crack eggs into the bowl.

“Bingo,” Jess nods, tossing eggshells in the trash. “The whole apartment was covered in protein bar wrappers and coffee cups. Drove me up the wall.”

“He has got to stop doing that,” Dean mutters. “The kid's been pulling' that schtick since middle school. You can't say anything about it either or he goes from zero to defensive in a heartbeat.”

“Tell me about it,” Jess rolls her eyes, digging a mixer out from under the counter. “It can't be healthy, right?! Anyway, it's been a week, he's slept maybe four hours and has reached that manic, semi-unhinged critical-mass zone that has him like, seeing sounds and hearing colors.”

“Because that's healthy,” Dean snorts.

“Yeah,” Jess agrees. “Anyway, I finally, finally convince him to take a nap, just a little, before his last final. You know, just to get his head on straight.”

“What'd that go?” Dean grins at Jess, waiting.

“Boy, do I ever,” Dean nods.

“And I sort of step towards the kitchen, and I ask him 'Sam, baby, you awake?'”

“No response?” Dean asks, taking a sip of his beer.

“I might as well have been talking to a brick wall,” Jess enthuses. “And he just keeps digging through the drawer, then comes out of the kitchen with a fork. And it's just a regular fork, but he's got it held up over-hand, like the killer guy from Psycho, and he's coming towards me, and I'm thinking to myself, 'Holy Shit. I'm about to become a statistic.'”

Dean snorts into his beer.

“And I'm seriously halfway between terrified and about to bust out laughing, so I ask him, really slow: 'Baby, whatcha gonna do with that fork? You gonna stab those exams?'”

Jess's grin is a mile wide, and Dean just knows he's got one to match it, leaning forward to hear the rest of the story.

“'Not at me,' because he's still completely gone, and nods, and says, 'Yeah, I'm gonna stab 'em. Gonna stab 'em right in the heart.' And then he goes into the bedroom, sticks the fork under his pillow, and just passes out.”

Dean cackles, and Jess continues:

“And I swear, when he woke up, he didn't remember a thing. He didn't believe me when I tried to
tell him, either. Apparently, he thought the whole thing was some bizarre practical joke, even after I showed him the fork under his pillow. I thought it was residual exam crazy, but well, having met you—"

“What?” Dean asks, faking offense.

“You’re seriously telling me you never played a single practical joke on Sam?” Jess asks flatly, serious face melting into an amused grin and a laugh when Dean shrugs. “That’s what I thought.”

“Hey, Sam’s genius is expressed in test taking, mine in awesome pranks,” Dean breezes, getting another beer from the fridge as Jess fires up the mixer with a metallic whirr.

“They were not awesome,” Sam grumbles, ducking into the kitchen to pour himself a cup of coffee. “They were stupid and—”

“Hilarious,” Dean finishes, grinning around the mouth of his beer bottle.

“Yeah, because replacing someone’s deodorant with cream cheese, that’s comedy gold right there.”

“Spoken with all the jealousy of someone who didn’t think of it first,” Dean tosses back.

“Okay, you two,” Jess interrupts, taking out a roll of aluminum foil and tearing off a sheet. “Stow the sibling rivalry and start talking to me about dinner. You guys thinking we eat in or get delivery from somewhere?”

“What, you’re not gonna Suzy Homemaker up something for us here, Jess?” Dean teases.

“Sorry, Dean,” Jess laughs, covering the mixing bowl with the foil and scooping around Sam to shove it in the refrigerator. “I don’t think anyone can make dinner from brown sugar, three eggs, cocoa powder, and an expired box of Hamburger Helper. You’re welcome to try, though.”

She strips off her apron, offering it to Dean with a challenging grin.

“Dean, drop the sexist crap,” Sam sighs, pouring himself another cup of coffee and thumbing through a battered, dog-eared edition of the Stanford Law Review.

“Dude, she was cooking!” Dean protests. “She was cooking! In the kitchen! Around dinner time! That’s not sexism, that’s—”

“Basic deduction?” Jess supplies with a laughing smirk.

“Exactly,” Dean agrees. “It’s not sexism, Sam. It’s science.”

Sam rolls his eyes with an ‘Oh God, they’re ganging up on me’ sigh as he dumps creamer into his mug, “Jess, I was thinking—”

“Sam, baby, I love you, but if we order Korean, I’m making you eat it outside.”

“It’s not that bad!” Sam protests over Dean, snickering into his beer bottle.

“Really?” Jess asks. “Remember last time? You ate it on the couch next to that fern on the windowsill?”

‘Which one?’ Dean thinks, but keeps his mouth firmly shut.

“Yeah, it’s not there anymore,” Sam nods, sugaring his coffee. “What happened to it?”
“It died!” Jess cries. “I’ve got three studio classes this semester, Sam, and apparently I’m not gonna shake the urge to draw radial symmetry anytime soon, so yeah, you get anything with kimchi in it, it’s staying outside. My grades depend on it.”

“Fine. I’m not sure plants work that way, but you win,” Sam agrees, trying and failing to squash a grin as he pulls open a drawer and drags out a handful of takeout menus, and Dean would recognize his brother’s ‘humor the crazy person in the room’ tone anywhere.

Dean catches his eye as he’s splaying the menus out on the counter and makes a whipping noise under his breath, complete with accompanying invisible whip crack, just for emphasis, and get a razor-sharp elbow to the ribs for his trouble.

They end up deciding on hot wings by way of a vicious three-way rock paper scissors battle. Since that was what Dean would have picked anyway, he tries not to sulk about losing in the first round as Sam scoops up his coffee and books and disappears back into the world of interview prep.

“Have you been keeping an eye on how many coffees he’s had?” Jess asks quietly, soaping up beaters at the sink as Dean leans against the counter, idly shoving take out menus back into their junk-drawer home.

Dean raises an eyebrow as he waits, pretending to tally the number up in his head.

“Five,” he answers. “Two before you got up, then another at lunch, and two more just now.”

“He doesn’t dial it back, he’s going to be up all night,” Jess frowns, setting the dishes in the rack to dry.

“You afraid he’s gonna psych himself out or somethin’?” Dean asks, raising an eyebrow.

“No,” Jess dismisses, shaking her head. “He could go in there on no sleep and still pass with flying colors, but does he really need to pull another all-nighter? It can’t be good for him.”

“That’s for damn sure,” Dean agrees.

“And I love Sam, really, I do,” Jess continues, “but there is no way him reading over this or that administrator’s bone dry tax critique is going to shed some sudden light on the psyche of his interviewer that he didn't see on the first four read-throughs.”

“Preachin’ to the choir, sister,” Dean pokes his head through the kitchen entrance to peer at Sam, hunched over a mountain of publications with a highlighter in one hand a ballpoint pen in the other, scribbling away. “Too bad he’d never forgive us if we topped off his next cup with Nyquil.”

“Yeah, and he’d taste it before he drank enough for it to do anything,” Jess grumbles, pouting before she sees Dean’s raised eyebrows and amused smirk, “but more importantly, it would be manipulative and wrong,” she backtracks hastily, which has Dean chuckling as he tosses her a beer from the fridge.

“All right,” he grins. “So what’s Plan B? Wanna smack him on the head with a rock?”

A light goes on in Jess’s eyes, and she smiles.

“Actually, I’ve got the next best thing.”

“Sleeper hold?” Dean guesses, only half serious.
“Um, no,” Jess gives Dean a curious look, then sets down her beer and opens a cabinet, digging through technicolor-splattered mason jars of battered paint brushes to unearth a green container of Folgers.

“Decaf? Jess, you naughty girl,” Dean chides, grinning at her.

“Go ahead, tell me I’m an awful, manipulative person,” Jess sighs, handing Dean the canister and snagging the coffee pot, dumping its contents in the sink.

“It’s just lookin’ out for the kid,” Dean shrugs. “God knows he needs it.”

“He’s not that bad,” Jess defends, measuring coffee grounds into the filter.

“When he found me, he hadn’t slept or eaten for three days,” Dean tosses back, quiet and harder than he would have liked. “God only know how long it’d been since he showered. Who the hell does that?”

“He was worried about you,” Jess answers softly, meeting his eyes. “Dean, his face when your Dad said you were missing...”

“Sammy and Dad, together again,” Dean laughs as he takes a sip of beer, and it’s more than a little bitter. “Woulda paid good money to have front row tickets to that show.”

“Yeah, they were pretty...” Jess nods, picking at the label of her bottle, and it’s pretty obvious she’s groping for something diplomatic to say, “intense with each other.”

“With those two, you kinda gotta count any meeting where no one walks away bleeding as a win,” Dean shrugs. “They push each other’s buttons worse than anyone I know. Always have.”

“Things got better after I took Sam’s knife away,” Jess notes optimistically, and Dean can’t help but choke a laugh out through his beer.

“I bet,” he chuckles, sidling out of the room.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

In which everyone says goodbye at least once.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jess watches as Dean crosses the room in a few, measured strides, sliding up on Sam's left and leaning a hip on the desk at his brother's elbow, head bent close with some whispered taunt as he nudges Sam's shoulder teasingly with a lazy push of his beer bottle. Sam's only response is to shove easily back with an elbow to Dean's thigh and a soft laugh, turning his attention back to studying, but not before shifting his chair incrementally toward Dean, adjusting his orientation slightly to better fit his brother's.

There it is again, that closeness, that narrowing of the world down to 'he' and 'me.'

Jess supposes that other girls would be jealous, would hate - if only a little - the closeness shared by the two brothers.

But this is Sam.

Serious, studious, secretive Sam. So-not-sneaky Sam, who asked Becca what kind of ring Jess would like days after not-so-casually poking through Jess's jewelry box to 'help her get ready.'

Really, he was hopeless.

And seeing him like this, open and smiling and relaxed against Dean like he almost never is? Well, it warms something in Jess.

Knowing that Sam has this, someone else who puts him at ease, who worries about him and cares for him and wants him to be happy, not because they gain from it but because Sam deserves it. He deserves to be safe and happy, relaxed and smiling with someone he loves.

Sam has Jess. He has Jess, and he always will, if she has any say in the matter. But he doesn't only have her, and knowing that, seeing it with her own eyes?

It's a good thing. It lets Jess let go of a worry that she didn't know she had.

On impulse, she quietly steps from the kitchen, plucks a blank notebook from the bookcase and starts tracing, in quick, sure strokes of graphite, the loose line of Sam's shoulders, the hint of a smile at the corner of Dean's mouth, the way they're turned to each other, drawn close like magnets, north to south, a whole world between them but touching, always touching, two pieces of the same puzzle.

And it almost feels like voyeurism, recording the way Sam's elbow is brushing Dean's thigh, the way they're angled together - silent, separate, but still wholly, undeniably together - two parts of one whole. The tension that's been following Sam since he got back from Louisiana is gone, washed away by the gentle brush of his brother at his side, who's nursing a beer and seems free, for the first time since he stepped out of that Impala in the parking lot, of the restless, nervous unease that's kept
him stiff and uncomfortable until now. Jess can't help it, can't do anything but trace it out in carbon
and graphite, capture this one, small moment of peace, of ease, in the world they made for
themselves.

She's smudging shadows into charcoaled plaid and denim when her train of thought is derailed by a
series of impatient smacks on the door. Dean appears at Jess's elbow as she moves to answer it,
amassed with cash and ready for a brief skirmish over who gets to foot the bill for dinner.

He loses, but only because the delivery guy is more interested in Jess unbuttoning her sweater to fish
a twenty out of her shirt pocket than Dean, awkwardly trying to reach around her without brushing
against anything Sam would kill him for touching.

Really, he never had a chance.

Wings acquired and ceasefire achieved, they retreat to the kitchen, Jess rolling her eyes at Sam, still
completely immersed in his interview prep at the desk, as Dean digs through plastic bags and piles of
napkins to crack open takeout containers of hot wings, territorially dumping bleu cheese over the
container of honey barbecue.

“Sammy! Food's here!” he barks, grabbing a couple of beers from the fridge.

Jess tries not to look surprised as he opens one with the ring on his right hand and offers it to her.
Instead, she pokes her head into the next room and calls to Sam at the desk, “Sam, come on. It's
gonna get cold!”

“Yeah,” Sam answers absently, not looking up as he flicks a page and scribbles a note on one of the
legal pads at his elbow. “In a minute.”

“You know what that means,” Jess sighs, taking a seat at the table and smirking a little ruefully at
Dean.

“Never,” Dean nods, putting his beer down next to the wings he's claimed and grinning at her.

“Wanna see a trick?”

Jess raises an eyebrow at him warily.

“Sure…”

“Hey, Sam!!” Dean calls. “You don't get your ass in here, I'm coming in THERE and setting every
book you own on fire!”

Nothing happens for a minute, and Jess tries to keep the smirk from her face as she takes a sip of
beer.

Dean just holds up a finger for her to wait a minute and fishes around in his pocket, pulling out a
battered silver Zippo and flicking the starter in the silence, letting the scratching click of the lighter
reach Sam in the next room.

In a heartbeat, Sam appears in the kitchen, toting a book and grumbling about pyromaniacal older
brothers, and how fire isn't the solution to fucking everything, Dean, and dammit, why did you have
to go and ruin all the honey barbecue wings with bleu cheese?! It's an affront to taste! Don't look at
me like that! You read Vonnegut, I know you know what 'affront' means!!

Jess just laughs and digs into her pile of lemon-pepper wings.
“You’ve gotta let me borrow that lighter sometime,” she jokes, looking at Dean.

“Nah,” Dean shakes his head with a grin, hot sauce already smeared at the corner of his mouth. “It only works if he thinks you’d really do it.”

Sam grumbles into a wing, pointedly not looking up from the law review squashed between a pile of napkins and the ranch dressing no one is using.

“Aww, what is it, Sammy?” Dean teases, wadding up the napkin he was using and tossing it to bounce off of Sam’s head. “Still upset about that copy of My Friend Flicka?”

“It was Fahrenheit 451, Dean,” Sam protests, law text totally forgotten as he bats Dean’s next napkin missile aside, “and I had a test the next day!”

“S not like you didn't ace it,” Dean shrugs, snagging one of Sam’s wings.

“That’s not the point, Dean!” Sam claims, grabbing his brother’s beer in retaliation.

Jess finishes with her wings and shoves her takeout container in the trashcan, leaving the brothers to bicker over chicken bones and wet naps as she goes into the bedroom to get some work done on her studio project.

Glaring at the stiff, gessoed expanse of cream and charcoal, she replaces the half-finished lily on her easel with her barely-begun fall assignment.

Most of her classmates were desperately trying to do something innovative and original, so while there were about a half dozen woolen scarves and foggy mornings and steamy cups of almost-rippled cocoa, hers was the only painting in the works featuring leaves.

It may be trite, but when Jess saw those green maple leaves refusing to fade, still glowing with the vibrant, flashing green of spring, bright and alive but being slowly swallowed by licks of spreading, rising, burning red, so dark at the tips that they were almost black…

Well, she couldn’t think of anything else that summed up the sweeping, sleeping, sudden change of fall better.

Even if the douchey hipster next to her had snorted into his caramel soy latte when he saw what she was doing.

Asshat.

Jess is layering greens on the canvas with a little more force than necessary when Sam edges past her into the bedroom, digging his iPod out of the back pocket of his pants before shucking off his jeans and slipping into track pants and running shoes.

“Going for a run, baby?” she asks, turning to watch as Sam kneels down to tie his shoes, fabric clinging in all the right places.

She is a lucky, lucky girl.

“Running?” Dean scoffs from the doorway. “From what?”

Sam just glares at him from across the room, tying the final knot on his track shoes with a defiant tug.

“Jogging, Sammy?” Dean laughs, following Sam out of the bedroom. “Really? You really have gone full-borne yuppie on me, haven’t ya?”
Jess trails after them into the kitchen, idly rinsing a paintbrush as she listens to them bicker like an old married couple.

“Shut up, Dean,” Sam grumps, grabbing his hoodie from the back of a chair in the kitchen and zipping into it.

“Whatcha gonna do, Tae Bo me to death? Maybe do some yoga? Make me a really bad frappachino?”

“What's that?” Sam asks too loudly as he shoves ear buds in. “I can't hear you over the sound of music made after 1985!”

“So mature,” Jess shakes her head, stepping forward and winding her arms around Sam causally, brushing a soft kiss against his lips before asking: “You know where you're going?”

“Just around the block a little,” Sam shrugs as his hands find her hips, bumping their noses together. “Clear my head, you know?”

Jess nods, leaning into him.

“Be safe, okay?”

“Course,” Sam grins, giving her a quick peck before he's flipping Dean off and ducking out of the apartment.

Sam gone and brushes rinsed, Jess makes her way back into the bedroom, Dean awkwardly trailing a few steps behind her.

“Sasquatch'll probably hog the shower when he gets back, right?” he asks, leaning against the door jamb.

“Probably,” Jess nods, smearing red into darker, purpling black at the tip of one of her leaves. “You gonna go ahead and get in there?”

“Yeah, if you don't need it,” Dean nods.

He shifts from one foot to the other, like there's something he wants to say, but doesn't know how.

“You're good with Sammy,” he gruffs, after a little bit of an awkward silence.

Jess has a hard time figuring out if that’s a compliment or a question.

“Yeah, well, Sam...” Jess trails off, smiles down at her hands, smeared in shades of charcoal and red, thinking of her exhausted, brilliant, beautiful idiot of a boyfriend. “Well, I guess you know better than I do. It's Sam. How do you quit that?”

“Yeah...” Dean mutters, then looks up, his eyes suddenly seeking, sharper. “You’ll keep an eye on him? Makes sure he eats, sleeps? The whole nine? ‘Cause I swear, I turn around and he’s as strung out as he was when he found me-”

“Of course I will,” Jess assures, “but Dean, I thought you were just going to shower...”

“Yeah, sure. ‘Course I am,” Dean mumbles, scrubbing a hand over his face in an undeniably Sam-like gesture. “I just...”

“I'll take care of him, Dean,” Jess reassures, not only because it’s true, but because he seems to need
to hear it said, out loud, by someone else.

It hits Jess, sudden and sad, just how unused to trusting anyone outside of each other these boys are.

“Maybe you should turn in early tonight, get some rest,” she suggests gently. “You're not looking so good.”

“Maybe I’ll do that,” Dean nods, and the smile he gives her doesn't reach his eyes. “You mind if I go ahead and get in there?”

He nods toward the bathroom door.

“Sure!” Jess chirps, standing up and scrubbing the worst of the paint off her hands with a towel. “Do you need anything?”

“I should be good,” Dean holds up the duffle he brought up from the car, making his way towards the bathroom. “Everything's pretty much in here. Thanks, though.”

Turning and sitting back down at her easel as the water in the bathroom kicks on, Jess chews at her bottom lip, darting an anxious glance over her shoulder to where Dean has disappeared behind the wooden door, shadow in his eyes and a heavy set to his shoulders.

Really, Jess thinks with a sigh, if it wasn't one thing with these boys, it was another.

Maybe Sam could help, when he got back.

~

Dean hates himself as he slips out of Sam's bathroom window, shimmies down the drain like a thief in the night as his brother's girl paints flowers and leaves and worries for him.

He hates that he's doing this.

He hates leaving Sam.

He hates what this is gonna do to his brother, to Jess, to the fragile, slowly mending something they've built since Louisiana.

But better this.

Better this than the alternative, better to have Sam angry at him than putting himself in danger over and over again on Dean's behalf.

Dean's feet hit the pavement outside of Sam's apartment building, and his hand finds the key to the Impala in his pocket, safe and sound and making Dean hate himself that much more.

Stealing is a fact of Dean's life. His baby won't run on good intentions, and all the saved lives in the world won't put a roof over his head or silver in his gun. He's never felt bad about it before. Never hated himself in the same way he did when he slipped his hand into Jess's pocket as they were grappling for the check before dinner.

But if Jess is just another bridge he's gonna have to burn to keep Sam safe, he'll do it. Hell, if leaving like this isn't striking the match, Dean doesn't know what is.

If Dean closes his eyes, shoves down hard on the knowledge that’s been drilled into him since he was four, he can almost believe that the sweet, soft girl sitting at the easel upstairs will take good
enough care of his brother.

Can almost lie to himself.

Can almost believe that someone’s gonna be able to protect Sammy better than he can.

He knows, logically, that this is gonna be better for Sam in the long run. And he *wants* this. Really, he does. He wants the very best life for Sam he can give him.

But wanting it, *needing* to see his brother safe and happy more than anything he's ever needed in this life, doesn't make this *easy*. Doesn't make what he has to do here any less painful.

As he shoves his things in the Impala's trunk, Dean can't escape the constant litany in his head.

This is wrong.

This is right.

This is the only way to keep Sammy safe.

He hates it. Hates leaving. Hates what it means for his life, for him and Sam.

But this is the price. This is what a good life for Sam is gonna cost. This is the only way Sam can have what he wants, a life with his girl, as happy and apple-pie normal as can be, with no salt or smoke or long black cars on the horizon or in his heart.

Sacrificing his happiness for Sam's isn't a hard choice to make, but it still hurts like hell.

The Impala takes the deserted road out of Stanford easy, the Stones clicking on to fill the cold, empty night air.

It's sad. And final. And more of a goodbye than Dean ever thought he'd get for this brief, bright coda to his life with Sam.

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious about the specific song Dean's listening to? It's "Laugh, I Nearly Died."

Enjoy that.
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

In which things change.

Sam knows the second he rounds the corner and sees the Impala missing. He knows, but he still picks up his pace, takes the stairs two at a time, and bursts, panting, into the apartment.

The unmade mattress is still laid out in the living room and Dean's beer is still sitting half-drunk on the coffee table, but his duffle bag is gone and Sam's brother is nowhere in sight.

He can hear Jess in the bedroom, and he hurries in, hoping there's some other explanation, anything, that isn't his brother slipping - again - through Sam’s fingers and out of his life.

“Where's Dean?” he demands around lungfuls of air.

Jess stares at him, her eyes wide, paintbrush suspended in the air.

“He's in the shower...” she answers in a bewildered voice.

And sure enough, Sam can hear the sound of it going. He tries the bathroom door and, finding it locked, rears back and kicks it in, ignoring Jess' horrified “Sam!”

A cloud of steam rolls out of the room, bathroom filled with the sound of water hitting empty tiles.

Dean isn’t there.

Of course he isn’t.

Sam presses a hand over his mouth, breathes hard for a second, and collects himself. Jess is saying something, but Sam doesn’t hear, his mind a mess of maps and facts and numbers.

He’s only been gone for a half hour, meaning Dean has maybe twenty minutes on him now. Sam knows where he’s going, can figure out what route Dean’s most likely to take. The last time they’d been in the Impala, the tank had been running low; Dean stopping for gas will buy Sam a little time. He can catch up to his brother, intercept him. Worst case scenario, Sam can follow him all the way to Black Water Ridge.

“I’m going to find him,” Sam tells Jess, pushing past her into the bedroom. “Where’re your keys?”

“I left the car at Luis' place after the party,” she answers, still sounding baffled. “I haven’t taken the time to walk over there, yet.”

Sam swears.

“Okay,” he says, pulling on a hoodie in his rush to get to the front door. “I’ll figure something out.”

“But Sam—” Jess protests frantically. “Sam, what about the interview?”

“I don’t know,” Sam tells her, snagging his wallet from the kitchen counter. “I’ll deal with it later.”
Right now, he really couldn’t care less.

He jogs down the stairs and only pauses for a second to survey the cars parked behind his apartment building. He settles on a blue Honda Civic that looks to be four or five years old – nice, low profile, good MPG. Not gonna match the Impala for speed, but speed’s not worth much when you’re stopping for gas every hour.

Sam lets himself into the car and bends under the dash to hotwire it. Jess hasn’t followed him out of the apartment, but he tries not to think about the fact that she could very well be watching Sam boost one of their neighbors’ cars from an upstairs window.

The car cranks to life, and Sam puts her into gear, peeling out of the parking lot with a squeal of rubber on asphalt.

The fastest way to get to Lost Creek would be to take I-80, but that route goes through more major cities and would force Dean to go through a toll. Sam heads in the opposite direction, towards I-5. Back roads and winding, dusty highways.

Much more Dean’s style.

As he rockets around the corner onto University Avenue, Sam gropes for his pocket, swearing again when his fingers find only the slick, smooth material of his exercise pants. His phone is still in the pocket of his jeans, on the floor of the apartment. So much for trying to call Dean, then.

He punches the gas pedal harder, pushes up and over the speed limit, and prays to God that Dean isn’t doing the same.

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Dean’s a little under two hours into the drive, rambling down the long, dusty stretch of West Side Freeway, when he sees headlights coming up on him at top speed. He rolls his eyes. Not like he has a lot of respect for highway law, but hell, he’s already going twenty over and this dickcheese is tailgating him?

There’s having a healthy appreciation for the wind your hair and the purr of your baby as she stretches her legs on the empty blacktop, and then there’s just being an asshole.

Dean slows the Impala down to a crawl just to fuck with the guy. The rest of the highway’s empty. It’s so goddamn important? Let him pass.

The car veers sharply into the other lane, revs ahead of the Impala, and then scares the living hell outta Dean by whipping right across his lane, screeching to a halt and blocking his way. He breaks hard, hearing his tires wail in protest.

“Shit!” Dean swears, holding his baby steady as she skids to a stop. “What the fuck?!?”

The driver’s side door on the car in front of him slams open, and the asshole bursts out, stalks towards the Impala.

Aw, hell. It’s Sam. And he looks pissed.

Dean thumbs the key in the ignition, shifting her into park, and opens his own door.

“Boostin’ cars, Sammy?” he drawls. “Pretty serious.”
He’s about to say something else, some joke about Sam’s law degree and apple pie aspirations not exactly going hand-in-hand with grand theft auto, but he doesn’t get the chance because Sam rears back and punches him square in the mouth.

He doesn’t pull it either, that’s for goddamn sure, and Dean stumbles backward, has to brace himself on his baby to keep from eating pavement. Sam darts in and winds a fist into Dean’s shirt, slamming him up against the side of the Impala with violent, vicious force.

“What the hell is your problem?!” he demands through clenched teeth, hazel eyes hard in a face that's pure anger, pure outrage, though Dean can't for the life of him figure out why.

“Christ,” Dean chokes out, feeling blood trickling down his chin as he tries to catch his breath, does a quick count to make sure baby brother didn’t short him a few teeth with that haymaker. “Pretty sure that’s my line, Sammy. What are you doing here?”

Sam’s eyes narrow.

“That is literally the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard you say,” he snaps. “I’m here to stop you from getting yourself mauled. You just ran off in the middle of the night, asshole! What did you think I was going to do?”

Not this, that’s for sure, Dean thinks, and it must show on his face, because Sam’s mouth twists furiously and his grip tightens on Dean’s jacket, pins him that much harder against his baby’s side.

“You really thought I was just going to let you leave, didn’t you?” Sam demands, voice rising. “After everything that’s happened in the last two weeks, you still think you can drop me off at Stanford and fuck off for another couple of years, and I’ll, what? Just let it happen?!”

“You did before,” Dean points out, quick like a jab between the ribs.

He might be pinned and he might be bleeding and Sam might have gotten a little crazy with that last cup of coffee, but hell if Dean is letting his little brother ream him out for doing his goddamn job, for backing a decision that Sam made himself, even if it is a couple years late.

“I’m not the one who wanted you out of my life,” Dean presses, punches out through the pounding at the corner of his mouth, the sting of blood trickling from his split lip, the hot, furious wall of pissed off baby brother pinning him to his own car. “That was your choice—”

“And this is yours!” Sam interrupts sharply.

No, it's not, Dean thinks. He doesn’t have a choice here. Not really.

“I mean, Christ, Dean!” Sam rants. “I didn’t ask you to drop the case! All I wanted you to do was rest up a few days! Hell, you could’ve waited less than twenty-four hours, and I would have gone with you!”

Yeah, Dean had pretty much known that’s where this was heading, but even knowing, he still has to suppress an unwanted rush of pleasure at hearing the words come out of his brother’s mouth, to swallow down a shudder at the confirmation that Sam would have had his back, would have come back to the life for him, would have kissed college and normal and safe goodbye in a heartbeat if Dean had ever just worked up the guts to ask.

“But no,” Sam continues, “the second you can get your hands on the keys, you’re making a run for it. Out the goddamn bathroom window, Dean! Do you really hate being with me that much?!”
Dean’s stomach drops.

“What? No, that’s not—!”

He breaks off with a frustrated sound, groping for the words. He hates fighting with Sam. Kid like this? It always feels like bringing a knife to a gun fight.

“I don’t hate being with you,” he says lamely.

“Really?” Sam challenges, sharp disbelief in his voice. “I have to physically force you to be around me! I thought things were actually going good, but I took my eye off you for half an hour, and you were out of there!”

“That wasn’t because of you!” Dean protests.

At least, not the way you’re thinking.

“So what then?” Sam demands relentlessly. “Was it Jess? You don’t like her?”

“No!”

“Then what? There’s got to be some reason you couldn’t just wait for me to go with you! Or are you really that suicidal?”

“Maybe I just don’t want you to come with me,” Dean bursts out, breaking Sam's grip. “Did you think of that?”

Sam looks stricken.

“What?” he asks weakly, uncomprehending, taking a shaking, stumbling step back. “But— that’s what you’ve always wanted. That’s why you got so pissed at me for going to college, because you wanted us to hunt together, be a family.”

“Well, I was wrong,” Dean says, and the words feel like nails in this throat, scrape and scream and fight as they come out, salt in a wound and acid on burns as Dean forces them through gritted teeth, shoves away family and Sam and the only shape happiness has ever taken for him. “You belong at Stanford. You’re not a hunter, Sam.”

And Jesus, the look on Sammy’s face… Dean might as well have hauled off and punched the kid. It's scraped knees and boogeymen in the closet, "We have to leave town” and "Monsters are real” all rolled into one and worse, so much worse, because Dean wants it. He does.

He wants, more than he's ever wanted anything, to drive off into the sunset and hunt monsters with Sammy, but they can't.

He can't.

Can't let Sam walk away from the life – the normal, safe life – he's built in Palo Alto. Can't watch Sam kill himself with worry for Dean. Can't live with the image of Sammy tearing and slicing and carving away at his skin and his strength and his sanity, all in the name of helping Dean, of keeping him alive.

“This is because of Louisiana,” Sam says in a miserable, trembling voice. “You don’t want me anymore because I screwed up.”

“No,” Dean says gruffly, and hell, if they’re going to be parading their feelings around like chicks
anyway, he might as well go all out. “It’s because I screwed up.”

Sam opens his mouth to protest, but Dean soldiers on.

“I saw you fight that vamp, Sam. It was a goddamn mess. You could have died!”

Dean swallows with a click, shoves down the quick, sharp flash of that bastard with his fangs buried in Sammy's neck, of cold skin and dead, empty hazel eyes, of Sam still, stiff, gone.

“And I couldn’t protect you,” he continues, voice horse. “Hell, my fuck-up put you there in the first place.”

Sam shakes his head, eyebrows digging furrows in his forehead beneath tangled, floppy bangs.

“You didn’t put me there,” he argues. “That was my decision. I’m an adult, Dean.”

_Not to me, you’re not,_ is the thought that flashes through Dean’s mind; he keeps his mouth shut.

“And in case you missed it,” Sam continues, “I won that fight. I didn’t need to you to protect me!”

“Sam, you were halfway to Crazy Town by the time you found me,” Dean says. "The things you did to save me? Man, I don’t even wanna think about what you would’ve done if you’d found me dead.”

Sam’s takes a shuddering breath, hands tightening to fists at his sides.

"This? Hunting?” Dean gestures between them. "It's just gonna be you pushing yourself to the brink over and over again until you break."

Sam looks away, his expression hidden in the shadows. An eighteen wheeler whizzes by, honking its horns at the two morons having it out in the right-side lane of the goddamn highway. Dean reaches out on instinct and tugs Sam closer, away from the truck's path, by the sleeve of his hoodie. Sam shrugs him off.

“This life makes you crazy, Sam,” Dean presses. “Being around _me_ makes you crazy. It’s been days, and you’re still wrecked.”

“Are you serious?” Sam spits out, turning to give Dean an incredulous look. “You’re my brother, and you almost died! Excuse me if I’m not instantly okay! And what, if I show that I’m upset at all by what happened on a hunt, I’m not fit to go on one ever again? That's not fair, Dean. Just give me some time, and I’ll get over it!”

“You’re not listening to me,” Dean starts, but Sam just cuts him off.

“No, I'm listening,” he spits out. "I'm just not agreeing 'cause you're full of shit."

_Seriously: Knife. To. A. Gunfight._

"Sam, I’m telling you that you don’t _have_ to deal with it," Dean sighs, scrubbing a hand over his face. "I’m giving you the out, dude. This is my blessing or whatever: Go do your law school thing. I’ll take care of the hunts. I can handle it. C’mon, trust me.”

Sam shakes his head, stubborn as ever.

"No," he refuses. "I'm not leaving you alone out there. I won't do that."

He looks down, a heartbeat away from scuffing the toe of his sneaker on the asphalt like the little kid
he keeps saying he’s not before looking back up at Dean, those damn puppy dog eyes of his going at full force.

"Don't ask me to do that, Dean," he says softly. "Please."

“Come on, Sammy, don’t fight me on this,” Dean sighs and hopes Sam doesn’t hear it as the plea it is. “We both know you never wanted to be a part of this.”

And I did know that, Dean thinks. I knew it all along, but I still let Dad push you into it, because I wanted you there and I thought I could make it good for you. I thought I could keep you safe. But now, I know. I can’t. I’m not enough.

“Listen,” he rasps out. “If having a normal life – being Joe College, getting a house in the ‘burbs with your girl – Sammy, if that makes you happy, don’t give it up for me. I’m not worth it.”

Sam glares at him, eyes glittery in the glow of the headlights.

“Shut up,” he chokes out, chin crumpling as he swallows hard. “Don’t say that. Don’t you dare say that. You have no idea what you’re worth to me.”

They’re quiet for a long time after that. A couple more cars whiz by: an old man hauling furniture in the back of his rusty Ford and a family of four with Spongebob playing in the backseat.

Finally, Sam breaks the silence.

“Okay, I get what this is now,” he nods, mouth tight, determined. “‘Look out for Sammy,’ right?”

Dean lifts his chin, squares his jaw.

“Yes, I get it. You think you’re doing this for me. But you know what? It’s crap, Dean.”

This time, it’s Dean who opens his mouth to protest. Sam raises a hand to silence him.

“Look, don’t… Just don’t, okay? You want to do something for me? Don’t make yourself miserable for me. Don’t die for me. I don’t need a martyr; I need a brother. And I am telling you, I want to be with you. I want to help you. You’ve been taking care of me my whole life. Let me take care of you for a change.”

“That’s not your job,” Dean argues.

“Well, it should be someone’s,” Sam tells him seriously.

“Come on, Sam. Law School,” Dean tries. “Jessica and fucking apple pie and a dog. A normal life——”

“Is not what I want if you’re not in it,” Sam interrupts firmly. “I mean it.”

The color drains from Dean's face then rushes back in to prick his cheeks at hearing Sam say that, out loud, for the first time.

“I’m not saying I’m going to drop out of Stanford,” Sam presses, steady and sure now. Determined. “I still want those things. I want somewhere to go home to. I want a career that’s not chopping off heads and scamming bikers. I’m saying… why can’t we compromise?”

Dean blinks.
“What are you talking about?”

“What think about it, Dean. Why do we have to live out of cheap motels and travel cross country and earn half our money with credit card scams?”

“Because that’s what hunters do,” Dean answers automatically, no idea where Sammy is going with this.

“Bobby doesn’t,” Sam counters, and it's his "Let Us Go or Press Charges” voice. His confidant voice. The voice he uses when he’s found a lead he just knows is gonna crack the case wide open. “Pastor Jim doesn’t. Neither does Caleb. That’s Dad’s way, Dean! It doesn’t have to be ours.”

Dean scoffs, shaking his head and scrubbing a hand over his mouth, because it's ridiculous, can't possibly be that easy.

Can't have been right in front of their faces the whole time.

“You’re saying, what, set up camp in Palo Alto?” he challenges with a skeptical glare. "Let you be law student by day, hunter by night? That could never work!”

“Why not?” Sam demands.

His eyes are bright now, like they used to get when he was solving a particularly tough equation, numbers crunching and whirring in his head as possibilities, problems, solutions spin through the supercomputer the kid calls a brain.

“My lease is up soon. I’ve got cash saved up,” he presses. "We can use it to get a bigger apartment, one with room for you and me and Jess. Between the two of us, I bet we could turn it into Fort Knox for spirits and monsters!”

“Sure.” Hell, a call to Bobby would sort that out. “But—”

“We’ll do what Caleb does: Just look for hunts within a few hours of where we live!” Sam goes on, talking faster as the possibilities spread, expand to take shape and form, become something Dean can see, could actually imagine happening. " I’ll take classes and do research during the week, and we’ll hunt on the weekends.”

“Monsters don’t exactly wait for Fridays, Sammy,” Dean shakes his head. Even if it could happen, there're still too many problems, still too many ways it could go wrong. There's always a catch, and if Sammy's too caught up, too swept away in this crazy as hell idea, then it's Dean's job to find it, to keep his eyes open and his feet on the ground, to find the flaw here before Sam gets too attached to the idea that they – of all the goddamn people out there – could have it all.

“So, if it’s urgent, you can take care of it,” Sam waves the problem away, shrugs Dean hunting alone like it’s suddenly nothing in the face of all these possibilities, in the face of this brave new world. “If it’s too much to handle or you don’t check in on schedule, I’ll blow off classes and come after you, no questions asked. You’d be close enough that I could get there in no time.”

“You could flunk out that way,” Dean points out, head still spinning as he tries to take in how fucking feasible that sounds – how this might actually could happen, could work – all while trying to figure out when the hell a life with him in it became more important to Sam than lawyering and cardigans and freedom from the constant coin flip of kill or be killed.

When did Dean become so important that Sammy'd be willing to tear everything up, to rebuild his
life from the ground up just to keep Dean in it?

Could Sammy really wants this? Really want Dean, loud and annoying and up to his elbows in engine grease and rock salt? Drinking too much and singing too loud and never, ever having to choose between taking care of business and taking care of Sammy, between his job and his life?

God, if this could work… If they could pull it off…

“Maybe,” Sam shrugs. “Maybe not. We won’t know if we don’t try.”

“Dad’d still send me hunts,” Dean tells him. “No way he’ll be willing to stick to just California.”

He’s trying desperately to find the fucking flaw in this plan before he buys in, before he drinks the Kool-Aid and believes, just for a second, that they could actually build something together, no sacrifices, no painful-ass goodbyes, just him and Sam and home.

“So, we’ll kick ‘em to Bobby,” Sam shrugs. “He’s got plenty of hunters in his network who’d be just as qualified to take care of whatever it is as we are.”

Dean can see it, that little twitch at the corner of Sam's mouth, the shine in his eyes that's always been his tell, that's always tipped Dean off when Sam knows, just knows he's gonna win.

“Man, Dad would not be happy about this,” Dean scrubs a hand over his face, forgetting for what must be the fourth time to-goddamn-night that he has a spilt goddamn lip and that fucking hurts.

“I honestly don’t care what he thinks, Dean,” Sam laughs. “Do you?”


Sam’s practically vibrating with excitement now, can't hold back the grin on his face or the glimmer in his eyes, the buzzing, vibrating, explosive energy of possibility.

Of hope.

“Dean,” he breathes, sounding as stunned as Dean feels. “This could work.”

Could it really?

Dean turns it over in his head, but he just can't find the fucking flaw, which can't be right.

No, there’s got to be something wrong with this. It sounds too good. Works out too well for them.

Good things don’t happen to the Winchesters. There’s some glaring problem that Dean’s just not seeing, because being in Sam’s life in a way that wouldn’t make his brother miserable? Having a life and a home and still being able to hunt? To help people? To bite back at the bastards that have taken so much from him, but still have Christmas and Thanksgivings and birthdays with Sam? To see him grow up, get off his ass and propose to Jess, to graduate and be a lawyer and help people, save them in one way while Dean saves them in another?

It's shit Dean gave up hoping for when he was four.

The idea that he could have it again – have it with Sam – and still save people? Still make his mom proud?

It’s stupid. It’s totally impossible.
Then again, some small part of Dean whispers, he’s seen a lot of impossible things in his life. Is it too much to think that, just once, something good could happen? That, just this once, the universe would cut them a break?

“Dean, give it a shot,” Sam urges, soft and close and tempting, so tempting. “We can make this work. For once, I’m asking you to trust me.”

Dean's eyes find Sam's in the dusk.

His brother’s face is half-hidden in the gloom, but it’s still bright with purpose, his green eyes gleaming with excitement that spills out and over to light him up like a Christmas tree. Sam may say he’s an adult, may be all about shouting his maturity from the rooftops, but right now he looks all of six. This is Sammy, pitching Dean a little boy’s crazy dream and asking him to trust that it can happen – to just believe.

Dean would give anything to trust that this is possible, to believe in it with the same absolute faith that's spilling out of Sam's every pore, but he knows can't.

Maybe he's been too many places. Maybe he's seen too many things. Maybe he's just a cynical bastard, but he just can't put the same trust in this – this awesome, impossible dream- that Sam can. They're Winchesters, and their luck always runs out in the end.

“Come on, Dean,” Sam whispers. “Trust me.”

He reaches out, presses his palm against the fist Dean has clenched at his side and squeezes gently. Dean looks down at the place where they’re connected, at the bandage wound around Sam’s forearm, glowing stark white in the headlights, then back to his brother’s hopeful face.

Dean’s fist slackens without his consent, and with it, Dean can feel all of his well-founded doubts slipping right out of his grasp. And he shouldn't. He shouldn't, has every ounce of common sense in his head screaming against it, but there, on that lonely stretch of California blacktop, Dean lets himself believe, just a little, in Sam's dream.

Because this is his kid brother, and if there's one thing – one single thing in this whole screwed up universe – that Dean will always believe in, it's Sam.
By the time they get back to Palo Alto, it’s nearly 3am and the only light on in Sam’s apartment complex is the one in his and Jessica’s bathroom window.

“Looks like Jess is still up,” Dean observes, putting the car in park.

Sam grimaces.

“Man, she’s gonna kill me,” he groans. “I just ran out on her. I didn’t even have my phone on me.”

“Well, she’s pretty cool so—” Dean begins.

“And I kicked in the bathroom door,” Sam adds with a wince.

Dean laughs.

“Well, there goes the security deposit.”

“Ha ha,” Sam says dryly, climbing out of the car. “That’s your money now, too, you know.”

Dean waves a hand dismissively, striding past his brother and up the stairs.

“Dude, I don’t need your charity. I’ll chip in for my share.”

“You mean Johnny Cash or whoever you’re impersonating this week will chip in,” Sam says, bustling up the stairs behind him.

“Hector Aframian,” Dean corrects him, turning to wait on the landing. “Johnny Cash? Really?”

Sam just rolls his eyes, fitting the key into the door.

“Well, ‘Hector Aframian’ should really compensate me for the security deposit anyway. Pain and suffering.”

“Dream on,” Dean says and makes a mental note to actually buy Sam a Christmas gift this year - something expensive and girly.

Jess can’t be too pissed, Dean thinks as the door swings open. The smell of freshly baked cookies is all over the place.

Sure enough, there’s a plate of them waiting on the counter, topped with a pretty little notecard. Dean picks it up. It says “Dickheads,” in girly handwriting.
Dean grins and flicks it at Sam, stuffing a chocolate chip cookie into his mouth whole.

“Better go face the music, bucko,” he says cheerfully, ignoring the fact that, apparently, he’s in the doghouse too.

Sam makes a face at him, and Dean cracks an imaginary whip, spewing crumbs as he attempts to make the sound effects.

“I really can’t believe I’m related to this,” Sam sighs, shaking his head solemnly.

“Shut up, bitch, you know you love me,” Dean smirks.

Sam just flashes him a quick, genuine grin before heading into the bedroom.

Dean leans back on the counter, taking another cookie. He closes his eyes, tilts his head back, and lets out a breath that he feels like he’s been holding for four long years.

He breathes in again and freezes, eyes snapping open.

There’s a smell hanging in the air underneath the scent of the cookies, a strange foul odor, and suddenly, his hunter instincts are going haywire. He’s already running toward the bedroom when he hears Sam cry out, smells the sudden roll of smoke, feels a wave of heat pulsing against his body, and oh God, no.

He bursts into the bedroom, heart pounding.

Jess is on the ceiling.

She’s on the ceiling and she’s on fire, her stomach sliced open, face frozen in wide-eyed horror.

“Jess! No! Jess!!” Sam is shouting, lying on his back with his hands raised toward her like he could somehow still reach her in time, like he’d still be able save her if he could.

Dean doesn’t think. He’s across the room in an instant, hauling Sam up by his underarms and dragging him away from the column of flames that bursts down from the ceiling, consuming the bed and Jess’ paintings and all of her plants in an instant, turning Sam’s law books to ash.

Sam’s fighting him, crazy with shock and grief, still screaming Jess’ name even as Dean drags him out of the apartment and into the stairwell. Dean has no idea where he gets the strength, but he tightens his arms around Sam’s torso and, hauling all 190 pounds of his brother up off the ground, does exactly what he did that night twenty-two years ago.

He carries his brother out of the fire.

Dean manages to get Sam out the front door and halfway across the lawn before they collapse. Sam’s still wailing, but now he’s just saying “Dean! Dean!” over and over again, like some part of him still thinks his big brother can make it all better. And Dean can’t do anything but hold onto Sam as tight as he can. He palms at the tears on his brother’s face, pushes a hand through his hair, says “It’s okay, Sammy, it’s okay,” and it’s such a goddamn lie.

It always is.

~

The blaze is still going strong, the lights from the fire trucks glancing off the sleek black surface of the Impala. The sounds of sirens wailing and firemen shouting fill the air, but Sam and Dean stand
silently together in shadows, away from the crowd of shaken tenants in pajamas and slippers and curious onlookers gaping shamelessly at the destruction. A few yards away, the paramedics are trying to calm an older woman who’s weeping hysterically about her cat while they give oxygen to her blank faced husband.

They want to check Sam and Dean out too, but Dean chases them off and then assures a cop with pitying eyes that Sam will answer all of his questions when he’s ready before returning to his brother’s side.

Sam won’t look at him. He stands with his back to the smoldering building and his head bent toward the open trunk of the Impala, tears dribbling onto the weapons inside as he sorts through them with a restless energy, like he needs to feel like he’s doing something. Sobs rattle in his chest, but his jaw is clenched tight against them, shoulders ramrod straight.

Dean touches his elbow lightly, and Sam finally turns to meet his gaze. Dean feels it like a punch in the gut. Sam’s eyes look like Dad’s did the night Mom burned. Like something’s died inside of him. Like he’s been hollowed out.

All of that hope Dean had seen reflected back at him just hours ago is gone now, the dream of building a home together so far off it might as well have never existed at all.

It’s never going to happen.

Dean knows that, without having to hear a word. It’s gone, burnt right down to ash and cinders. End of story. Dean should’ve known, should never have believed it for a second. Nothing good ever happens to the Winchesters. No matter what they do, no matter what they try to change, it always ends in flames.

Finally, Sam speaks, his voice hushed and raw with an undercurrent of steel.

He says, “We’ve got work to do.”

Chapter End Notes

And with that, we’ve finally come to the end. Thanks for reading everyone! Check out my livejournal for story notes and information about the upcoming sequel!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!