El Dorado

by nigeltde

Summary

Life, death, the trail.

Notes

AU of El Dorado (1966 dir Howard Hawks) that I've butchered beyond belief. If you like a piece of dialogue, it's likely Leigh Brackett wrote it. And if you find some of the medical stuff improbable, well, I'll send you her way again.

Wetsammywinchester was an unbelievable beta and moral support. She deserves thanks beyond count; any remaining errors are mine.

Set Texas 1880.

See the end of the work for more notes.

Dean was facing the door and his instincts were good, which is how he knew before anyone else that trouble walked in. He scratched his beard tiredly and set his hat on the table, leaned back and picked up his whiskey and toasted a sorrowful farewell to a night of comfort and rest.

This was in a cantina over in Arizona Territory. Town that if it had a name he didn't know it; the kind of place where people stopped only if they were no good. Four days of riding had put him there, two of them without drink and all of them with no company but his girl. No company now either save a bottle and his deck of cards and a waitress with big cautious eyes, but she was polite to him and the bustle and chatter and guitars were starting to chip away at the solitude of the trail.
Dean was halfway towards a better night than he'd had in a long time.

The kid was tall and dark and likewise had a few days of road on himself, and a ragged bare leather jacket that his wrists poked out of. He was looking for someone, Dean could tell that. Dean's waitress stepped past and he reached out to grab her arm and pull her back. The kid wasn't looking for a woman or a friend or even a drink. Dean could tell that too.

Dean was in the corner with his back to the wall, and the kid stopped at a table not too far away. Four men were playing cards and only one of them raised his head, sharp eyes sizing the kid up. Smooth-cheeked and gangly, the kid wasn't armed, and he was gonna force something anyway.

Dean shifted his chair to the side for a clearer line and took a quiet drink, trying to hear.

“Charlie Hagen.”

Another man at the table looked up from his hand, scanned the kid dismissively, thin mouth curling in a sneer. “You want something from me?”

“Do you know me?”

“You someone special?”

The kid had a tight rein on his temper but it was chafing, showing in his twitching fingers, his too-even voice. “Maybe you remember this jacket.”

Hagen smirked at his companions. The sharp man didn't smirk back but the other two sniggered, yellow teeth showing through their scruff. The kid waited them out.

“Why in hell,” Hagen said with exaggerated patience, “would I remember a jacket?”

“You killed the man that was wearing it.”

A wider hush fell fast, guitars stuttering to a stop. Dean waved the girl away from him and laid his palm on his gun. Hagen raised his eyebrows.

“Just who was this feller I killed, a friend of yours?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“And when did I do this, boy?”

“Two years ago. Come September. You and three others.”

Only the sharp man seemed to have any idea what was in store. The boss, Dean guessed. He was looking at Hagen now with scorn.

“Kansas City,” the kid pressed. “He was playing hold 'em. And he was hurt. Shouldn't have taken four of you.”

“Don’t you remember, Charlie?” the boss asked. The kid didn't twitch to hear another speak, coiled up too tight around whatever he was planning, letting that narrow vision blind and deafen him. Another goddamn kid walking down into death, Christ. Maybe this was just Dean's life now.

Hagen sniffed. “Yeah, I remember. He was crazy as a loon, and and he was a cheat. Tend to think we did him a favour.”
A muscle ticked in the kid's jaw. Well, Dean sighed. That was the end of it.

“Not that night. That night he was hurt. He was tired. He was just trying to get some rest.”

“It really shouldn't have taken four of you, Charlie,” said the boss, and the kid flicked his eyes over and back to his mark.

“No, it shouldn't have. Well, I'm glad you remember, Mr Hagen. The other three didn't.”

The room lost all sound completely. Dean took rapid stock. The women were melting back. The owner sagged, arms crossed, tired and expectant, behind the bar. Anyone near the table was hunching and craning as much as they could without drawing attention. No one else was gonna jump in this.

“The other three?” Hagen said, uncertain now, and the boss twitched his mouth in grudging respect. Dean agreed. The kid was tall but he was skinny and a lot of tall men had no idea how to handle themselves. He'd have bet that way on this.

“Yeah. You're the last. Now I think you better stand up.”

Hagen frowned at his boss, who made a go-ahead gesture. “Stand up, Charlie. I'm curious to see how he does this. He doesn't have a gun. And it shouldn't have taken four of you.”

It always happened quick when it happened, so Dean was ready for it. Hagen feinted more arguing with his boss and exploded up, the table shoved back and his chair clattering and his hand halfway toward his hip. A knife handle bloomed in his chest with enough force to fling him backwards, arms flying up and his mouth yawning open in shock.

Stone dead. Dean looked at the kid before Hagen even hit the ground. His hand was outstretched from the throw, fingers hovering in the air like he thought he could recall the knife back to him.

No taking back from death, Dean knew, and that knowledge was in the kid's eyes too as he crouched by the body, head bowed, face carved in hollow shadows. He pulled the knife, used Hagen's shirt to wipe the blade and slipped it somewhere around his belt, moving like his joints were borrowed and sore.

That was a throw better and faster than any Dean had ever seen. Better than Dean could do himself. Dean had practiced long enough on his own draw to know something like that didn't come natural.

“You. Hey, you with the jacket,” growled one of the other men at the table. He already had his piece out and a glance told Dean that the boss wasn't going to intervene this time either. “You killed Hagen cause he killed your friend, right?”

The kid took a long time to drag his focus over from Hagen's body. He wasn't in the room any more. Dean cursed under his breath as the man at the stable stood, slow and careful.

“Well, it happens Hagen was a friend of mine. So let's see if you can do that trick twice.”

Easy enough for Dean to draw and shoot the gun out of his hand as he took aim. Under the noise and someone's yell he thought he heard a bone or two breaking. More than two, if Dean's wishes ever came true.

Dean stood and kept the barrel on ol' broke-finger, who bit off a howl when he saw Dean was ready to go again. The boss's hands were both resting easy on top of the table like his pulse hadn't even kicked up. He raised an eyebrow when Dean stepped out into the open, and Dean got the
uncomfortable feeling he was already known.

The last man had drawn on instinct.

“I'd let it go, friend,” Dean told him, and he reholstered, making a show of being begrudging and unafraid. Eye to eye with a barrel these types always lost their pride. Dean turned to the boss. “Hope you don't mind.”

The boss smiled slow and wide, white teeth shining, and shrugged. “It always seems to take more than one, doesn't it?”

“That's 'cause they're no good.” Dean came closer and looked back at broke-finger. “Pick up your gun.”

“Against him or you?” The man said, reluctant, and hovered his good hand over his number two.

“Me first,” Dean said, and heard the kid rise to his feet behind him.

“Wait a second–”

“Tell me about it later,” Dean said over his shoulder. He reholstered and watched broke-hand's hand drift closer to the gun.

“Get out of my business,” the kid said, firmer now, grabbed at Dean's shoulder.

“Shut up.” Dean shrugged him off and kept his address to the table. “He your friend or ain't he? Do it now if you're ever gonna do it.”

“Hold it, hold it.” The boss held up a hand at Dean. “Before you start anything, I can't afford to lose another man. You gonna take his place?”

The man sneered, looking at his boss. “You got a lotta faith in me, don't you, Gordon?”

“Oh, faith can move mountains, Walt. But it can't beat a faster draw. There's only three men I know with a draw like that. One I killed. One's me. And the other one....” The boss tilted his head in appraisal, eyes narrowed. Dean was known, sure enough.

The boss glanced at his men and jerked his head at the dead fellow. Broke-finger sneered harder but folded, kicked at his friend's boot and they grabbed an end each of the dead man and hauled him outside, muttering dark and indiscreet. One arm dragged forgotten, begging, palm up.

The guitars started again, hesitant, and a ghost of uneasy chatter. Behind Dean, the kid was shifting from foot to foot. It was starting to get on Dean's nerves.

The boss pushed a chair out with his foot that Dean ignored, and waved a commanding hand at the owner. “Can I get you a drink, Murphy?”

“You have my advantage.”

“Gordon Walker's the name.”

Unfamiliar to Dean but the man didn't strike him as a liar or a fool, and when he saw Dean didn't know him he got a smug look like that was how it should be. He was probably as good as he said, and if he was that good he was probably down here on a job. Dean didn't feel right about it.

“You happy to leave this as it stands, Gordon Walker?”
“Only seems fair.”

The owner arrived balancing a tray and the kid swiped a glass, knocked it back like it was water and tugged at the brim of his hat.

“Sorry for the trouble.”

“Just a minute, kid,” Dean said, and held out a hand, felt him steam up. Naturally ornery, then.

“I'm not a kid.”

“You're pretty good with that knife,” Walker said. “Can you use a gun?”

“What's it to you?” He started to step off again and Dean kept his arm in the way, pressed across his chest. He had some muscle under there, Dean found with surprise.

“Get out of my way,” the kid snapped, trying to put some menace behind it. Dean didn't doubt he'd follow through on any threats or hesitate to pull that knife again but he was tired too, bone-deep and all addle-brained.

“It ain't gonna kill you to stand still for another minute,” he said. He made it bossy, and that that worked. The kid folded his arms, impatient, jacket riding up even further. Dean turned back to Walker. “Don't suppose you're down here visiting family.”

“You looking for a job?” Walker gestured to the empty table. “Somehow I find myself in need of men.”

“What kind of job?”

“Oh, nothing exciting. Little range war down in Texas.”

Dean nodded, heart sinking. He'd known, a man like this, down here for a reason. He'd known Eldorado wasn't done with him. “Mind telling me who hired you?”

“Woman named Masters. You know her?”

Dean shrugged. “Ah, I turned that job down a few months back.” He finished his drink, let Walker simmer in being second choice a while. Set the glass on the table and turned it a couple of times. “You know who you're going up against?”


“No,” he said, and Walker sighed like it was a shame.

“Probably just as well. Two like us in the same bunch, sooner or later we'd have to find out which one of us was faster.”

“Guess you're right,” Dean said, weary feeling coming down on him, the next few weeks and the fight at the end already heavy in his bones. He turned his back on Walker to get his jacket and hat, throw some money on the table.

The kid was stiff and watchful, waiting for him; he made a relieved noise under his breath that turned nasty when Dean hesitated by Walker's table.

“Would you make up your mind?” He griped, and pulled at Dean's sleeve, his gun arm. Dean
jerked it out of his grasp.

“Just wait, would you? Walker, would you like to try that door first?”

“No, don't believe I would,” Walker grinned, and stood up anyway, leading them to the door. He raised his voice towards the other side of the street. “Walt, Roy, can you hear me?”

There was a long pause, and then a resentful voice called back.

“We hear ya.”

“I'm coming out,” Walker called, and headed through. Dean fell into line behind him, kept the kid at his back until they hit the porch.

Walt and Roy slunk into the light from under a flight of stairs across the street. Walt was cradling his hand against his chest and still seemed to think he could manage a six-shooter. Most likely he'd have ended up losing a couple of toes to go with that finger. He was a menace, Dean thought; Walker must be sore-up for followers, which was the only good news of the night.

“Get inside, go on,” Walker said, and watched them grumble past. “That all right, Murphy?”

Dean resettled his hat. “Yeah, there's one more thing. This Sheriff down in Eldorado. Not a good man to be on the wrong side of, I feel gotta warn you.”

“Ah. Another quickdraw.” Walker smiled a false smile, leaned in and lowered his voice like a mournful friend. “Well. He used to be.”

Dean froze. Fingers touched the small of his back, a light pressure.


“What usually happens to a man? He lost a woman and found a bottle.”

Walker said this so casual that Dean didn't register it for a moment. Karen Singer, lost? If that was true she wasn't just gone, she was dead. That woman had loved her husband and been loved back. Maybe he wasn't bosom friends with Bobby but he sure knew the man would rather lift a bottle than the weight of grief that big.

Walker turned away and hesitated, hand hovering mid-air. He fixed his big serious eyes on Dean.

“Murphy, I like you, so I'm telling you. Maybe you think you're a red-hot gun hand, but you got no knowledge of anything important. You want to keep your head on your shoulders you'll stay out of this.”

“That's mighty kind of you,” the kid said, bristling. Dean didn't move, and Walker gave them both a final long look-over before nodding and returning inside, light spilling around his body and the guitars faltering a bare second before picking up louder.

Dean let out his breath and rubbed at his face, tried to scrub away the dismay. Months he'd spent trying not to think about that mess he'd fled in Texas, running the second he could stand. Fooling himself he was doing right out of cowardice and guilt.

Seemed like he'd just left them to it.

There was nothing he could do right now, this night. Nothing he could do here, so far away, a faithless friend, no good to anyone.
He checked his guns, cracked his knuckles, and turned to the kid.

“Kid, you hungry?”

A couple of thoughts chased each other across the kid's face and he turned around and looked across the street at the stairs. “I would have walked right out into that.”

Dean sighed. “I asked if you were hungry.”

“Now?”

“Now,” Dean said.

A smile split the kid's face like the sun coming out, and that was some more good news.

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The kid's name was Samuel Winchester and he ate like he never tried such a trick as eating before. Dean watched him start and signalled for another bowl of stew right away, got it set up by the kid's elbow and he switched over when the first bowl was empty without missing a beat. Dean wasn't too keen on the food, more cowpea than cow and drowned optimistically in chile like that would help matters, and he pushed the last of his serve over too, leaned back and drank and took a solid look at him.

He had a mess of unwashed hair stood up every which way and fallen across his forehead, and big quick hands and shadows under his eyes, and skin that Dean thought would be golden even if he hadn't so clearly been riding hard under the sun. He'd just recently gown out of that jacket and had worn it ragged in the meantime, or the previous owner had. The leather was bald in too many places but it had been carefully mended in others, with reworked seams and some odd-coloured patches and several small round causes of death plugged up across the chest and lapels.

The cook cleared the table and eyed Dean and the size of his purse before turning a big motherly smile on the kid.

“Tener otro tazón, niño.”

Niño scraped his bowl clean and licked his spoon, and handed them to her. “No, pero gracias.”

“Just the whiskey, ma'am,” Dean said.

Winchester sighed and patted his belly, slid down in his chair and looked right back at Dean over the table, chewing on the inside of his cheek like he could eat that too.

“I just finished something tonight I've been two years doing.”

What would it be like, Dean wondered, to go to bed knowing what you were going to do when you got up the next morning. The next week, the next month. What would it be like to have a friend so near your heart that you'd ride two years to find his killers.

“What're you figuring on doing next?” He asked, and the kid slid his mouth sideways, rueful.

“Never thought much about what I was going to do next.”

“Where are your people? Back in Kansas City?”

Winchester looked down and rubbed at a whorl on the table. “Got no people to speak of.”
Dean didn't ask. Everyone out this way had a death or two and a thousand-mile hardship. Dean had plenty himself, carried a bullet in his back to remind him of it if he ever thought about forgetting. This kid was no different, and Dean couldn't see any way to make it go right for him and figured it was pointless to try, and found himself trying anyway.

“Well, if you're gonna stick around these parts kid, let me give you two pieces of advice. Get rid of that jacket, and learn how to use a gun.”

“I don't think I'll get rid of the jacket.”

“No?”

“No.”

Dean took another drink and measured the breadth of the kid’s shoulders and remembered the feeling of muscle under his arm. Maybe he wasn't the scarecrow he came across as; maybe it helped to look gawky and unready when you were going around killing men.

“It's too small for you. It'll mess with your throw.”

That wasn't something easy to dismiss, and he could see that Winchester already knew it and had put it aside.

“It belonged to my father,” he said, and that made the night fit a bit better for Dean. “All he left behind was a gold ring and this jacket. I had to sell that ring about a year or so back. So I guess I'll hang on to the jacket.”

Dean shifted in his chair, thinking of the last time he saw Jim, bloody and blind to the world. He'd left Jim's with nothing and lost more of it along the way. Not much room for sentiment in this life, but he knew that was how it worked for some people, collecting talismans as they travelled.

“What about learning to use a gun?”

“I know how to use a gun. I'm better with a knife.”

“Hell kid, if you can shoot better than you throw I'd retire tomorrow.”

The kid poured himself a drink, taking his time with the first sip, eyes back on Dean. They were slanted and bright, clever. He had a mole under one, by his nose.

Dean looked away.

“I've heard of Dean Murphy,” Winchester said, warm and curious. “That's you?”

“That's me.”

“You don't look like what I expected.”

Dean twisted his lips. Nothing much to say to that. The more his name spread the more it seemed people expected him to come in dripping blood with a knife-eye on their women or children; or drawing inverted crosses in the air, bending bullets around corners. The last few months had proved that much to him.

“Younger than I thought.”

“I'm twenty-six, friend,” Dean said, injured, and the kid tilted his head.
“It doesn't concern you any that I killed four men? That you know of?”

Dean shrugged, but now that he was thinking about it it was a little worrisome that it never did worry him. Being one himself he knew killers, the vicious kind, or the wild vengeful kind. The kid touched on his instincts, but not in that way. That was the only way he could describe it, and it unsettled him not to know.

Best he finish this up and get back on the road.

“No one's paid me to care. I ain't the law. And you had your reason it seems.”

“Well, not any more.” That sat between them for a while, and then the kid flicked his eyes up at Dean. “You looking for a job?”

“No.” Walker was going to move in before Bobby sobered up, or before they got a new sheriff; but he was in need of men first, and then he had to get there. Dean figured he had about a month to make it back down to Eldorado.

“Don't suppose I can ride along with you,” Winchester said, and almost seemed surprised he'd said it.

“No.”

“That's plain enough.” He kept looking at Dean like he knew something. Between Walker and now this kid Dean had pretty much had his fill of being eyeballed like there was something under his skin worth digging at. His fingers tightened on his glass.

“Well then, I got one more piece of advice for you although seeing as you ain't listened so far Lord knows if it'll do any good. You take that road east until you hit a city big enough to cope with you. New York would be my guess. Wash the dust outta your hair and get yourself a girl and make something of your life. Find yourself a new reason for waking up that ain't to do with being shot one day in the dirt.”

Winchester raised an eyebrow. “You sure can talk when you feel like it.”

Dean shook his head and suppressed a smile. “You sure are a son of a bitch.”

Winchester kept staring at him. “It's been my experience that those who like to give advice are really trying to tell themselves.”

The smile hiding in Dean settled down and died cold. He stood and threw some coin on the table, enough to cover that night and a meal or two more. The kid didn't blink.

“Guess I'll be moving along,” Dean said, and pulled himself out of the trap of the kid's eyes, and left without looking back.

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He saddled his girl before dawn, waking her up with yawned apologies and an apple core. They'd been on their feet pretty much since Pocatello and he'd promised her a run of nights somewhere warm and cosy, and hated to renege.

“We got a ride ahead of us, girl,” he whispered into her blaze, and she lifted her head and lipped at his hair in forgiveness.
He was tired, was the thing. The dead kid had come for him twice overnight, following him from nightmare to nightmare, blood on his lips and groaning the usual accusations. Heading back to Eldorado, that was to be expected.

But being tired always made his back worse, and it seemed that bullet was always waiting for his guard to drop: barely an hour out of town, at the bottom of a little gully, something wrenched and his back plain gave out, no warning this time at all, no incipient tingle. Just that lightning spasm burning out his nerves and his legs and gun hand gone numb.

The ground flew up to him and punched the breath out of his lungs.

He lay there a while gasping in the dirt, his girl shifting her feet, staring down at him impatiently. The pain went after a few minutes. His back unclenched and he waited for the numbness to ease too; but if it was going it was being slow about it, slow enough to fire a pressing frantic worry in his guts and chest, scrabbling clumsy and awkward to hitch himself up onto his ass. He got his elbow bent and his right hand in his lap, massaged it until he could feel a fuzz start up in his shoulder and fingertips.

His girl's ears turned, flicked towards the hill he'd just come down.

He shoved himself backward behind the cover of a boulder and tried again to shake his hand awake, fumbling for his Colt with the other. If it was Walker and his boys, the one good hand might not be enough, exposed like he was.

Just one horse though, picking its way down careful. Pause in its tread when the rider saw his girl standing alone, and then Samuel Winchester rattled down the slope and into view. Dean lowered his gun, let his head drop forward to knock against the rock.

Winchester pulled up next to his girl and grinned down at him.

“Well, well, well. Dean Murphy fell off his horse.”

Dean levered himself upright, leaning more than standing, and wiped his brow. “I about near blew your thick goddamned head off. What are you doing here?”

“Looking for you.” Winchester frowned, eyes stuck on Dean's arm. “Something's wrong.”

“It's nothing.”

Winchester swung a leg over and hit the ground, loomed at Dean. He sure was tall. Stretched up higher this morning maybe now that his father's death wasn't weighing. “That's not nothing.”

Dean flexed his hand, pointed at his hat on the ground by the kid's horse. Winchester grabbed it and slapped it against his thigh a couple of times to knock the dirt off, handed it over and stepped back. Dean settled it firmly on his head and brushed himself down. His dignity was slow returning.

“I got shot in the back a few months ago. This happens sometimes.”

“Someone shot you in the back?” Winchester was coming up righteous on that one. Dean kept his mouth shut; wasn't about to go into it with a stranger. “How long does it last?”

“Not long.”

“Let me see.”
“I ain't gonna let you see!” Dean said, scandalised, and the kid narrowed his eyes like he didn't appreciate being refused. “Why are you following me?”

“I got to thinking about what you're gonna do.”

“And what am I gonna do?”

“You're gonna go to try help your friend against Walker and his bunch.”

“How do you know he's my friend?”

“You're not hard to read.”

“Yes I am,” Dean said, tried not to sound offended. This kid kept putting him on his back foot. “Maybe we should play poker sometime.”

“I'd like that,” the kid said, unconcerned.

“Not like you got anything worth taking,” Dean grumbled, and ignored how that got him a flash of something fiercer. He walked unsteadily over to his girl and brushed down the saddle, got his stirrups turned around right. How he was gonna get the kid to go his own way now, he couldn't figure. That buckskin looked like he had plenty of speed. Wasn't like Dean could just shoot the kid and he suspected Winchester already had his measure on threats of that kind.

The kid spoke behind him. “You think his wife's death was a play?”

Dean's fingers clenched around the leather and he turned his head and looked at the kid. For the first time really looked at him. The tall strong way he stood, his broad easy shoulders, the certainty in his gaze. He seemed bigger every time Dean laid eyes on him; seemed like he ran deeper.

“I ain't sure yet,” Dean said, feeling that pull again from last night.

“I can help.”

“There ain't no money in this, kid, or glory neither.”

“I can help,” he said again, calm, his eyes in the shadow of his hat and still sparking out at Dean.

“Yeah,” Dean said slowly, and felt his heart beat even and clear. “Maybe you can.”

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Up on the other side of the gully they emerged into wide country and a light clear morning. Much as Dean hated to crawl out from a warm bed, getting moving always put him in a good mood. Nothing he could do about Bobby and Masters until he got there, so moving was all he was required to do and sure, there was distance to cover but on a day like this it wasn't a hardship.

They were up in the tablelands, scrub mottling the rust of the earth. Bursts of wildflowers and the big blue sky. The sun and the noise of the horses settled into him and his back came good again without fuss. Maybe he was gonna have to ask LeGrange to take another look when he got to town if there was time, but for now it seemed like it would hold.

Winchester's buckskin gelding was as tall and rangy as he was. Dean's girl lifted her head up and put on a bit of a show, and he silently chided her for acting the filly at the same time as a sneaking pride at her black gloss and the shape of her muscle lit him up a little. She was the best thing he had; a biter and a kicker towards those who didn't have her interests at heart, and she had outright
killed two men once trying to pull Dean out of the saddle. They had faith in each other.

They watered at a creek and ate jerky in the saddle for lunch. The kid had a little sack of peanuts that he shared. It had been a long time since Dean rode with someone but it was going about as easy as it could. Winchester knew how to sit a horse, and just as important he knew how not to run his mouth; seemed most of the time to be either floating mindless on the rhythm of the ride or churning away in thought. It was easy to slip out of the habit of talking, Dean knew that well enough. He had no strong desire to tell his own story, and he didn't press for the kid's.

In the afternoon, the kid finally came up with something he wanted to say.

"Is Walker really that good?"

Dean yawned and stretched out his shoulders. "Can't say for sure. But yeah, I think he is."

"He'll be pretty mad when you turn up on the other side."

"I hope so." Winchester sent him a questioning glance and Dean quirked his mouth. "A man in this business hasn't got a right to get mad. He's mad, he's not so good. The madder he gets, the better I like him."

He surprised the kid with that. Every time Winchester looked at him Dean felt his eyes dig in keener. It was queer, becoming the focus of someone's estimation. Not the way people tended to size him up.

"And this Masters woman, you turned her down?"

"That was my mistake, taking a job without knowing the facts." Or the boss; the second he'd tossed her purse back and seen her demure smile drop into that flat uncanny look he'd known it was a dead end. Hell, he should have known from the start just because the money was too good.

"What are the facts?"

Dead kids and stubborn women planting flags in a dusty plain. Dean sighed. "I ain't sure on the full story. Far as I can tell, a carpetbagger named Masters came south last year with a packet of money and a daughter. Settled her up in a little ranch before he died. Now she's got some cattle and some big ideas, and both of them need space and water. She borders Harvelle land but Harvelle's in no mind to sell, or lease her creek. So she's holding, and Masters is pushing, and my friend is standing right in the middle."

"And where is this?"

"You always join up with a man without knowing where he's going?"

"I've never joined up with anyone before," Winchester said.

Dean felt himself flush without reason, looked down and reset his saddlebags to hang neater and recalled that the kid just got done with two years on the retribution trail. He wondered if the kid had been lonely, lying under the stars with no one to talk to but his horse. Maybe wishing for someone else to be there, friend or girl or brother. His old man, probably.

"We're heading to Eldorado, Texas," Dean said, and Winchester tipped his head back and laughed, sunshine and glory. He had dimples. "What's so funny?"

"Eldorado, really?" The kid raised his eyebrows, mouth twitching like Dean had pleased him in
“You're not joking me?”

Dean frowned. “Why a joke?”

“Eldorado doesn't exist.”

Dean sniffed. “I tell you it does exist.”

“It's a fantasy. The town with riches beyond dreams, that everyone seeks and no one finds.”

“It's real all right.”

“Gold-plated eh?” The kid smirked. “You live there?”

“Stop there now and then,” Dean said, and shrugged. “Good folk for the most part. Don't deserve whatever Masters and Walker are bringing down on them.”

Winchester's eyes landed on him again, the weight of his gaze like a second sun hitting Dean's skin, warmth and exposure from the wrong angle. The kid was always looking, thinking. Didn't make a man comfortable.

“Gaily bedight, a gallant knight, in sunshine and in shadow, had journeyed long—”

Dean jerked his girl to a halt and she skipped a little under him. “What in hell?”

“It's a poem.” Winchester reined around to face him.

“Jesus.” Dean shook his head. “You are the strangest person I ever met.”

The kid grinned at him. “Had journeyed long, in search of El Dorado. But he grew old, this knight so bold, and o'er his heart a shadow fell as he found no spot of ground that looked like El Dorado.”

“Stop that.” Dean's blood chilled, shadow lying on him too like the kid could tell his vagabond drifting future. The kid's face fell.

“Sorry.”

They walked on and the kid lost his voice again and any expression at all, that sun disappeared into frost, midnight on the highplains. Dean pinched the bridge of his nose and cursed himself, pulled up.

“Give 'em a breather, come on. Step down off that horse,” he said and dismounted, itched his girl's nose. She snuffed admonishingly into his hand. *Yeah, yeah,* he muttered at her.

The kid looked away at the horizon, squinting. “I like your orders about as much as I like your advice, Murphy.”

“When you're as good as me, orders and advice just come natural,” Dean said, and stifled a smile as the kid huffed and rolled his eyes. “Come on, if I'm gonna let you ride with me, I wanna see how you shoot.”

Winchester ducked his head, too slow to hide his mouth curling under his hat brim, and dismounted, followed Dean a few steps away from the horses. Dean handed over his second and the kid twirled it to get the weight; raised his arms to shoot two-handed and picked the head off some cholla fifty feet away.
He was a marksman, not a quickdraw, not a point shooter. He fired twice more and Dean watched him shift his balance, adjust the line of his shoulders and thought that he could get him there with time. He had the reflexes for it, the way he threw. He had the capacity to be a top-notch fucking shooter.

“You ain't bad,” Dean said, let some of his admiration show.

“You're better.”

Dean acknowledged this with a gracious nod of his head, and the kid rolled his eyes again. “I can get you better too.”

Winchester looked back down at the gun, swiped his thumb over the grip and handed it back over. His fingers as they brushed Dean's were warm and dry. “I've spent enough time practicing shooting.”

There was a history there that nudged at Dean all wrong, made him flare up a bit. He'd known enough men who were hardasses on their boys. But he guessed that whoever the kid's father was, he was worth two years of his life.

“Your daddy a hired gun?”

“You could say that,” the kid said. “A hired gun, that's what you call yourself?”

Dean had been called all kinds of things. His mouth tightened and he busied himself reloading. “I do what I see needs doing, and sometimes I get paid for it.”

“Doesn't sound like much of a vocation.”

Dean glared at him. “Well seeing as I ain't got Murphy and Sons Haberdashery to fall back on I suppose I gotta make do with this.” Dean waved his gun and slipped it back into his holster. “There's people out there, kid, need taking care of, and maybe that means a kind hand, and maybe that means a bullet.”

The kid snapped his gaze away but not before Dean caught him flinch down deep in his eyes, softening the hard thin angles of his face. Dean cocked his head.

“How old are you anyway?”

“Twenty-two I reckon.”

“You reckon?”

Winchester shrugged in even closer on himself. “Don't exactly know my birthday.”

“Kid, you just keep getting stranger,” Dean said, but nothing he said was going right now, and it earned him a glare and silence all the rest of the day's ride into Gallup. Crossing the town line the kid muttered something about needing an hour and kicked his gelding on, skirting wagons, stiff-backed and straight in that too-small jacket.

Dean watched him go with a feeling shading dim and grey as the twilight. He turned his girl away so he didn't have to see the kid disappear, and went hunting for the Swede.

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Winchester found him in the saloon at the El Rancho, knocking back a shot. They were lighting
the gas lamps. Word had gotten out from the Swede about his name, and he was drinking alone.

He was glad tonight, not in the mood to hide himself, not in the mood for a girl or a game or anything much that involved another human being. Most of the people in the world were people he never met before, but they all seemed to have an idea about him. Didn't matter, rich or poor, homesteader or shopkeeper or whore, or piece of shit horse thief face down in the dust, or kicked dog or child. Murphy made deals with the Devil to shoot like that, they said. Murphy killed men as easy as breathing. You could pay him five cents to do it and he'd turn the money down with a laugh.

Even Bobby had pointed a gun at him last time they'd seen each other, shamefaced and suspicious, like Dean had become the kind of man who'd kill a friend for coin. So Dean could outgun just about anyone. So Dean had been shot in the back and lived. So he had a nightmare horse and a price on his head in St Louis. So when he rode out of town, there was thick red mud in streets that hadn't seen rain for months. Such were matters of money, mostly pitiful, and luck, mostly bad. That didn't make him a crop-blighter or a devil or a bandit, from where he stood.

Then again. He'd shot that stupid kid Max Miller in the gut after all, just for being a Harvelle lookout. Maybe they were right.

He was closing in on a brooding black drunk when someone came up alongside him, rested his forearms on the bar.

“Your girl's hard to find in the dark,” he said. Dean shrugged, didn't look up from his glass. “Where'd you get her?”

“Up north.” Three days in a killing blizzard he'd spent chasing her down before she changed her mind and came to him, and three months before he could be sure she wouldn't throw him just for fun.

“What's her name?”

“Girl.”

“Her real name, I mean.”

“She ain't told me,” Dean said, and felt himself colour.

Another long look from Winchester. “You are a strange one yourself, Murphy.”

Dean tapped the bar and when the whiskey came slid the glass over. Winchester threw it back smoothly, upended the glass and licked his lips, turned around and leaned his elbows back on the bar. Nothing of the kid about him in here, strong and lean, taking the measure of the room.

Dean craned his neck to see what he was seeing but it was just the usual. Tables, cards, piano, whores. Men you could cross, and men who'd beat you for trying, and the barman like a thundercloud because of the ten feet of clear space around where Dean was feeling sorry for himself.

“You already paid for a bed?” Winchester asked.

“No.”

“Not a bad night out there.”
An hour ago, eating alone at a rickety table in the attached hotel, Dean had counted four fat rats going about their business, more clean and orderly than the grease-faced boy who'd served Dean his dish, sinew with a side of pork fat. And here he was now in the saloon, laying down a dollar per shot and not making any friends while doing it, on his way to a fight or an evening on the floorboards most likely.

Dean scratched at his beard and finished his drink and released the death-grip he had on his melancholia. He pushed himself off the bar.

“I could be convinced so.”

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The air outside headed Dean's drunk off at the pass, crisp and clean, the moon just coming off full and hanging large on the horizon. Bright enough to make their way by, skirting the railyards silently, putting about a mile of space between them and the coal piles and any other traveller before finding a place to stop. Dean scrubbed and settled the horses and Winchester got the fire going and then laid himself out near it, too close, with a little book angled to the light.

Dean propped his saddlebags against a rock and leaned back against them and untied the shotgun. The Swede had sawed it down for him quick and cheap, and the stock as well, and now he ran his fingers over the cut end of the barrel, finding little nicks of steel to file smooth. That didn't take long and then he started sanding the stock. This was work he could do without looking, caught up like always in the gentle crackle and snap of the fire, the seams of the wood glowing as it burned from the inside out.

Distractions tonight, though, as the kid turned pages on that book faster than anyone Dean had ever seen, Bobby included. Dean almost didn't believe anyone could read that fast and keep it going for so long, a half-hour, an hour. No words on the cover but it didn't even seem to be a racy book going by the kid's face, his faint furrow of concentration; one side of his face was going red, but Dean figured that was from the fire.

“You eaten?”

The kid looked up and frowned, voice guarded. “Yeah. Why?”

Dean shrugged. “Just checking.”

The kid's frown eased into something more considering. He gave Dean a measured glance and marked his page and shut the book, turned around to lean against his saddle, cleared his throat.

“Like I said.” The kid adjusted his boots by the fire and pulled his jacket a little closer around, hands in his pockets. “I'm not too used to company. I was in a mood this afternoon.”

“You don't gotta say anything to me,” Dean said, and fished in his pack for the linseed oil, started working it into the wood. After a few minutes the kid spoke up again.

“I just got to thinking on my old man. And some other stuff, and it didn't put me in a good way.”

“A girl?”

“No,” Winchester said, surprised. “Well, sort of.”

“She back in Kansas City?”
“Boston. In the middle and six feet down.”

“Aw, hell.”

Winchester chewed at his lip, shrugged one-shouldered in an unexpected bashful sort of way that made him look young all over again. “She wasn't even really my girl. Never could have been, to be truthful. More – the promise of one. You know what I mean?”

“No,” Dean said, thinking of Cassie, wondering if it was maybe the same thing. But what do you say to something like that.

Winchester was mulling on his troubles over there, staring into the fire. Dean sighed, screwed the cap on the oil and rolled it in the rag and shoved it back in his pack.

“Here,” he said; waited until he got the kid's attention and tossed the gun longways. The kid grabbed it neatly out of the air. “You ever used one of these?”

“No one this short.” He frowned at Dean. “You didn't have this before.”

Dean made himself busy, thumping his packs into a more comfortable couch. “Feller in town owed me a favour.” Winchester went to toss it back and Dean waved it away. “That there is a point-and-shoot and it'll take care of anything near enough to take care of you. No practice required. Yours if you want it.”

Winchester's face went blank with disbelief. He stared down at the gun long enough that if Dean hadn't rode with him all day he'd have thought the kid was was slow.

He looked back up at Dean. “I can't accept this.”

Dean flapped his hand. “Don't piss me off, kid.”

Winchester turned it over a couple of times, set the stock into the palm of his hand and raised it to eye height.

“It fits me,” he said, bewildered.

“I had to guess. It ain't finished, not close. But it'll do for now.”

Winchester cracked it and sighted through the barrel down to the fire. His hair was pushed back dark and the firelight flicked shadows across his cheekbones and in his eyes; there was elegance in the steep lines and planes of his face, rare and fine as a bluegrass sprinter.

He lay the gun in the crook of his elbow and levered himself to his feet and walked over to Dean, stared down at him, inscrutable. Dean had a moment where he couldn't breathe.

“You got any shells?” he asked, and Dean fumbled, fog-headed, for the box and held two up to him. He plucked them from Dean's fingers and loaded while he walked back to the other side of the fire, put his other hand on the grip and fired at a shadowy cactus some ways out of the camp. The noise was deafening, and the horses startled and something out in the dark screeched and he threw a huge wild grin over at Dean that started a hare in Dean's chest, warm and alive and afraid.

“I'll pay you back.”

“You will not,” Dean said, heart still rabbiting, unable to look away. “I said he owed me a favour.”

The kid's hands tightened around the gun and a look ran across his face that Dean couldn't nail
“Thank you,” he said, and then, soft, making Dean turn away finally in shock: “Dean.”

“Don't go on like a girl now,” Dean said, gruff to cover up whatever was happening to him to hear his name like that, spoken without coarseness or distaste. He grumbled and thumped at his pack like a bent-backed old-timer, and pulled his blanket up high and lowered his hat over his face, and held his breath until the kid settled, wordless, at his own place on the other side of the fire.

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The kid was a restless sleeper it seemed, tossing and turning as Dean slipped under and already up and stoking the embers when Dean woke. Chilly morning, air pinching at his nostrils, steaming his breath. He stepped off to piss still swaddled in his blanket, sat back down at the fire and coughed his chest clear.

“Coffee?”

“Answer to that one's always yes,” Dean said, which got him an approving nod and a hot tin mug that he had to balance carefully, blowing across the top before he drank. “Hell, Sam, this ain't bad. Maybe I'll keep you around after all.”

The kid raised an eyebrow at him over the rim of his own mug, eyes clear in the pale sun. Seemed about to comment, and then put it aside and picked something else. “How long until we get there?”

“Three weeks, depending.”

Sam hummed to himself and tipped the rest of the coffee in his mouth down to the dregs and set some oatmeal going while Dean fed and watered the horses. They ate and saddled up and set off.

And that was how they travelled for a time that Dean didn't really touch on while it was happening, unbounded, big as the country they crossed, high as the sky. That first day, Dean's girl crabbed and jigged like she had a burr up her ass and he let her stretch her legs down on the plain, and Sam's gelding kept pace so smooth that it turned into a race before Dean thought of it, sitting easy while his girl exploded beneath him and Sam whooped alongside, hand holding down his hat. Dean had to put a stop to it too soon, worried about prairie dog holes and winding the horses.

The air brightened Sam's eyes. They laughed together like the breeze they made blasted any bad feeling right out of them, and the vague dread that had been hanging around Dean's neck over the press of the ride and what he might find at the end of it evaporated like dew.

Later that day Dean put a rifle in Sam's hands and watched him pick a feral goat off an outcrop a hundred yards away, and then watched him dress it with quick bloody hands. Dean peeled potatoes to fry and put the goat on a spit and Sam ate it all without any apparent issue. From then on, Dean did the evening cooking and Sam the morning and the coffee; Sam managed the fire and Dean the horses. It was a division of labour that happened thoughtlessly, without the carping or bitchery Dean was used to any time he doubled up on a job.

There was another day when they pulled up to let the Santa Fe chug its way south to Pecos. A boy hanging out the window of one of the passenger cars waved at them, and they waved back in unison, his mother's face buttoned-up tight behind him and the guard on the rearmost car staring at them hard, hand resting on the butt of his rifle. Sam snorted, and it was the first time anyone had been next to Dean to split that look. It didn't feel quite so damning, shared.

Before he'd killed that kid in Eldorado, Dean had been half thinking about finding someone to pick
up with. An idiot hope rapidly abandoned. His first job after recovering from that business had been protection at a silver mine up in Senora, a joint affair with a grizzled veteran who was grateful for the backup but never let that gratitude extend beyond a handshake and a couple of sparing drinks. Maybe that was Dean's fault, too headbound, only a few weeks out from those bullets.

There was some brother-feeling with this kid, though; a tentative start to it at least. Still, even as they settled into the harmony of routine, just being around someone all the time, morning and night and through the day, was strange in a way that rode Dean's nerves. Dean was trying to get used to it; or if he was honest with himself, there was something about not being able to get used to it that he liked, that beat in him secret and special, and that skittish rabbit in his chest never did settle down completely.

About a week in there was a night when they drank properly together for the first time. Sam came over to Dean's side so they could share the bottle back and forth. Dean told him about the time some Irish hired him to put down a moonshine gang that took to burning stills up in Belmont County, and how he'd nearly lost his good looks and happy disposition in the ensuing fire and flight. And Sam, who was squirrelly about most things and careless about others in a way that Dean couldn't get a handle on, told Dean about getting so fall-down drunk in a bar on the Hannibal docks that someone rolled him and hid him on a steamboat, and he woke up penniless in Portage de Sioux without ever realising his transportation. He was chuckling, loose-limbed and slow, leaning warm into Dean's side. Dean stared muzzily at him in horror, and neither of them moved until Dean's girl nudged him awake at noon, his head pillowed on Sam's shoulder.

Then there was a day when they hit a general store for supplies and Sam gawked at a row of raggedy books lined up above the flour sacks and laid out six dollars and twenty-five cents for them, his every last coin and one of Dean's too. Tom Jones, he said when Dean gaped at the price, and he'd only ever read the first volume and he never got to read novels and it was a miracle to see them here in this nowhere place, and the only peep Dean heard from him for three nights running was his amused huffing. And, when he was particularly tickled, he would read Dean a sentence and Dean would say it was funny and clever just to keep that glad expression on his face a while longer. It was nice to look at. Over the fire in the evening; over coffee in the morning. Dean thought he would have been reading in the saddle if he could have made it work.

There was a night where they stabled the horses out back of the Longreach Hotel and drank and played stud poker with three other men and Dean found himself hustling almost by accident, he could read Sam so well and be read just as clear. Locked in so quick with him in a game of raising and folding that they might as well have been playing whist. They came out of that with their pockets full and two extra bottles of rye, and they slept upstairs in the hotel's worst beds. At dawn Dean saw Sam stand and walk barefoot to the washbasin, and the light was so pearly and soft it could have been a dream.

So the kid was a hustler, he learned that. Had paid his way across the country with a handful of cowboy jobs and a lot of tablework and probably some pocketwork as well. He learned too that Sam's beard itched him something fierce and that was why he shaved every morning, by touch if he had to. He learned Sam came from Kansas but had rode through just about every other state and territory, had heard seagulls on three separate coasts but had never been to Canada. He could sit a startled dancing horse like he was born up there. He burned pancakes but not oatmeal, because if he didn't have to be stirring he'd forget the pan. Had a years-old scar at the base of his neck, jagged and white and running down to his collarbone, and once or twice Dean caught sight of another scar above his heart, circular and raised so it looked more like a brand.

He had moods that came on him seemingly without warning, pulling him down into black contemplation that could last hours. They lessened as the days went on, but still he often carried an
air about him like he didn't really care to know you. Dean thought it mostly inadvertent, borne of preoccupation, but it showed in towns and between that and Dean's reputation they were generally left alone. Women who were brave or desperate enough to approach the kid were turned away. Dean spent a couple of days wondering, but then there was a boy that he turned away as well without even seeming to notice what was on offer and Dean figured that dead girl must have been something special.

For the most part though they kept out of towns and away from the eyes of normal folk. Dean was sorry for the hard ground, but glad for the solitude. Sam slept maybe one night in four the whole way through, and might have been the first man Dean ever met who seemed to have dreams worse than Dean. About what Dean didn't know; the kid was stubborn as a fat-eared sow and never mentioned them, the same way he never mentioned how he disliked that jacket and showed it all the same, tugging unconsciously at the cuffs or the hem.

He didn't talk about his father. Didn't talk about much personal at all, wagons circled around his inner self. Dean had to tell everything by observation and he didn't begrudge it, not being keen to start on his own tale of woe: the lost years, the woods, Jim and Blue Earth, lighting out to see the world; the restless pointless life he'd chosen, roving trails like tributaries to a great river that he heard inside but never saw around the bend. Hell, Dean didn't even have a father to keep quiet about.

They were young together, but Dean was rising twenty-seven and there was a old man's strain on Sam that showed through sometimes in moments of quiet, deep thought. Hard lives behind and hard country ahead. Dean had his back that troubled him every now and then with an ache and pins-and-needles, although nothing so bad as that first day on the road, and one day near the end, Sam had a headache that came on so sudden Dean had to leap his girl up and grab Sam's jacket to stop him sliding out the saddle altogether. Another seam ripped under his fingers as Sam knifed forward, hand pressed across his eyes and a cry of pain choking him.

He got the kid on the ground somehow. Useless hovering until it passed, and then Dean pressed the canteen to his lips and got him to drink. He was pale and sweaty and his hands were shaking, his voice thin and hoarse.

“How far to Joseph City?”

“Joseph City?” Dean repeated, baffled, trying to duck down far enough to see the kid's eyes.

“That's back the way we came.”

“How far, Dean?”

“Six hundred miles, maybe seven. Why?”

“Never make it,” Sam gasped, wretched, and threw up by Dean's boots. Dean scuffed some dirt over it and tried to get him sitting back, fear running deep and cold.

“Are you sick? Is there a doctor there?”

“Never mind, I'm fine, never mind.” He swilled water through his mouth, spat and then pushed Dean away and put his face in his hands.

That was the end of that day's ride, and it turned into a bad night with the wind springing up, trying to find a bit of shelter out on the spare open plain and get Sam there without banging him around too much, trying to get him to eat, trying to wake him out of his slump. The pain was gone pretty quick it seemed but some other feeling was lingering, calling him down dark roads.
“They come like that very often?” Dean asked after a while, breaking down a tumbleweed for kindling just to keep his hands busy, and Sam shrugged a shoulder and kept staring into the fire, pale, still clammy and cold-looking. Dean didn’t like this mood of his, different even from the brown study he tended to carry around with him. “You need a doctor? Joseph City ain’t all that far.”

“It ain’t like that, Dean,” he said, and lifted his head and gave Dean a weak smile. “Trust me, don’t worry over it.”

But Dean did worry, couldn’t help it: out east he had known a woman who’d had headaches that left her weeping and so drained afterwards that when the pastor took Dean to her she hadn’t lifted a hand to defend herself. Dean had pointed his gun at the pastor instead and took her out of town straight away, and she hadn’t been any kind of witch, just sick with a swelling in her head and dead in days.

So that was a new worry that Dean had on top of his other worries, and he resolved that when this business in Eldorado was done with, he’d put the kid on the fast train to New York and one of those universities they had out there.

That was his dream that night, waving at Sam from the saddle as the nurse’s car took him away to a heartsblood horizon, and next to Dean the kid Max Miller was smiling up with his teeth stained and that black hole in the centre of his forehead, saying it again and again: I’m on fire, I’m on fire. It’s burning me up.

So the next morning he was feeling worse than Sam, who rose first like normal, and made coffee, and even laughed ruefully when they got channelled downriver half a day looking for the water to spread out flat and slow enough to ford. On the other side they stripped off their shirts and washed with real soap, jumping and shivering in the cold and splashing up water at one another like boys.

Sam was well built; plenty of muscle, broad shoulders and long strong arms. Dean's eyes kept sticking on the line of his collarbone and that circular scar over his chest. Around the fire they set to dry out by, Sam was back into his books while they still had the daylight, and his hair dried so thick and soft-looking, curling around his face, that Dean wanted to touch it. It itched in his fingers so bad it shocked him a little.

Instead he got out the sewing kit and bullied Sam until he had handed over his jacket, let Dean fix the broken seam. A few minutes like that and his brain got loud again, buzzing at him about his new friend, his new friend, right there, right there, like a missing piece returned to him.

“Hey kid,” he said, and Sam looked up at him automatic and open, eyebrows raised. “You know any poems about good stuff?”

“What's good stuff?”

“Fighting, girls, you know. Life, death, the trail.”

Sam turned this one over a few times, tapping his finger unconsciously on the cover of his book, and then looked back at Dean with a sly smile.

“I know a song.”

Dean made a go-ahead gesture, and Sam marked his page and sat up a bit straighter.

“Lady Margaret, Lady Margaret, a-sewing at her seam,” he started, quiet, and Dean grinned and lifted his hands in acknowledgement, shook his head.
He should have expected the kid to dodge left instead of right. He knew this one, and it was about as far from a campfire song as you could get. He'd heard it once from a Cornishwoman with an accent so thick he could barely understand it, but Sam's version was different, darker, with unwanted babies, and silver combs buried at crossroads, and a queen who turned a woman's lover into fire in an attempt to burn them both alive, and the woman held on until she burned as well, and somehow that was their salvation.

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They got an early start the last day. They had been moving steady enough that Dean was fairly confident they beat Walker into town, but he blew out a heavy breath of relief when they turned the bend atop the gentle rise to the north and the place was still standing, stuck in the same old sunset rhythms. One main street, the evening traffic thin, with a smaller friend off to the side, and three cross-streets and higgledy-piggledy alleys. The edges of the town had swollen a little. The schoolhouse had been rebuilt in brick. The church bell was ringing.

To his left was line of trees that signified the creek on Harvelle land, and past it, invisible out towards the horizon, was Masters' place, Cold Oak. And somewhere down in that muddle of buildings was Bobby Singer, and God knew what was waiting for them there.

He looked over at Sam.

"End of the trail," he said, relief turning into something else, words catching thick in his throat, heavy on his tongue. Sam looked back, calm and steady.

Dean lifted the corner of his mouth and reined his girl off to the right and down an arroyo. Sam trotted down after.

"Where are we headed?" he called.

"Around the back. To see a girl."

"Are we talking a real girl or a horse?"

"A real girl!" Dean cried, glaring over his shoulder. "You don't think I could know a girl?"

Sam flashed a grin at him. "I always make you mad, don't I?"

"I try not to hold it against you," Dean said, and turned down the alley behind the newspaper.

The rear door was locked, and she answered his banging with a little cocked pistol held down by her side, frozen in surprise.

"Dean?" She hissed in shock, hands coming up to her cheeks, making Sam flinch in his periphery as the gun came up too.

"Hey, Cassie," he said, and gave her a careful smile. "Sam, meet Cassie Robinson, best newspaperman this side of the Mississippi."

"Ma'am," Sam said, grave, lifting his hat.

"Ma'am," she snorted, and pulled back and ushered them inside. Dean didn't like the way she checked the alley before she closed the door and locked it. She'd always had that gun on her person, after her father's death not being happy to count on people's goodwill, even in peacetime with the protection of the Sheriff, but Dean had never seen her so watchful.
She took them through into the press room and that was unchanged: cabinets ill-containing the paper jamming half-open drawers and baled like hay. President Lincoln on one wall and her parents on the other, and the press looming in the centre. Last time he was in here she'd come near to punching him; had called him a shark who'd die if he stopped in one place too long.

She lit a lamp and shook out the match.

“How much have you heard?”

“I heard the old man's drinking,” he said, and knew the rest from the sorrow in her eyes.

“Karen died, Dean. This winter. I would have written you but I didn't know--”

“No, I know, I know. Hell.” He'd been expecting it, but it wasn't good to hear. He gathered her into his arms and rested his chin on her head. Ink and smoke in her hair; her hands stained. Like he'd never left. He should never have gone.

He sighed. “Where is he? Is he over at the jail?”

“Still Sheriff,” she said into his chest, and held on tight. “Though I don't know why.”

“Any strangers in town?”

“Not that I'd noticed.”

“This one you'd notice,” said Sam, and when Dean looked for him he was still standing just in the doorway, stiff and dark-eyed with his arms crossed over his chest. “A black man, northerner, name of Walker. Tall, dark, smart. Probably at the head of a grubby little posse.”

Cassie pushed herself out of Dean's embrace, shaking her head, and smoothed down the front of her dress. “There's no one here like that.”

Another couple days' grace, then. Dean had to hope it would be enough.

“Where's your mother?” he asked, half glad the woman wasn't here to think her loud disapproving thoughts at him, but nervous to leave Cassie alone.

“Visiting.”

“You want to stick with us?”

She raised her perfect eyebrow.

“On a printing night?” She gave him that look that had stopped him in this town the first time. Four years ago, called in to back the sheriff against rustlers. He'd chased them off and she'd taken his measure and three nights turned into three weeks before his feet started tapping again.

“Well,” he said. “You know where we'll be if you need us.”

“I'll be fine. You be careful, Dean. This town is running low on peace. And Jo Harvelle is still mad at you.”

Dean reset his hat on his head and threw her a grin. “Ah, that girl is mad at everyone.”

Sam unfolded his arms, over in the shadows. “This Jo Harvelle is the one that shot you?”
“It wasn’t her fault.”

“Well it sure wasn’t your fault,” Cassie said, that old lie again, that old storm brewing up, and six feet away Sam was latching on like a terrier. The two of them like this Dean couldn’t stand.

“We got more important things to worry about than ancient history,” Dean said, and Cassie’s jaw clenched and she looked away and nodded, resigned to him and still angry about it, and when she leaned up to kiss his cheek goodbye and he ran his palm across her curls, he thought that there was last thin chance for them gone. His last chance to hang his spurs and coat, slipped right away there under Sam’s watchful eye and her need for him to be more than he was.

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“Harvelle’s bar,” Dean said, as they passed on foot, leading the horses. He pointed down the street. “And Masters’, where that godawful piano is coming from.”

“Thought you said this was over cattle?”

“Six of one, half a dozen of the other.”

A shadow rocking in a chair outside the jail called them out as they got close, shotgun barrel rising and a thud of feet as someone stood.

“You got business here?”

A woman's voice, tough and suspicious. It took Dean a moment to place.

“Jody Mills?” he said, and she stepped into the light cast out of the window. “Who gave you a badge?”

She recognised him and her hand tightened around the gun. “Took it for myself. State your purpose.”

“What do you think, Jody?”

She spat her tobacco on the boards.

“I think ’cause he ain't in a position to look out for himself then I gotta, and I think last time you was here, he pulled a gun on you.”

Dean showed her his palms and spared a brief moment of yearning for yesterday, for the weeks gone, just the sky and the trail and some kind company. Lord, he’d told Sam these were his friends.

“I ain’t working for Masters, Jody. I told him then and I tell you now. I ain’t here to hurt him. He knows that.”

“He doesn't know much of anything any more,” she said, unyielding. “He forgot what they made corks for.”

She was grieving him, Dean realised with a pang of foreboding, and what that meant for the state of the man he didn’t want to think.

She sighed and lowered her gun.

“Well, all right.” She jerked her head towards the door. “Don’t wake him up sudden.”
Dean passed his reins to Sam and stepped onto the porch, Jody swinging around to dog his heels; wrapped his fingers around the doorknob and took a deep breath.

“You gonna go in or ain't ya?” she huffed down his neck, and at the same time Sam called up.

“Ma'am, where do I put these horses?”

“Stalls 'round back,” she said, and sighed again when Sam gave her a wide-eyed look, pure innocence, like he never heard of a stall or horse neither. She jumped down onto the road, and Sam flicked those eyes back to Dean, and laid a finger on his hat brim and winked.

“Yeah, don't think you got one over on me, kid,” she grumbled, heading towards the corner, and Sam clicked his tongue at the horses and moved off before Dean could say anything, staring at his back, watching him nod down attentively at Jody as she started in on him about his accent.

Dean bit down the smile that spread warm through this veins, firmed his shoulders, and opened the door.

It wasn't so bad, he thought at first, Jody Mills all worked up when Bobby was just sleeping it off in the cells like any old drunk. Not even first time Dean had seen him passed out on one of the cots, sawing down the roof.

Closer, the picture was less rosy. Dean turned up the lamp and considered him, sprawled out in a ripped and smutty undershirt, badge lopsided and tarnished. His beard was at least two weeks set in and he smelled like he'd spent that time rolling with the pigs.

“Hey.” He kicked the leg of the cot, set it juddering with a frail creak of wood. “Jesus, Singer, get your self together.”

No response.

He grabbed the basin outside the cell and dashed the water callously through the bars. Bobby came up gasping and flailing, shaking himself like a dog, water glittering in his beard. The bottle he was nursing hit the ground with a thud. Dean nudged it further away with his toe.

Bobby looked at him.

Dean flinched, unable to hide it. Bobby had aged years, sorrow and drink carving new cracks and hollows into his face. When Karen had gone she'd taken a pound and more of flesh with her.

Bobby grunted, spared him a couple of dull-eyed blinks.

“Whaddaya looking at?”

His voice was long disused. Dean shook his head. “Tin star with a sorry son of a bitch pinned under it.”

Bobby scooped a boot off the floor and threw it poor enough that Dean barely had to dodge. He raised an eyebrow.

“Go fuck a coyote,” Bobby snarled, and wiped his face on his arm, bent into the corner for the bottle. Bare dregs, Dean saw when he tipped the remains to his mouth, and he backed out before the empty bottle could come his way too.

Sam and Jody joined him at the gate to the cells and they watched Bobby sink back down onto the
cot, arms shaking from holding himself up. He looked about a half a night away from death.

“We gotta get him sober,” Dean said, and couldn't hide the despairing note in his voice.

“If I knew how to do that, I woulda done it,” Jody flared.

Sam was staring into the cell, flat look on his face. “You got cayenne pepper?”

Jody shot Dean a look and turned to Sam, folded her arms. “Cayenne pepper? Yeah.”

“Hot mustard? Ipecac?”

“What's this about, Kansas?”

Kansas? Dean mouthed at him, but Sam hadn't taken his eyes off Bobby.

“I can get him so sober he won't be able to touch the stuff for days without his stomach turning inside out.”

“Pepper, mustard and ipecac?” Dean repeated, feeling dumb. Ten feet away, the snores started up again.

“And asafoetida, croton oil, and gunpowder.”

“Well call me a suck-egg mule,” Jody said in a considering tone, looking Sam up and down. Dean knew how she felt. “That's like to kill him.”

“Kill or cure,” Sam said, voice tight and grim.

“You think LeGrange will have that stuff, Jody? Could he come and help?”

“Guess I'll check his place,” she said, and made for the door. “But he ain't here, and he's got no replacement.”

“He's away?”

“Dead,” she said, shortly, and didn't expand. “You'll find your condiments in yonder cabinet.”

Dean rifled through it for the pepper and mustard, as Sam found himself a bowl, wiped it down at Bobby's desk. Dean grabbed a powder pouch off the shelf and sat by him, tipped out a spoon's worth of grains and passed that over too.

LeGrange dead. Who knew how long. Maybe the last thing he ever did was save Dean's life. All these months Dean had been treading with that bullet in his back, thinking LeGrange was praying for him and the soul of Max Miller as well, clearing the way for Dean to pay some kind of penance. It was a stupid thought, only half-formed, but strong for all that; proven doubly stupid now, he supposed, and sighed, swiping his hand through the dust on the desk, blowing it off his palm.

The jail was unimproved despite the brewing war; still just the one room and the cells gated off to the rear. Two desks and the flaking window shutters that probably wouldn't stop a lady's purse gun. Yellow old flyers nailed up and the one rack of rifles and shot; they were cared for and glossy at least. Jody might have been a little rough but she knew her guns.

From where he was he could see through the gate to Bobby in his ruin, flat on his back with his chest rising and falling, one foot still on the floor.
The last time Dean saw Karen she had fed him apple pie for lunch because a happy man healed faster. Bobby had taken her on two waltzing turns around the kitchen table, and she had laughed with the sun in her hair.

“You got people here.”

Dean startled. Sam was watching him, unreadable, like he thought he got to know anything about Dean he wanted and give nothing away himself.

He was wrong about this, though. Dean looked back at Bobby, who called him son sometimes with a gruff indifference that always hit Dean harder than he was ready for, the only person left in the world he could lay any kind of claim to, the only one who might lay some kind of claim on him: unconscious and uncaring.

“I didn't figure on you being – part of it. Didn't know it could work like that.”

It doesn't, Dean wanted to tell him, heavy feeling in his chest, tying his tongue; for some reason it just never did. Not in Blue Earth, not in any place he'd been. Never had a brother or sister or good friend to run with, right from the start. 'Cause he was a foundling orphan or a gun or cause he was plain ill-fit, he never discovered why.

Jody saved him from trying to put that into words that Sam might understand, banging the door open. She unburdened her pockets of soft-wrapped bottles, laid them in Sam's hands and leaned over the bowl.

“You a doctor? Where'd you learn this?” She sneezed a huge dynamite sneeze and backed off quick.

“Around the way,” Sam said, intent, dissatisfied with the smell of the asafoetida when he rubbed the powder between his fingers and brought it up to his nose. Dean watched him mix it in, scraping the sides of the bowl clean neat and sure with the hush and purpose of ritual.

“What did you say your daddy did for a living?”

Sam flicked him a glance and poured the stuff into a glass, unbent and walked into the cells. Dean and Jody trailed after like ducklings.

“Jody, sit on his legs. Dean, hold down his arms.”

He wasted no ceremony, pinched Bobby's nose and poured it down his mouth, thick and stagnant as river mud. Bobby's eyes flew open and he choked, and Dean had to jump forward and grab him before Bobby jack-knifed off the cot. Jody got a knee in the stomach and cussed, breathless.

Bobby shuddered again, spine arcing as Sam pressed his shoulders down, mouth racked open in a soundless yell, and then collapsed back, limp. They stepped away as he fell under. He'd lost what little colour he had, black of the mixture stark at the corner of his mouth. Dean wiped it with the sheet.

“Hell, Kansas,” Jody said, bleak loss for words on her face. Dean stared at her and back at Bobby, rooted to the floor.

Sam tugged at Dean's jacket. “Come on. He'll be fine, but it'll take the night, and tomorrow too, probably.”

Dean shook his head, dazed. “He's probably gonna blow up. What was I thinking, letting you at
“He’ll be fine.”

“You're sure?”

“Sure, I'm sure,” Sam said, and tilted his head consideringly at Bobby. “Given he's human.”

“He's human all right,” Jody said. “No other critter on earth'd go so to ruin.”

She'd lost a husband and a son, Dean remembered, prospecting out west, and had washed up here some years ago. Now Bobby a widower too, setting up home in a bottle and a cell. How could Dean have just left them to it?

Sam tugged at him again, voice soft.

“Come on, Dean. I'm tired.”

Dean turned, shaky on his feet. Sam was waiting, weary, hunched into his jacket, hands in pockets. Right at the start he'd said he'd be a help to Dean; had proven that a bare hour in despite not knowing Dean, not really. Not knowing Dean's friend. A stranger in this town, needing a place to rest.

Dean swallowed and nodded assent, tipped his hat at Jody. “You'll stay with him?”

“I have been, haven't I?”

“Yeah, Jody,” he sighed. Clapped a hand on her shoulder, and felt exhaustion land on his own. He took Bobby's keys from his desk and allowed Sam to load him down with packs and pull him out the door.

Bobby's home was a block down from the jail, and was mostly dust when Dean let them in: dust and books and empties and a strong cold silence. Sam lit the stove while Dean cleared the kitchen table, numb, shifting bottles from here to there at a bit of a loss for to how to make it all go away. Sam, predictably, turned over every book he came across, frowning down at a couple like they were telling him things he didn't want to hear. He set one aside for later reading that didn't even strike Dean as being in English, which Dean guessed wasn't too surprising in the end.

They checked bread and cheese for mould and cut a few thick slices, and Dean found a bottle that wasn't empty, and they sat and got warm and the tiredness slid into something easier, food and drink and cards and the fire like it had been for the last few weeks. Funny as it was to be sitting in this lifeless house at all, let alone with the kid, it somehow made Dean feel boneless and peaceful, sunk into his chair.

They played a few rounds of penniless blackjack, nothing that Sam got too competitive over; Dean knew him well enough already to know that he was counting in the back of his mind regular as a clock ticking, could let the rest of his thoughts bubble away.

“Singer always been a Sheriff?” He said at last, overcasual.

Dean frowned at him. Bobby had fought in the war, he knew that much. But the man seemed to be born old and crotchety and righteous. Dean couldn't think what else he'd do.

“Far as I know.”
“You don't have family here?”

Dean dealt himself a soft seventeen and glanced at Sam, slumped down in his chair so his legs must be sticking somewhere by Dean's boots. Long fingers curving the cards, tapping the table. Dean dealt him a hit that he didn't look at, gaze dark on Dean. The fire crackled.

Dean shifted in his chair, and it creaked in the silence.

“Got no ma or pa to speak of,” he said, working to keep the care out of his voice. “I grew up with a friend in Minnesota. Then he got himself killed too. So I been riding since. Worked here once. Come back now and then if there's a job 'round the way.”

“Seems strange a man would leave at all,” Sam said, and turned over his cards and smiled as Dean huffed and gave the rest of the deck up as a lost cause. “When he's got people. When it's nice like this.”

“Like this?”

“I'm guessing his wife had more of a hand in this house,” Sam said, sardonic, and Dean shrugged. “She did.”

Sam watched him shuffle and Dean chewed on his lip, face heating up with that feeling like he was one of Sam's books. Turned out it was different in here after all, with the four walls closing them in, trapping them together, no breeze to whisper away any wrong steps.

“This isn't – I don't. Tend to stay. People get kinda nervous. Maybe I do too.”

“Considering you were shot by one of these Harvelles we're here to back, I don't blame you.”

“So glad to have your approval,” Dean bit out, welcoming the irritation. “Guess you got that scar on your neck from a bosom buddy too.”

Sam lost his expression like he'd been scrubbed clean, backed down in a hurry like Dean knew he would. They played through the deck, and Sam won most of it, composing himself, and spoke again in that casual voice.

“And Cassie is your girl?”

Dean paused.

“Yes,” he said. Sam's eyes were sharp on him again. He dropped his cards and stood up and brushed himself down. “Listen, I'm gonna turn in.”

Times previous, when Dean had stayed with the Singers, he'd used the bed in the second room down the hall, but it had saddles and even more books and crates piled in it now; there was the main bedroom of course but he was dirty and wouldn't have slept in Karen's bed if he were clean as a babe anyway. So he stoked the fire in the front room and grabbed a couple spare blankets out the chest. Handed Sam the thickest and steered him toward the couch.

Sam resisted, eyebrows climbing.

“I'm too big for that, you take it.”

“I'm better off on the floor.” Dean dragged the side table away and set the lamp on it, grabbed a cushion and tossed it down. The rug was thick and the blanket wool. No concerns over rocks and
scorpions in here. It was verging on paradise, as far as Dean was concerned.

Sam, over by the couch, narrowed his eyes. “But your back.”

“Back's fine,” Dean said. He hitched a thumb toward the window. “It's been all right on the floor out there, hasn't it?”

“Well, now we're here,” Sam said, stubborn light kindling up in him. “I'll take a look at it in the morning.”

Dean glared and got a flinty look right back. “I said I'm fine.”

“You don't fool me.”

“You think you're pretty clever, don't you kid?” Dean snapped. “With your potions and your poems and your secrets.”

Sam's mouth tightened and he strode over to where Dean was standing and that rabbit started up in Dean's chest again, to have him so close. Golden glow from the lamp on Sam's face, his eyes dark and his cheeks lit up from below, like blades. It stole Dean's breath.

“Ask me,” Sam said. “Anything.”

Dean swallowed and fought the urge to step back. Who are you, he wanted to say. What did I do to bring you near.

“You say what you wanna say.”

Something desperate and fierce twisted in Sam's face before he locked it down, and save his soul Dean got fixed on the curve of his lips and his fingers itched again in that fateful and dire way, watching his mouth twitch soundlessly. So much going on in that brain, no wonder he didn't know where to start. Dean could touch him, run his thumb across his bottom lip and drag it aside, help him pull the words out.

What would he taste like.

Sam turned his face to the side and his throat worked. Jesus, he was – he was like nothing Dean had ever seen before.

“Don't call me kid,” Sam said at last, forcing it out. “You know my name.”

He broke away with a suddenness that had Dean swaying unsteady after him, and sat on the couch and started unlacing his boots. Dean stared at the top of his head for a while. Doused the lamp with mindless fingers and pulled his own boots off and laid down and drew the blanket up and over, battered and throbbing under his skin, sleep beyond him, and safe and decent thoughts.

What went running through Dean's mind then in the dim moonlight was how a couple of times over the years on the trail, his path had crossed with another wayfarer or a lonely rancher waiting to bring his wife from back east. He was thinking that he'd had a look when he was younger, before he learned to grow his beard and wear his hat low, that some men responded to. One time in Dallas when a swell had walked right up to him cocksure and gleaming, and Dean had given it a go just to see how it was to be with someone fancy. It hadn't been very good. Never had been, the few times Dean had tried it.

But lying there three feet from the couch with Sam's breath slowing down into that familiar sleepy
rhythm, Dean had a thought that he wanted to put his hands on Sam and very nearly did just now, and that maybe it would have been good, real good, close and hot and friendly, with chuckles and whispers and their legs tangling. Good enough to stop his heart. And maybe Sam would have let him or maybe he wouldn't have but underneath that what Dean was really thinking about in a sidelong careful secret kind of way was clearing out of here in a day or ten. Riding with the sun burning above and his girl glowing beneath him and his Colt at his hip. And beside him someone tall and clever, dark with secrets and brilliant with a smile that was only for Dean.

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Next morning was a cold one. He washed down in cold water and shaved in cold water and if that was why he was in a mood no man could blame him.

Jody had the coffee going already at the jail and he took it with promises of kisses and marriage and cradled it in the corner, letting the heat warm his cheeks. The clouds outside were thick and Masters' men had rode in early, passing Dean on the street, the same thin-looking useless posse Dean had seen when he rode out to return the woman's money. They set up at her saloon and Dean was glad to see Gordon Walker wasn't amongst them as they filed in, stomping their feet and blowing into their hands. Yeah, they weren't all that. Maybe if Dean got lucky like he never had before, this would all settle down easy now he was here backing Bobby up.

The esteemed Sheriff himself joined them on Dean's second cup, staggering out into the room, cheeks slack and hand pressed to his head. Jody waved the coffee pot at him and he blanched like whatever was left in his stomach was repeating on him, started checking shelves and drawers.

“You dirty lousy rotten sheep-herdin' idjits.” His voice was rougher than gravel. “Whadja do to me?”

“Just hang on, Sheriff. You'll fetch around.” Sam was sitting at Bobby's desk, shuffling cards, quick and sure.

Dean didn't want to look at him. Dean woke up this morning with a worn leather jacket laid over him atop the blanket and the couch empty. He'd slept right through it, and the feeling that pummelled him when he'd realised that was more damning somehow than any childish fancy his brain had conjured the night before.

Bobby peered blearily down at Sam.

“Who are you?”

Dean cleared his throat. “Bobby this is--”

“I'm Sam,” Sam said at the same time, and opened the drawer by his knee. Bobby made a glad noise and grabbed the bottle out of it, jabbed menacingly at Jody with the hand that was wrapped around the neck.

“Don't try to stop me.”

Jody held up her hands.

“No one's gonna try,” Dean said, and Bobby took a long swig and belched, mouth moving like he'd just drunk sour milk.

Sam grinned up at him sunny and fine, waiting; a tremor shook through Bobby and he turned green, dropped the bottle and staggered back into the cells.
“Dirty…”

Sam turned that face on Dean and Dean grinned back helplessly, shaking his head.

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Cassie stopped by mid-morning and handed him two large thin sheets of the Record that Dean caught a glimpse of before Sam snatched it away. Nestled beside the pastor's Psalm 51 moralising had been a sizeable advertisement for Harvelle's saloon.

Dean looked up at her.

“Cassie,” he warned, and she gave him a conspiratorial wink and stepped back out into the sunshine, leaning like a tree over her heavy basket.

Sam passed over the paper for Dean to look at when he was done, small-typed with the latest on Congress irrelevances, and Jonah Freeman's new leatherworks opening on Mason Street, and up in Dakota Territory Wild Bill Hickock's dead body had been discovered turned into stone when they moved his grave. Reading that shook Dean with an eerie haunted feeling, and he put the paper down. Checked in on Bobby, fixed himself another coffee, and resumed being bored.

They cooked up sausages for lunch, and Dean set a plate in the back in the hope the smell would wake Bobby up. It did, but in no pleasant way. Dean dealt with the pail.

The waiting was no good for Dean; made him fidget, blood pumping without purpose. Sam seemed to be able to take any amount of inaction, sharpened his knives first and then stuck his nose in his favourite book, the handwritten one. In the afternoon Dean made excuses to go visit his girl; chatted with her some, apologised for not taking her out. He had to remain in hollering distance of the jail but he stayed away until the light failed, trudging back though the gloom as people parted around him, making bets with himself that if he could kick this rock under that porch then Bobby would finally be awake.

He wasn't. Nor was Jody, leaning back and snoring with her hat over her face. Sam was back to his cards. Dean had brought along his father's jacket that morning, and it had remained all day folded limp over the back of the chair where he had left it. Instead Sam was wearing a thinner canvas affair that fit him nicely, brought out the power in his shoulders, his arms.

Dean got pulled over there like a magnet. He perched at the corner of the desk and fiddled with a letter opener, watching Sam shuffle. A cheater's shuffle, Dean finally figured, one he'd never seen before, made for lamplight and shadows, and it brewed a kind of sad fog in his chest. This kid was gonna put his mind to everything. This kid was gonna make himself into as much a pariah as Dean. This kid was gonna ride into town after town and those people would never see him coming, and he would ride out straight out again and if he was lucky he wouldn't pick up a bullet in the back of the skull the first one or two times out.

He was a heartbreaker, all right.

Dean looked away, flipped the letter opener and caught it, once, twice.

“You always throw underhand?”

“Mostly.”

“I never learned that.” He shrugged a shoulder and Sam lay down the deck and squared them with his long neat fingers and tilted his head up at Dean with his eyes dark and his hair curling around
his ears. Dean's mouth went dry.

“You want me to show you?”

Hooves outside, and Dean jumped to his feet and turned away, burning, even his ears hot. Jody was at the window already, and from the look of her there was trouble outside.

It was Ellen Harvelle, driving an old flatbed wagon with a scatter of her ranch hands around her, that young and motley crew, Jo at her six on her little palomino with her hair flying and her rifle on her back. They pulled up at the Harvelle saloon. Jody swore and grabbed her gun off the stand on the wall.

“I'll go tell her not to force anything.”

“She listens to you?”

“Much as she listens to anyone.”

Dean stayed over by the window to watch her jog down, checked the rest of the street. A couple of Masters' men were milling on the porch of that saloon, drinking and watching too.

“You think Masters has to act against Bobby first?” Sam asked, still sitting, and Dean nodded, kept his eyes forward.

“We're still in peacekeeping mode here. Bobby's in his rights to take her down if she moves outright on Harvelle. That'll change when she feels strong enough to make it a matter of force.”

“Then why didn't she move before we got here to back Bobby up?”

Dean frowned. “Waiting for Walker, I suppose.”

“And this is about a land grab?” Sam said, scepticism clear in his tone.


“And to get to me, now they gotta go through you?”

Dean whirled. Bobby was sagging against the iron gate. Weak in body and still in that stained undershirt but his eyes were red-rimmed and present, and his suspenders were over his shoulders at least.

“Hey there, Bobby. How you seeing?”

“Clear enough.” Bobby looked back into the cells, scratching at his neck, searching for a memory. “We have a fight or something?”

“Or something.”

Bobby grunted and turned back to the drawers he was looking through earlier, pushing so that Sam had to scrape back several feet in his chair. Bobby ignored him, words directed down but aimed at Dean.

“And you're here for?”

“Want some coffee?”

“No.”

“Met him out west. Said he was getting paid to do a job here. Said it wouldn't be a problem. Only a drunken Sheriff to watch for.”

Bobby made like he didn't hear, grabbed a bottle and turned it upside down, tossed it away.

“You really wanna try that again?” Dean said, gently.

“That earlier was bourbon,” Bobby growled. “Bourbon never agreed with me. This Gordon Walker, he's working for Masters?”

“That's what he said.” Dean narrowed his eyes. “You know him?”

Bobby ignored the question. “And you came here why?”

Dean blinked, set back. Bobby had always been good to him, his wife even kinder in some ways. And it wasn't like he wasn't already blooded in this fight.

“Why wouldn't I? Bobby, when I heard about Karen--”

“Fuck's sake,” Bobby barked. Behind him Sam rose tall, face like a stone and Dean held out a hand to placate them both. Bobby leaned against the shelf, jabbed a finger down at the cabinet. “I had a bottle in here.”

“It's gone, Bobby. Sure you don't want a coffee?”

Bobby sent him a scornful look and patted down his pockets, turned around. “Where's my hat?”

“Here,” Sam said, and picked up a hat from the desk, tattered, mud flaking off it. Bobby frowned at him.

“Who are you?”

“We met last night and again this morning. This your hat?”

“It'll do,” he grunted, and grabbed at it.

“You won't get a drop at Harvelle's,” Dean warned, and Bobby pretended deafness again, shouldered past Dean to the door.

Sam came up in his wake and they stood there and tracked his progress down the street. He still had a drunk's shambling lean, not caring to duck around the people or horses in the street, not even noticing the buggy pulling up sharp in front of him with a rattle of wheels and a yell of horse and driver.

Sam shifted next to him. His face was hard and cold, any spark of warmth in him gone. Dean was sorry he'd seen Bobby so bear-headed.

“He ain't usually like this.”

“I guess.”

“He loved his wife. She was a good woman.”
Sam curled his lip. “Yeah, that's what does it.”

Dean sighed and looked away. He couldn't blame Sam. It had done it all right, taken Bobby straight on down into Masters' saloon like he was happy to end things right there, and damn any man or woman that relied on him.

The doors were still swinging behind him when a little gang reined up outside the saloon and dismounted. Four yammered and jostled; the fifth stood at the base of the steps and took a slow turn around, placid and confident. Dean jolted back into the darkness of the jail as that gaze made its way over to them, and swore under his breath.

There the man was, grim as a pebble forewarning a rockslide. Couldn't tell which route it would take down or where it was going to end up, but it was starting now and nothing could hold it back. The only sure thing was that they were in the way of it. Goddamn, he thought they'd have more time.

“That's Walker,” said Sam, as their new band of compadres went inside. No Walt or Roy. They'd obviously fallen short of Walker's expectations. A shame. Dean would've liked the advantage.

“It's Walker, all right,” Dean said, grim, and checked his holsters, stepped out on to the porch.

Sam snapped out a hand and grabbed Dean around the arm before he got to the street, pulled him back. “Wait.”

Dean tugged and couldn't get away. “The saloon's one thing but Sam, come on.”

“Trust me,” Sam insisted, fingers holding tight enough to leave bruises, keeping Dean without much evident effort as Dean pulled at him and seconds later, bare seconds it felt like although it must have been a minute or more, Dean was so keyed up thinking he'd hear guns, Bobby staggered out. He was bowed over, clutching a bottle like a baby. Not shot, Dean realised after a second of panic. And no blood. But wounded all the same.

He halted halfway to the jail when he noticed their eyes on him, and tried to unbend his spine.

“Don't you think you'd better get out of the middle of the street?” Sam called, heartless, and finally let Dean go. Bobby walked the rest of the way stiff-legged and precarious as a newborn foal, and the sun sank past the horizon as he did it. Dean massaged his arm where Sam had held him and tried not to take it as a sign.

They shifted apart to let him in and he collapsed into a chair and set the bottle on the table. Dean glanced at Sam, who was gone stern and forbidding again looking down on Bobby in his wreckage.

“They laughed at me,” Bobby ground out. His hand clenched into a fist on his leg. “Right in front of Masters. They laughed at me.”

“Aw, Bobby.”

“I miss her, Dean,” he said with a tremor, and rubbed at his eyes, and went back to glaring at the bottle.

“I know. I'm sorry,” Dean said, and hated himself, this thin useless offer of sorry that Bobby didn't even hear. He couldn't fix it. Couldn't turn back time, make anything better. It would never be better again.
It was only just now, getting Bobby back, that Dean was starting to see the full bleak shape of it: the devouring wound, so much of him eaten away.

What it might mean, Dean thought, to have someone so deep in you that losing them turned you inside out like that.

His heart knocked perilously against his ribs and his arm burned where it had been held and he looked over at Sam, not being able to help it, but Sam wasn't looking at him, or Bobby, or down at his hands. Sam was staring at the closed window shutters, pointed and alert as a hound.

Outside, a woman screamed.

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The crowd had spilled out of Harvelle's into the street already and Dean shoved through them to the hollow centre, trying to make sense of fractured shadows set swinging by lantern on the Harvelle porch.

A girl was dead in the mud. One of Harvelle's hands, he vaguely recognised. Jo kneeling by her head, smoothing her hair and whispering at her, fruitless, unheard. Dean was expecting to see a bullet hole in her head like the kid Max Miller but she was different. Dead without a shot, it looked like; a knife in the back, maybe, or a broken neck.

Another girl was crying, huge hysterical sobs, barely standing as Ellen Harvelle shook her by the shoulders.

“Hush, Ava. Ava!” Ellen drew back and slapped her. The crying stopped and she raised a thin trembling hand to her cheek, wide eyes on Ellen.

“What happened?”

“They killed Lily,” the girl wailed, disintegrating again, her fear splashing through the crowd, the other Harvelle hands pale and huddling in alarm. Jo looked up at the noise and noticed Dean, and her pretty face hardened. She'd liked him when she was younger, Dean recalled, giving him the eye whenever they crossed paths, back when her father was living and a drinking buddy of Bobby's. But then he'd gone and not died when she shot him.

“Hush,” said Ellen again to the crying girl, voice tight, and wiped at her face. “Where did they go?”

“Down there. Three men.” She pointed shakily down Main Street but it was too full of movement to track anything, people running up to poke their noses in, shitheels and respectables both. Ellen turned back to her.

“What men?”

“One had a, a bad leg. One was tall, the other a bit shorter I guess.” Her eyes dropped to the body. She moaned and Ellen gathered her up, hid the girl's face in her shoulder, gentle but for the stony look on her face, staring down at the dead hand.

“I'll find them,” Jo said, and stood, clutching her rifle.

“Joanna Beth Harvelle,” Ellen barked, and the girl in her arms flinched. What was the woman doing, in middle of a range war hiring such fragile creatures? Dean had always thought she was a better judge of character. “Don't you take another step. We need to get them back home.”
“She's right.” Bobby pushed by Dean. He'd put a coat on, musty and creased, and his gunbelt too. Dean searched Sam out; he was hanging back at the edge of the crowd, unmistakable even in shadow.

“Little late ain't you?” Jo sneered at Bobby. “You stop for a drink?”

“Give it a rest,” Dean snapped, and Jo glared at him, defiant over the body of the dead girl.

“All right I'm late,” said Bobby, voice dragged three miles over rocks and the same look in his eyes, dead serious, turning to Ellen. “Maybe too late. But think, woman. You die and that's the end of it. You can't be chasing around in the dark for a two-bit killer.”

“Mom,” Jo pleaded, and one of the hands hissed at her to shut up. Ellen's mouth tightened.

“I'll get those men,” Bobby said, never wavering from Ellen. “Give me an hour. You can wait that long to die?”

She held his eyes, some kind of silent conversation running between them; nodded, finally, firm, and fell to business.

“Help me, child,” she said, and handed Ava over to her daughter, who accepted the girl with rigid fury. Called out for one of her hands to fetch the wagon, threw a set of keys at her barkeep, who pushed through the milling crowd to the porch.

“Dean,” Sam said, low and urgent enough to carry through the melee, and Dean grabbed Bobby by the elbow and hauled him out. Jody stood next to Sam, out of breath, hanging from his shoulder. Sam already had his sawed-off out and loaded.

“Just ran three of Masters' men down in the church,” she panted, and then groaned, lagging behind as they took off, dodging through the oncoming flow down the other end of town.

They stopped in the alley that opened opposite the church, paired off on either side. The men were watching up on the roof, at bay like Jody said and ready for fire, taking cover and the high ground behind the parapet. The occasional guesswork shot puffed dust up by Dean's boots.

A tight spot. No way to pick them off from down on the ground, and if they weren't pressed they had a side escape and a back one too to get clean away. Dean pursed his lips, bumped his shoulder against Sam.

“Watch that door down the side, okay? Don't do anything stupid.”

Sam nodded, ducked around the corner into the shadow of the blacksmith's porch.

Dean looked over at the other two. Bobby was sagged against the wall and still recovering his breath, rifle stock balanced precarious on his thigh.

“Bobby, you ready? Jody, you cover that roof.”

Jody took the gun out of Bobby's hands, set herself up and made the bell ring. Curses came down at them and a couple more shots.

Bobby took off his hat and wiped his brow. Dean looked dubiously between the church and him. It was a good thirty feet of bare earth to the doors.

“Hey. Can you do this?”
Bobby glared at him and drew and took off running, gun up and shooting blind.

“Shit – watch yourselves!” Dean yelled over his shoulder and scurried after him, right into goddamn fire, Jody clanging that bell, giving them the best cover she could. But God, it seemed, was still a friend to drunks and children and they made it to the doors with no extra holes in them, diving through and thumping up against the low wall at the front of the nave.

Bobby holstered his first gun and took out his second. Still carrying those old Navy Colts which meant he was down to six shots, fucking reckless with his body and Dean's too and his ammunition on top of that. Dean cursed internally and took a glance around.

The place was the same as he remembered; virtually empty of cover. Whitewashed walls ghostly in the moonlight, the pews and the loft crossed with beams, the structure of the belltower and steps thumping as the men came down. No good for a standoff, not if you were on the ground. They had too much room to move up there, good angles on where Dean and Bobby were crouched.

Bobby lifted his hat off his head and showed the crown over the wall; nearly lost it, shots starting up, thunking chips out of the wall plaster.

Dean made himself small, threw a hymn book up and over and let them shoot at that too. Only two in the loft; the last still on the roof probably. These were Masters' men, not Walker’s, and no great shots, and not particularly smart neither. They all paused to reload at the same time, and Dean tugged at Bobby and darted down the aisle and threw himself between the pews. Bell still tolling above and Bobby was by Dean's feet but upright, in full sight like he'd gone plain crazy; shot a man dead eye as he stood up, blood painting the wall behind him.

Dean dragged Bobby down and there was more fire from outside: a .38, and a shotgun, both barrels. The sawed-off, Dean realised. The sawed-off, outside, and only one left upstairs–

He leapt the last pew and put the man down as he rose, and bashed his shoulder against the door. It flew open and ricocheted off the wall and nearly took him out as he stood there, searching for movement on the dark street.

Nothing.

“Sam!”

“Over here!”

Sam's voice came from around the corner; he was alone in the street when Dean got there, a target for anyone. He grabbed Sam by the shoulders and threw him back against the building and shook him a little.

Sam had the sawed-off out, smoke riling up the air.

“I said watch, not go around shooting people!”

“I hit him!”

“You hit him?” Dean looked around for a body.

“I hit the sign, the sign hit him. That's some fucking recoil!” Sam laughed, half at himself but still riding high, and his eyes were on fire and his hat was blown back to show his face flushed and perfect in the silver light of the moon.
“Good Lord,” Dean said, a little faintly. Sam clapped him on the arm and held him, fingers hooking in the fabric to pull it against Dean's skin, sway him in closer.

“You shaved,” Sam whispered, a statement of fact that had nothing to do with anything, and then he curled his mouth sheepish at Dean like he knew it sounded silly, both of them too giddy and this feeling on the verge of bolting, taking Dean with it right over the horizon.

Around that horizon hustled Bobby and Jody, and Sam dropped him finally, let Dean teeter a step or two away, reeling from the whiplash switch, the dead girl and the church and then this crazy kid standing here in the street shooting at buildings.

Bobby kicked the dirt next to the blacksmith's sign.

“How do you know you hit him?” Dean asked, and Sam arched an eyebrow at him.

“Well he was limping when he left.”

“He was limping when he got here!” Dean cried.

“Blood here,” Bobby called.

“Told ya.” Sam grinned at him.

“Told ya.” Sam grinned at him.

Dean shook his head and grinned back. “He still got away, you fool. He could be anywhere.”

“He's in that saloon,” Sam said, and pointed down the street with his gun arm, banged Dean with his elbow on the way back just to be able to do it. “Fool.”

He said it fond and warm like a brother or a lover might, and it knocked a storm through Dean's bones, baffling crash like thunder in his ears, all the air in him gone.

For fuck's sake. It was too much. Dean turned right around and ran an unsteady hand over his face, focused on where Sam had been pointing a hundred yards down Main Street. The night was far from over if that was where they had to go next. He had to get a hold of himself.

“Masters' place,” Jody said darkly. Bobby reset his hat and ambled back to them, checked the cylinder of that old relic of his and made a face, looked over his shoulder towards the saloon, the light and the faint jangle of the piano spilling out.

He looked twenty years older than when Dean had seen him four months ago; the night barely started and his hands trembling already. Dean put his hands on his hips and tried to convince himself it could be left to the morning.

“Bobby.”

“So help me boy,” Bobby snarled. “You ain't giving the orders around here until I'm dead and buried.”

“Sure thing, old man,” Dean said, and pulled the gun and the pouch out of his hands, sat on the porch and started reloading. Bobby faced the saloon again.

“Guess I'm gonna have to go in there after him.”

“You know who'll be in there don't ya,” Jody said.

“Well,” sighed Bobby, and rapped a knuckle on the star on his chest. “That's as it should be, if this
tin means a damn. There's two I gotta get, and they'll both be in there.”

“Two?” echoed Sam, come down now from his high and solid as ever. Dean had to crane his neck to see his face.

“The man who killed Harvelle's girl, and the woman who sent him to do it.”

“We don't know he killed Lily,” Sam said, and Jody squared off at him.

“You saying I can't see straight?”

“I'm saying you saw him run,” Sam said carefully. “That's what we know.”

“He's doing Masters' dirty work. He shot at us. Coulda killed you. That's enough for a firm word at least,” Dean said, and stood, and meant it to settle the affair and still he found himself looking to Sam for agreement. Sam searched his eyes, serious and direct with purpose now, and nodded.

“I'll go in the front,” Bobby said, and held out his hand for his gun. “Jody, you set up in the porch across the road, give the nod if they got men posted. Keep my back clear.”

“Watch it, the way your hand's shaking, watch that trigger.”

Bobby sighed and turned on her. “Don't you get on me, Jody.”

“I ain't started yet,” she said, and threw the rifle over her shoulder, jogged across the road.

“We should go in the front,” Sam said, and Bobby glared.

“Just who the hell are you again?”

Dean got a hand between them. “Wait a minute, Bobby. The man you're looking for got a bum leg.”

Bobby looked at Dean's hand and back up at Sam whose face was fixed and his spine straight, and then he switched to Dean, lips thinning, a keen edge to his eyes.

Dean had never taken anyone's side against Bobby, excepting Karen, and he'd sure never picked up a partner before and brought him along: especially one like Sam, who had more going on hour-to-hour than most folk had in a lifetime, who sung out special and strong and different. His heart sank. He had a friend, that was all. He had a new friend. It was allowed. It was expected in the course of things, something that every person got to have. Wasn't like it was Bobby's business in the first place but there they were, and Dean was facing down some kind of talk now Bobby was woke up and taking the world in again.

“You two come in at the back, and wait for my word,” is what Bobby stuck with just then, and turned away before they could say anything more.

“It shouldn't be him,” Sam said, unmoved, tall in the moonlight and severe as a blade. Dean reloaded from his belt and surveyed him through his eyelashes. What had happened to this kid, that he had such little forgiveness in him?

“They laughed at him, Sam,” Dean said. “Because his wife died. That makes a difference.”

Sam looked at him, crease between his eyebrows.

“Come on, fool.” Dean knocked his hand against Sam's chest, got them moving out of the street,
quick and swift, Sam at his heels without a wayward step.

The rear door of Masters' place pulled them up soon enough, handle refusing to turn. Dean swore and cast about for a makeshift crowbar; found a length of iron that was going to make plenty of noise breaking the lock but when he turned Sam was bending over the lock with a pair of slim metal sticks. His hands were neat and sure, and when the lock clicked through the air he threw Dean a small secret smile that was mostly in his eyes and swung the door open, crept in hunched over.

That incessant piano slapped Dean in the face and he was stuck to the ground for a second, watching Sam's back disappear into the room. Four weeks he'd known this kid, too clever and dark and close for his own good. Four weeks and a look like that and Dean couldn't picture time without him.

The storeroom was crowded with barrels and boxes and a ham hanging in the corner that Dean would bet was marked for one person only. As they got near the doorway all the chatter in the next room evaporated, clinking bottles and glasses stilled, only that piano continuing on unconcerned.

“What can I do for you, Sheriff?”

Masters' voice was as slinky and cold-blooded as Dean remembered. She had no accent that Dean could tell, and no human feeling either, besides a cruel knowing kind of amusement. He cracked the door and peered through.

The place was full, mostly men he didn't recognise, a few working women borrowed from the house down the street. Some were just locals looking for a payday or a thrill but she must have pulled in more bodies than just Gordon Walker and his four. She and the man of the hour himself were playing cards at the table closest to Dean, set up nice with a good view of the room but not reckoning on being flanked.

Bobby stood inside the doors, gun out and pointed at the ground; Jody's rifle notched under the chin of a man coming in behind. She shooed him off and he stumbled to a seat.

Bobby looked around, raised his voice over the music.

“I want two things, and there'll be no trouble if I get them. I want the man who came in here.”

“Nobody came in here lately 'cept a fat old Sheriff,” said one of Masters' men, big and blustery under an oversized moustache, sitting to her right. Gordon's hand, under the table, twitched towards his gun.

Dean stepped in and cocked his own, aimed centre chest.

“Hold your horses, Walker.”

If Walker was surprised he covered it well, looked up at Dean with the same easy confidence he'd had in the cantina. “You decided to throw your lot in with them, I see.”

“Never figured it any other way.” Dean gestured for Sam to come in and regretted it when Walker's smile got wider in recognition, like he was happy to see the kid, like he'd expected nothing less of either of them. Sam stared him down expressionless, kept his shotgun trained on the table.

“Your man is right,” Bobby said, raising his voice, looking hard around the room. “I'm still Sheriff, and have been since half of you was crawling.” Any locals cast their eyes down; not enough, Dean knew, feeling the violence pulse against the walls, press the window glass and beat
back towards him. It could easily go either way. “You said nobody came in?”

The big man puffed up his chest.

“I said so, didn't I?”

Sam checked the faces in the room and shook his head at Bobby, who sucked his teeth and looked over to the piano by the bar. The man thumping the keys had dark stains of sweat on his shirt, face red and pressurised.

“Elmer, you're playing a lot of sour notes on that piano there.” The man nodded and swallowed and kept on sweating. “You don't look too happy.”

“I'm certainly not, Sheriff.”

“Anyone might be standing behind that piano,” Bobby said conversationally, “has got one chance to get his hands in the air.”

Elmer threw himself onto the ground and the man behind shot blind through the wood, at his friends and all; Dean and Bobby returned it and he fell out, amidst the spraying splinters and the deep mournful twang of the strings. Dean walked over and kicked the gun out of his hand; but he was dead as dust.

Getting shot at by their buddy had calmed the room somewhat, and people kept their hands out in the open when Dean looked around. Masters hadn't flinched. She was dressed up tight in duck-egg blue, demure neckline and her hair pinned tidily like that would fool anyone. Her mouth was red, curled flirting-like and unbothered. Not the way a woman should look who'd just had one of her men shot dead at her feet, who had a gun or two winking at her. It wasn't a good sign.

Bobby turned his attention back to the table. “You said nobody came in here.”

“Well,” said big boy, nervous under his mustachio now.

“Didn't you, laughing boy?”

“Come on now, Sheriff,” he said and stood awkwardly, showing his palms.

“Let me hear you laugh.”

Big boy looked at Masters for help and she lifted one shoulder in a delicate shrug.

“Come on, laugh!” Bobby snatched the rifle out of Jody's hands and rammed the stock into the man's stomach. He doubled over yawling and his knees hit the ground. Bobby didn't even watch him go down, fixed on Masters now, clutching the gun white-knuckled, red in the face like Dean had never seen him get, overcome.

“You thought I was pretty funny too, didn't you? You feel like having another laugh? It's the same drunken Sheriff, the same hat, the same outfit, why don't you laugh?”

She pushed herself up from the table slowly, eyes boring into Bobby's, that smile still on her lips.

“You thought I was pretty funny too, didn't you? You feel like having another laugh? It's the same drunken Sheriff, the same hat, the same outfit, why don't you laugh?”

She pushed herself up from the table slowly, eyes boring into Bobby's, that smile still on her lips.

“Your clothes are the least laughable thing about you, Sheriff.”

He slammed her with the rifle across her nose. Her head snapped back and she hit the wall.

“Bobby!” Dean yelled, starting forward, but she was still on her feet, wiping at her face, fishing a
handkerchief from her pocket.

“You're under arrest,” Bobby growled.

She looked at Walker.

“You just going to sit there?”

“Not much I can do right now is there, Miss?” Walker said, and to Dean's surprise grinned at her, like he was enjoying her pain.

She pulled her handkerchief away from her face and looked at the stains with a foreigner's curiosity. She was still bleeding, and when she spoke she sent tiny droplets into the air.

“Well I guess I'll see you soon, Gordon.”

Walker touched the brim of his hat. Bobby scowled and pointed the rifle around the room.

“She'll be the first thing dead if you try anything at all. I want you out of town by morning. All of you, you hear? And I want you at the front of that column, Walker.”

Bobby took her wrist and she went serenely, skirts swaying. She smiled as she passed, big eyes on Sam and her red-white teeth showing, making Sam step back, startled. Dean couldn't blame him.

She seemed more dangerous like this with guns on her and her face bloodied than four months ago when she'd stood in safety on her porch with her gang around her, asking Dean to murder his friend for money.

Her looking at Sam all knowing and coy made him see red himself, itching to step between them. Couldn't do that to the kid, though, so he settled for kicking his boot to Sam's and covering the retreat through the door. Jody followed up last, backed through with her .45s out, and Sam unhitched a mare out the front and walked her along as well for extra cover, as the saloon porch started groaning with bodies. The street was filling with menace too, men glowering tough now they weren't under direct threat.

The only friendly-looking face shining their way was Walker's. He came down the steps easy as a king, and tipped his hat to see them off.

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They locked the door behind them, Jody and Sam setting up at the windows. Bobby and Dean took her straight through the gate into the cells, turned the key on her there and then for good measure Bobby fetched a chain and locked that around the bars as well. Dean wet down a cloth and threw it, and she caught it out of the air and wiped daintily at her face.

He stood there with Bobby and watched her turn slowly, looking up at the ceiling, examining the floors.

“Interesting arrangement, Singer,” she said, and Dean felt Bobby suppress a flinch. Got the feeling too that he wanted to look at Dean and was suppressing that as well. She was getting to him, Dean realised. The night was hitting him hard, cheeks sunken and grey now the anger was gone.

“One more word and I'll gag you,” Bobby growled, and she pouted and backed away, busied herself repinning her hair, wiping at her face again. This cell had probably never seen someone so fancy; rich cloth of her dress and coat and her skin so clean and pale, where it wasn't swelling across the bridge of her nose or blackening under her eyes. That smile was back and she blinked at
them slow as a lizard.

No way was Walker leaving by morning like Bobby warned, Dean thought. Hell, maybe this was all part of their game.

Bobby stepped over to the basin and threw some water over his face.

“Well, we got away with it,” he muttered, and Dean went to him, kept his voice kind and quiet.

“You did good, Bobby.”

“I didn't do good.” He scrubbed at his face with a towel and that brought some colour back to him, a hard look to his eyes that was more familiar to Dean. “I was just too mad to be scared and too sick to worry about it.”

“I know that.”

“Next time's not gonna be so easy.”

There wasn't gonna be a next time, Dean could have told him, but figured he knew already. Harvelle and Masters had been sitting on the fire for half a year now, and Walker's presence and the dead girl was gonna boil them right over.

What he couldn't figure was how it was gonna happen. Harvelle senior was in danger; that'd end it, if the law didn't care. A knife in the night or deviousness, a woman's poison maybe. But a firefight, even with all those guns Masters had brought in? Dean couldn't picture it.

Sam was right to be unhappy with putting this down to a land grab. It was too nasty and muddy for that, too sideways. Too much rang wrong.

And then there was the kid Max Miller, and all the lingering perversity of that affair, that Dean had dismissed as being memory tainted by fever dreams and guilt, sending it away to haunt his nightmares.

Four months ago and three miles down the creek Dean had stood in front of that kid as he bled from his belly, Dean's slow-killing bullet in there, spitting pale despairing prophecies at Dean like he had already seen the other side. And Dean's gun had been raised without anyone's hand to it, muzzle to the kid’s forehead.

Somehow, Max Miller had shot himself, and died; and somehow, Dean had survived the bullet that came for him an hour later. None of this was right or normal.

“Bobby,” he said, took him by the elbow and pulled him away into the cell furthest from Masters and leaned in, voice low. “What happened to Karen?”

Bobby made a deep wounded noise, hoarse and involuntary.

“She – she had a fit. She killed Roy LeGrange when he came to help. I had to – I had to put her down.”

“Bobby, no,” Dean said, dismayed.

Bobby set his jaw and blinked fiercely down at his boots. “I had to.”

Dean shook his head, dread crawling in his stomach.
“Bobby,” he said, dropping his voice further to a whisper. “You ever get the feeling there's more to this than cattle and water?”

Bobby jerked back and stared at him. A laugh floated out from across the way.

“Why don't you ask your boy, Dean?”

Three long steps and he was in front of her, one hand dropped to his gun and the other jabbing at her. “The man said to hold your tongue.”

She was as satisfied as she'd been in her own saloon, stepped forward with a slink and toyed with the links of the chain wound through the bars, looked up at him through her eyelashes, long as a doe's.

“There're a lot of things you'd like to ask him, aren't there, Dean? And more than ask?”

Dean flushed, ears burning. Bobby off to his right and Sam probably listening in on the other side of the gate.

“You hold your tongue or you'll lose it.”

She ran that tongue across her teeth and bared them at him a little. “Don't you just want to--” She hummed a breathy little moan that turned his stomach, made his vision swim, his hand tighten on his gun. “Get inside him and see what makes him tick?”

“I'm just looking out for him,” he said, breathless, through the churning exposed feeling sitting in his throat, his guts. She pouted and nodded, mocking understanding.

“So chivalrous. So innocent.”

“Who are you?”

“Who?” she whispered, and his brain buzzed and he searched her dead dark eyes and leaned in and hissed.

“What are you?”

She arched a coy eyebrow but didn't want to answer questions it seemed, only poke at him, dig in wherever he was raw and shamed. She faded backwards, smoothed her skirts to sit graceful and neat on the cot. Checked her fingernails. They were red, like a high-priced whore's. Like a puma's.

He grit his teeth and swallowed hard, turned around. Unlocked his fingers from his gun and readied himself for Sam's gaze.

But Sam wasn't there to overhear anything. Dean stepped through the gate and looked, but it was just the one bare room, desks and Jody watching through the shutters. Vanished. Dean's voice rose in alarm.

“Where's Sam?”

“Who is this kid?” Bobby asked, coming through and shutting the gate behind him.

“He ain't a kid. Where is he?”

“He ran across to the stable,” said Jody. “Said he saw someone pointing a gun.”
"A gun?" Dean's heart thumped in panic. "You didn't stop him?"

Jody glared at him. "It's called lookout, kid, you heard of it? He'll be fine."

"Goddammit Jody!" Dean checked his Colts, reloaded the spent shots from the saloon and reholstered, grabbed a rifle for good measure.

"Dean!" Bobby barked. "Who is he?"

Dean flexed his fingers around the rifle. "He was hunting the men who killed his pa. One of them was in Walker's employ. That's how I met him. I brought him along, he wanted to help. Okay?"

"That all you know about him?"

Dean got a sudden boiling feeling again like he needed to step in front of Sam and Sam wasn't even there. "What are these questions about?"

Bobby stepped in close and looked at the floor, sighed and resettled his hat, took his goddamn time replying when Dean needed to get out of there and start looking.

"You like the kid, I can tell that." Bobby's voice was guarded but he was trying to be kind and it just made Dean madder, jaw clenching around how little he needed any kindness or protection from this man, who wasn't Dean's boss or father or teacher or anyone really that he owed any explanation to. "And that's...fine. For now. But there's more to this story than you know and I ain't settled on his part in it yet."

"He ain't gonna be a problem," Dean snapped, and Bobby looked at him grave.

"Well if he is I guess he's your problem."

That was the truest thing that anyone'd said to Dean in an age and it got pretty deep inside Dean pretty quick. He pressed his lips closed and nodded sharp, swung the rifle over his shoulder.

"The stable you said, Jody?"

"Yeah," she said, and he was reaching for the door when someone thumped on it from the other side, called Dean's name muffled through the wood.

Dean wrenched the door open. Sam was standing there with Jo Harvelle, his gun to the small of her back, her rifle in his other hand. She looked about three times as angry as she usually did, nostrils flaring and furious colour over the points of her cheekbones.

Dean knew his jaw was hanging open but he couldn't help it. There was hay in her hair, and a bright red handprint across Sam's cheek.

He laughed, high with shock and relief and absurdity, and they both scowled at him.

"Jo," Dean said, and stepped back, letting them in. Thankfulness had him now, and he was grinning wide at them, stoking their joint indignance. "Never thought someone would get the drop on you."

"Can I have my gun back?" She held out her hand and Dean inclined his head. Sam gave it over.

"Just who were you fixing to shoot there, Miss Harvelle?" Bobby asked, stern.

"The moon. Who you think?"
“Last time I checked, the law still stood in Eldorado.”

Jo sniffed, brushed her hair down, picking the hay out, and turned all sweet and big-eyed placid. “Would it be all right if I saw her? Talked to her.”

“Sure thing,” said Bobby. “Just hand over that gun again.”

Jo shifted. “Never mind.”

“Jo,” Dean said. “Let us run things here. If things are all this bad your mother needs you on the home front. Might be they’ll come for her next.”

Jo cast a sidelong look at him and addressed Bobby. “You think you can hold her?”

“She's locked up and chained up,” Jody said.

“Bobby Singer,” Jo said, and stared at him hard. “You think you can hold her?”

“I reckon we can. Unless you know something I don't?”

She didn't answer, and he leaned harder, unconscious patronising tone in his voice that Dean could tell him was just going to make things worse. “Maybe you ladies should trust me. We're getting down to it now, and it's a killing game, girl.”

She sneered at him.

“I know that, Sheriff. I've been here. Where have you been?”

Bobby went white and Jody jumped in and grabbed her about the arm, let her thrash and try to get free.

“Come on, you little hellion,” Jody said, and opened the door and dragged her through, each of them cussing at the other as they tripped off the porch onto the road.

Dean followed them out and took in the street, Sam by his elbow, inching further and further from the jail to lean on the railing. Down at Masters' saloon the men were drifting and mounting up or stumbling away, shadowy as the light from inside dimmed. Shutting up early without the boss there. It made Dean uneasy, not to have them centralised and drinking themselves out of action.

Bobby joined them, checking his pocket watch.

“I tell you boys one thing, we are on the back foot here. This night ain't over.”

“You think Walker is going?” Sam asked, and Dean shook his head.

“A man like him will never run.”

“Well don't speak it too loud,” Bobby muttered, and stared back through the door toward the cells for a minute. “Say, why don't you two take a turn around town.”

“Be careful of her,” Sam said, frowning back through the door as well.

“Bobby,” Dean said, reluctant, and Bobby shot him a winking look through that untrimmed beard and wild hair that was almost like his old self, calm and steady and the kind of man anyone would want at their back. He took a few steps and grabbed Dean's hat off the desk and slapped it into Dean's chest.
“Ah, the deputy'll be back soon, she won't let me get into too much trouble. Go on, kick those men down the road if they start lingering. And tidy up that church if you can. I got a list of sins long enough in that preacher's eyes already.”

“Think about what I said, Bobby.”

“Come on, Dean,” Sam said, already on the road like he was itching to get clear of the jail. Dean bowed his head, and put on his hat, and headed over to meet him.

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“You eaten anything?”

“Hmm?” Sam said. They had sent off the last two men hanging about outside the saloon. Watched them trot past town limits and gave the nod to a couple of busybody crones up past their bedtime, glaring at them through a window, clutching their shawls. Heading down towards the church now, Sam had gone quiet, mind off with the sprites and fairies. “Have I--”

“Didn't think so.” Dean fished out the jerky he'd smuggled away into his jacket, unwrapped it from the cloth.

Sam stopped in his tracks and stared at him. Dean raised his eyebrows.

“What?”

Sam just shook his head, grabbed a stick and stuck it in the corner of his mouth, started gnawing. Dean ate some himself and tried to get a handle on his thoughts. Outside again under the moon, ticking toward midnight and the town dead quiet, last lights doused and the dirt of Main Street crunching under their boots. Crickets buzzing and an owl or two, too much silence for peace, to quiet all the things rattling around uneasy in Dean's mind: Masters and Miller, Bobby and Sam.

Dean drank from his flask and passed it over. Jo's handprint had faded, he was sorry to see.

“She got you pretty good, huh?” Dean tried a smile; an effort spent in vain. Sam swung back around into that simmering anger.

“That girl ever shoot anybody in the front?”

Movement between houses. Dean stopped and watched; just a rat, but it gave him a chance to school his face. He'd opened the door and now those rotten old thoughts were snaking in, testing the air and finding it rich.

“She had cause, Sam.”

Sam took a drink and wiped his mouth, frowning. “What cause could she possibly have?”

“She thought I was in with Masters,” Dean said, and started off again, hands shoved into his pockets. “It ain't worth talking about.”

“She nearly killed you and y'all just let her walk around free and it ain't worth talking about?”

Dean shook his head. It wasn't like that. Her friend was dead. He'd seen a hundred and more deaths over the years, and he knew a good death from a bad one and that had been a bad one all right. It was only fair. Someone had to care when a person dies. There had to be someone left to say words.

“I shot her friend.” He put his hand across his face, pressed thumb and finger to his temples. “And
don't tell me you never heard of hunting down a man for something like that.”

Sam’s eyes bored into the side of his head. Why’d you shoot him, Dean waited to hear, regret coming for him, a patient stalking wolf, water splashing up under its paws. Why'd you go and shoot a defenceless kid.

Sam took another drink and muttered something to himself that Dean didn't rightly process, starting to haze over on the memory. Tying the body on the back of his girl, dripping all down the long road back to the ranch. She must have been caked with blood by the end of that woebegotten day. Who had washed her down, with Dean half dead and screaming? Who had said to the world, let the nobody live, and let Max Miller die scared and far from his friends?

“He was just a stupid kid,” Dean said, and cracked, hoarse and sorry and now Sam here probably thinking of all he’d heard of Dean Murphy, kid-killer, black-eyed roving gun, no home, no place, no kin or good standing. Oh, Christ. “Stupid fucking kid. I never meant to Sam, I swear. He just jumped up yelling on top of that rock and I was watching for an ambush, I'd just refused Masters, I was just too hair-triggered, I didn't mean to. If I'd seen him proper--”

“On top of a rock?” Sam said, abrupt, frozen a few feet behind Dean and Dean turned, startled.

“What?”

Sam frowned like a memory was coming to him and put an unconscious hand over his belly, two hands like he was holding in the blood and pain and every beating cell in Dean petrified, staring at that with Max Miller's groans echoing through him. When Sam reached out with one of those hands Dean flinched away, half expecting to see blood dark dripping in the moonlight. Sam grabbed for him again, earnest, locked strong fingers around his wrist.

“Dean, no. You didn't kill him. Don't put that on yourself.”

“Sam,” he whispered, not able to say anything else.

“Your gun maybe,” Sam insisted, eyes wide, “and your bullet first. But the one in his head--”

Dean recoiled, snatched his arm free, stumbling back. “How do you know that?”

Sam crashed out of that pleading look and into confusion, slowly drained into stark white dismay. His hand, uncertain between them, dropped, and his eyes, and his voice.

“Jesus.” He was back to clutching his belly, no remembrance of bleeding now but surging nausea, gulping it down. He looked around the street with changed eyes, aghast; looked at Dean, deathly pale, and snapped into a cold rageful snarl, face twisted, thundering.

“Who sent you?” He closed the distance between them quicker than Dean could react, fisted the front of Dean's shirt and hauled him up on his toes. Dean flailed and jerked his head away from the vicious threat in Sam's voice. “Why'd you bring me here?”

“You followed me!” Dean howled, and shoved at him, kicked him in the shin and that woke him out of his fury, broke him down into catastrophe, the line of his mouth fracturing. He dropped Dean and spun away, reeling.

Dean called his name; and again as he stumbled away. No sign he'd been heard. He fixed his shirts and jacket where they had been wrenched out of place and got his heart under control, gave the kid a good fifty foot head start to the church and kicked himself on after.
Dean wasn't smart, not like Sam or Bobby or Cassie. Never had more than three years' schooling and never won a prize for anything more than shooting the pip out of an ace of spades but he had his instincts and he wasn't blind or deaf: Bobby wasn't telling him the whole story. There was, as well, Harvelle and her strays disguised as ranch hands, and Karen's madness. And what he'd seen himself: Max Miller's unthinkable death and the foulness in Masters, whatever its nature, whatever kind of creature she was.

There was more to this than some rancher dispute. More to this than anything seen on a fine clear day, that let itself be known to the good and proper people of the world. A glimpse of it now and it seemed like something Dean had been walking around the edges of his whole life. On the outside looking in and coloured by it all the same, the stories that stuck to him, bad luck and disharmony in his life like an evil eye.

And inside treading deeper, there was Sam Winchester, straight and tall under a formless weight, carrying it alone.

The church was quiet and grey when Dean came in through the side door he'd banged out of only an hour earlier. Dust settled now and the bell quiet. Sam was already up in the loft, fallen into a black internal racket, face blank, movements careful and controlled and the air around him somehow tight with roiling thought and worry.

It was a job to get the men down the stairs, Sam holding their ankles and Dean's hands under their shoulders, their heads lolling back to point at the ground, tacky with blood. They laid them out in the vestry and Dean unbuckled their gun belts and hooked them on the stand, cheap and unfancy. If they had sons, their guns should go back to their boys. Dean didn't know these men; didn't know if they were even from town. It was Masters' responsibility to tell their people, but Dean doubted she cared.

Sam had left the room. He was sitting on a pew; studied his hands in silence a while, looked up at the stained glass window. Maybe he was a religious man, Dean thought. Never caught him praying but for plenty of men it didn't work that way. The moon was on the windowside and shone through and some of the colour hit Sam's face faintly, just the barest blush, the rest of everything dim and faded. Or maybe that was just Sam.

Dean turned away and pulled the raggedy altar cloth from its place on the shelf. Trudged upstairs to wipe down the blood and brain, came back and covered the men with it. It was a bad job poorly done. Needed a bucket and a scrubber, and he hoped there was no service in the morning. Dean hadn't spent a whole lot of time in churches over the last ten years but it still felt wrong to leave that mess upstairs and these bodies in the vestry.

“Maybe we oughta grab a sled,” Dean called through the doorway, looking down at them, scrubbing his hands against his pants. It took Sam a while to say anything.

“You ever come across someone who can dream true things, Dean?”

Dean stilled, felt a hush float through and settle over everything, the pews and his breath and the mouse whispers in the walls and time. Sam returned to staring at his hands, side-on to Dean, finely carved and glowing like a statue very far away.

“I've come across people who said they did, but that's not the same thing.”

Sam chewed on his cheek. “I should never have come. I knew it. I knew it was too good. I knew it.”
“What's that mean?”

Sam raised his head and watched him for long enough that Dean shifted uncomfortably. What he was seeing, Dean didn't know. Tired faded ignorant gunslinger with blood on his hands.

“I dreamed about you,” Sam said, eyes in dark shadow. Dean swallowed past the knot in his throat.

“Me?”

“I never saw your face.”

“What does that mean?” he repeated, but Sam turned his gaze back to the front of the church, the cross there. His voice was empty.

“I thought when I killed Hagen that I was done. I did my grieving. I did my penance. But it's never going to be done. I can't get away from it because it's in me.”

He broke on those last words like they were tearing their way out and taking flesh with them, and Dean took a few long strides to him and grabbed his shoulder. Squeezed until Sam turned his anguished face up to Dean, and then squeezed harder, took his shoulders in both hands so that Sam would have no choice but to hear.

“Maybe I ain't known you long, Sam Winchester,” he growled. “But let me tell you something, and listen up. There's nothing wrong with you. Anything strange you think you got going on, I guess that's your affair to speak of when you like. But don't you go around thinking you're no good because I've seen no good, hell I am no good, and you ain't that.”

Shock on Sam's face and his lips parted with a breath that Dean felt like he'd made it himself. He rose to his feet and it pushed Dean away from him, a step back from something big growing in Sam, the storming look in his eye, but stepping back was just an invitation for Sam to come closer, and he crowded Dean against the wall and pinned him there without even touching him.

“I'm a murderer,” Sam said. Dean licked his lips and saw Sam's eyes flick down. It set up a tremble in him, terrified and expectant.

“You ain't alone in that.”

“I'm unnatural.” He said this firm and dark, but this was the big one, Dean knew by now, and he didn't hesitate.

“As you say.”

Sam shook his head, mystified look on him that Dean was starting to recognise, that he got whenever Dean had a nice word or deed for him, and he put his hand to Dean's chest that Dean felt through every layer of cloth and skin he had and right into his bones, huge and burning. Sam pressed him harder into the wall and looked him slowly up and down and it set Dean on fire almost, knees weak and breath stolen.

“I'm no good for you,” Sam said, voice plunged so forbidding and slow and deep it sounded like a threat turned around into a promise.

Too much to bear. His head tilted back and knocked against the wall and he looked at Sam from half-closed eyes and Sam made a noise and ducked to Dean's neck and sniffed, heat blasting off him. Dean went near insane.
“Dean,” Sam sighed, hot and drawn out with longing, goosebumping the skin of Dean's neck, and his other hand was at the front of Dean's trousers, heel of his palm running so perfect along where Dean was filling up hard and necessary and there were hoofbeats outside, thundering sound that Dean figured was his heart for the first second. Hoofbeats and the first gunshot and he pushed at Sam's shoulder, and Sam kept touching him, greedy, solid and immoveable as the wall at Dean's back.

“Sam,” he said, hoarse, and shoved, and Sam stumbled back, dazed, mouth open. Dean's knees wouldn't lock but he made it to the door, head swimming and half bent over himself, where Sam's hand had been, Christ. He clutched the doorknob to keep himself upright.

Outside in the road was a gang bearing down on him, hollering and shooting the air. Walker was in the lead, and in the moonlight Dean saw his gun come down and point at Dean's chest, and Dean thought that here was that death come for him after all, and he hadn't finished his job, he hadn't had time.

Something huge walloped him in the back and he flew off the road, landed in the dirt twenty feet away winded, stunned and gasping and in the doorway of the church Sam emerged out of the gloom with his arm outstretched and his nose bloody. His wide eyes terrified on Dean and the dust of a bullet floating down from the wall by his head.

Walker and his gang were galloping towards the jail, disappearing around the corner. All of this happening faster than Dean could process, shots starting up again away where he couldn't see, Jody's old boomer.

Sam was bent over clutching his head. Blood on the dirt in front of him and the fear that hit Dean at that sight was like getting punched again, snapping him towards Sam just as fast as he got thrown.

“Are you shot, are you shot.” He pulled Sam's hands away, lifted his chin. Sam's face screwed up in pain and bloody, but just from his nose. Dean wiped him leaving smears that looked black in the moonlight.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry.”

“Sam, are you shot?”

“I ain't shot, go,” Sam said, and pushed him feebly towards the jail. He wouldn't look at Dean.

“Go.”

“Follow me,” Dean said and Sam pulled his head away, eyes searching the space around Dean. Dean gripped his jaw harder and spoke as fierce and strong as he ever had in his life. “Don't you go fuckin anywhere but that jail Sam, you hear me.”

Sam closed his eyes a beat and Dean thought he felt a nod and he had to take that, tear away with every misgiving an arrow through him, and run back to the jail, lungs burning and airless. When he rounded the corner there was blood there too, and a horse thrashing on the ground, hooves and stirrups flying, its rider broken and Bobby on the ground as well, clutching at his leg where Jody was tying her bandana around.

The horse staggered upright and fled, taking an off centre kick at Jody that she threw herself away from.

Bobby was cussing and adrift and Dean had to pretty much carry him inside, almost going down
twice when the man tried to hold his own weight. Jody shuttered the windows while Dean laid Bobby down on a cot in the empty cell furthest from Masters. She made a muffled pleased noise as they passed and he looked over to see her gagged and hand-tied, eyes widening like she was having fun, unconcerned for dignity or freedom at such a fundamental level that Dean was incapable of contemplating it right then. He put her out of mind.

Jody brought a lamp back there. The bandana around Bobby's thigh was soaked and his face was wet with sweat and too pale under that scraggly beard. He kept trying to stand, cursing Walker and Jody and the sight of Dean's face and Dean hovered over him vainly, pushing him back to the bed, stern words to lie the fuck down belying the hysteria infecting him too. He didn't know what to do. He'd patched himself up plenty of times in the field but never once pulled a bullet out of someone else, not one so lethal.

He looked over at Jody desperately and she mirrored him, mouth drawn.

“Boil some water, Jody,” Bobby grit, waking up a little, clutching at Dean now instead of pushing him away.

“Already got the kettle on.”

“Bobby, lie down dammit,” Dean said, and then a sound at the gate behind them and he had his Colt out with a scrape of leather and snick of the hammer, pointing thoughtless at Sam and that unnerved him more than all the rest of it, like Max Miller all over again, so close, so close.

Sam faced down his gun without a flinch and took in the scene, shoulders as broad as the gateway it seemed. Dean thumbed off the hammer and reholstered, shaking, as Sam stepped in and came down to kneel at Bobby's side. He clapped Dean on the arm as he passed and his hand felt huge, momentous.

He looked Bobby up and down and gingerly untied the bandana, felt underneath Bobby's thigh. It wasn't so bad as Dean was fearing, no heartbeat pulsing wet.

“I think the artery's untouched,” Sam said. “I can get this bullet out, but it's gonna hurt.”

Bobby looked at Dean and Dean nodded and grabbed a table, and Jody brought the kettle over, poured it into a basin and set some clean bandages by it, and the sewing kit.

“I've been hurt before,” Bobby said, and grimaced.

“You won't be able to drink.”

“Get it over with,” Bobby snarled, and Sam pulled an oilcloth from the inside of his jacket, unrolled it to reveal those lockpicking sticks. He laid their ends in the basin.

“You got any clean cold water?”

Jody shook her head, and Sam looked at Dean.

“Your flask?”

Dean set it on the table as Sam took a knife from a sheath on his belt, not his throwing one but a different one, etched with strange-looking letters that Dean didn't recognise and honed to a wicked gleaming edge.

Bobby maybe did recognise some of the writing, and he looked hard at Sam. “I suppose I asked
this before, but who in hell are you?"

Sam gave him a brief smile and set the knife against the seam of Bobby's trousers, slit through the cloth easy as butter.

“I suppose I told you before, but maybe it didn't stick. Sam Winchester, at your service.”

Bobby jolted up on his elbows and Sam jerked the knife away, rocking back on his heels. “Goddammit, boy, what is this?”

Sam frowned at him and some kind of look flew between them that Dean couldn't get a handle on.

“What?” he said, hackles rising.

“You knew my father,” Sam guessed, and Bobby stared at him, shook his head like something was trying to tumble loose in there.

“That's okay,” Sam said, conversationally, unscrewing the flask and washing down Bobby's leg. Bobby flinched, and Dean grabbed his ankle, stretched his leg out flat. The wound emerged, neat and round and still trickling blood, and Sam felt the skin around it and nodded to himself. “He drank with a lot of men and cheated more at the table. He cheat you, Bobby?”

“I never met—son of a b**ch**!” Bobby started, and howled, as Sam went in with the sticks and pulled the bullet, washed the wound down again with Dean's drink and let it bleed.

Jody passed him the needle already threaded.

“You ever done that before?” she asked, quiet, and Sam smiled up at her, grim and tired-looking now, pinched around the eyes.

“I've read about it, and seen it done.”

Bobby went under during the stitching, eyes rolling back and falling limp mid-curse. Just a few knots, neat as if Dean had done them himself, and then they cleaned him up and settled him as comfortable as they could, dimmed the lamp by his head and headed back into the main room.

Sam washed his hands and Dean leaned against the desk with a sigh and a huge cracking yawn, his whole body gone to aches and pains now that he had a moment to worry about them.

“They gonna try that again?” Sam asked, scrubbing at his face with a cloth. Dean puzzled at the question through the fog that was settling down on him.

“Not that,” he said, and knuckled at his eyes, scraped his palm on his stubble. “We pushed back hard enough. But there's gonna be something else. They think they got the upper hand now, and they sure ain't gonna wait for the Marshal to come.”

“Can we go for them?”

“Go where?” Jody checked her guns. “With Masters here, they might not even be up at Cold Oak.”

“So we just wait?”

“That's about the sum,” Jody said, and sighed. “And one of us ought to be down at Harvelle's too, and thinking about who's least likely to be shot I reckon that's me.”

“I don't give any guarantees with them lot,” Dean said.
Jody threw him a wry glance and hitched her gun over her shoulder, looked over to the cells for a long heavy moment, resignation in her eyes. “I don't know about you boys, but I ain't getting paid enough for this.”

“She’ll come back safe and we’ll start talking about a union.”

She snorted, and nodded back there. “Don't let him do anything stupid.”

“I'll knock him out again first chance I get,” Dean promised, and levered himself upright and locked the door behind her, tracked her through the window as she ran lightfoot around to the stalls.

He closed the shutter and yawned again, stretched his back out.

“Let me look at it,” Sam said, from over by the cabinet in the corner, packing away the bandages. Dean sighed. This again.

“Sam, I'm tired.”

“Come on, Dean.” His face was set but soft for all that. “It took a hard hit before.”

Dean drained his flask instead of answering, spun the cap back on and turned it in his hands, working the taste in his mouth, trying to figure how to say it. His back didn't need any looking at. That bullet was between him and Max Miller and whatever chance at reparation the world might see fit to send Dean's way.

“Fool,” Sam said, sweet and exasperated. “Come here.”

Dean took off his gun belt as he went, laid it on the desk and stopped a foot in front of Sam, who leaned and dragged the lamp closer, turned it up to get more sluggish glow through the soot-stains. He stood at Dean's side and pushed at his shoulders until Dean bent forward a little, braced his hands on the cabinet shelf with his face turned away, cheeks burning and a shiver setting up where Sam was pulling at his jacket and shirt, baring his skin to the air.

Sam made a noise and touched a gentle cold finger to the scar. It turned Dean inside out with a violence he was unprepared for, throttling any even or seemly thought or feeling he had, a roar in his head, his heart pounding like it was trying to escape his chest.

“I see. No, maybe I could do this,” Sam murmured. “But not here. Not without more research. I'd rather take you to a surgeon.”

His thumb brushed across the bump of Dean's spine.

“I'll take you to the city,” he said, voice low and hot, and what was in the city Dean wanted to ask, what can you do there, and then the whole big spread of his hand was pressing on to Dean's skin and rucking his clothes up his back and Dean choked and wrenched away, shoving at his shirts, trying to catch his breath.

Sam took a pale wavering step backwards, stricken, hands digging into his pockets like he could make himself smaller.

“Sorry. I'm sorry. I'm – tired. I'm not thinking. I shouldn't have.”

Dean tucked his shirt back in clumsy and mindless. His heart was going like a stampede, shaking the ground under him and raising dust to put dirt in the sky, upending the world. He rested his
weight back against the cabinet and shook his head, to clear it or to deny that Sam shouldn't have; or most likely at himself, so wholly overrun by this kid, by a few brief touches from him.

He was not, it was starting to be plain, thinking straight about this whole situation, and maybe Bobby had hit on something true there at least.

He opened his mouth without any sure idea of what he was going to say and Sam beat him, nodded sharply to himself and breathed deep and spoke.

“T'm going. I've got to go.”

“No,” Dean said, alarmed and automatic in denial. “Go where?”

“Anywhere. I've got to.”

“No.” Unsupportable, unbearable; there was nothing real tying him here and the potential he had to just walk right away frightened Dean badly. “I need you. We need your help.”

“I think it's the opposite, Dean, I do,” Sam said, earnest, wide-eyed.

“Then you're thinking wrong,” Dean said, so firm and sure of it that a fraction of doubt creased Sam's forehead, a pause while he chewed on his judgement, unwilling to let it go and unwilling still to betray those sacred fears to Dean, whatever it was that he clutched so tightly to himself.

“There's a reason that I'm here Dean,” he said eventually, feeling his way through the words. “A reason and a purpose that's laughing at me, thinking I made any sort of choice joining up with you.”

“Something to do with that trick back at the church?”

Sam looked at him, sad bend to his mouth. “Which one?”

Dean's mouth went dry. “Sam.”

Sam shifted in a vague helpless shrug, sombre, limbs like they were too heavy to move.

“I don't know, it's never happened before. When I saw--” he blanched, teeth showing. “It just came out of me. Still think I'm not no good?”

Sam had thrown him twenty feet, and he hadn't even touched him. Dean looked at him square.

“Still think that.”

Sam shook his head again and started turning away, that too-possible impossibility of him leaving rocking Dean back on his feet once more. A concussed, catch-up feeling that he was starting to get used to, on uneven ground and in unmapped territory since he'd met the kid, running on instinct like he was gentling a wild thing; like that last endless pause before his girl had tossed her head high and farewelled the cold and come to him.

“I got some kinda feeling about you, Sam,” he said, soft, and Sam froze, face pointed at the floor, hair falling forward. “It happened quick.”

Sam kept still, kept breathing, lips tightening on words that never came and Dean studied the golden backlit line of his profile and waited him out. The kid had to come to it on his own. If he felt the same. If it had happened to him too.
Sam breathed out long and slow, and his shoulders slumped out of their tension and the corner of his mouth quirked up, rueful.

“Yeah,” he said. “It did.”

Something uptight and afraid in Dean sighed too and melted, flooding glad through him, tingling in his fingers, making light of what was heavy. Making it all seem plain and right.

“I always wanted a brother. Always thought I shoulda had one.”

Sam frowned at him. “I don't need a brother.”

“Yeah, you do. You need someone to look out for you.”

“That time is past.”

“Not if I'm around. Never if I'm around.”

Sam's jaw clenched, muscle ticking down his throat. “Don't want you like that,” he ground out.

“You got me any way you want.”

Sam winced, closed his eyes like Dean had hurt him. “Lord, Dean. You oughta think before you talk.”

“Not much one for thinking.”

Sam stepped in close, fierce in warning.

“You oughtn't talk like that,” he said, burning dark, looming so that Dean had to bend his neck. “To me, Dean. Cause I'll. I'm no good, friend, and I won't stop. I'll take you as far as you can go and then I'll take you further.”

Dean looked at him and thought that maybe Sam fancied he had some idea of where Dean's limits were and that he was wrong, that this trail he was walking didn't have an end. Dean was in this, and Sam could search Dean's eyes all he wanted, could tick his brain over until they were both dust, could open him up with that enchanted knife of his and not find a single qualm in Dean.

He didn't blink. Sam sucked in a thready breath and held it, hushed and soft with wonder.

“Fool,” he whispered, maybe to himself or maybe to Dean, and cupped his hand around Dean's neck. Dean kept his gaze steady, a great act and effort as Sam's thumb brushed his lips, ran his stubble against the grain, eyes dropping to follow where he touched. Scorching. He smelled like gunpowder, and blood and life and Dean had a crazy idea that if Sam kissed him right now that Dean might never be the same, might never come back out from it, might be some new man pure-made, good and whole.

He swallowed down his heart and brought up a hand to wind his fingers in Sam's hair. Sam closed his eyes.

A groan trickled out from in the cells, creak of the cot and they jumped apart like a thunderclap and Dean spun in a storming circle, surging with frustration, sick of it, this jail, this whole benighted town; he had to get Sam out and away from here. Get him anywhere, open sky or lightless canyon; stagecoach or boxcar or pup tent or any goddamn place where they could be alone together, where he could get to Sam like he needed.
“Later,” he said to Sam, jabbing a finger at him, the oath roughing his voice. Sam's eyes widened and all his caution fell away and he gave Dean a smile that Dean hadn't yet seen on him, unguarded, wide and white, dimples carved into his thin cheeks and his eyes sparking up happy and creased at the corners, the road years and sorrow gone, leaving him young and strong and how he was meant to be. So beautiful and no one had ever looked at Dean like that and he felt his own mouth stretch in response, helpless, caught up in this kid in ways beyond his understanding, not knowing how it happened or how he deserved it.

Sam was staying.

This feeling beat between them until Dean couldn't bear it anymore, ducked his head and turned to the cells, overcame the tremble in his knees to walk over there and check; Bobby had lifted through unconsciousness into a normal sleep, eyelids twitching. Not too much blood on the bandage.

Across the way Masters' lips, stretched around her gag, were cracked and dry.

“You need some water?”

She raised an eyebrow at him and he got an uneasy, dreadful feeling like she could see through walls.

“Well, suffer then,” he mumbled, going red, and backed out of there. Sam was checking through the shutters. Up on the wall the clock showed almost two. It was a mild shock; he would have laid money on four at least, too much gone on surely to fit into one half of one night.

“They gotta sleep, right?” he said, and Sam actually seemed to consider it; ran a hand through his hair and yawned wide.

“Well, we do. When is the Marshal due?”

“Not soon enough,” Dean said, and started gathering up Bobby's guns and his, and the rifles and powder bags and boxes of shot and wadding, laid them on the desk and slumped into the chair and considered them. “And maybe he couldn't do anything any way.”

Sam sagged into a chair himself, picked at the wooden armrest, drew his lip through his teeth.

“You know who would be good here right now?”

“General Sherman?”

“My father.”

Dean tried not to jerk in surprise; flicked his eyes up. Sam was brooding but not fallen down the well yet, not even thinking thinking thinking. Just a small gift offered up to Dean like it was nothing.

“Handy with a gun?” Dean said, kept his voice even.

“Handy with anything you've ever seen and a few things else.”

When he was sober, Dean guessed. Sam had worshipped him, Dean could see, in the tired wistful grief that showed sometimes on Sam's face. Regret there too, and resentment. Two years hunting the man's killers. Twenty years his son. That iron in his soul had to come from somewhere; and that reclusion, and that simmering anger. Dean had never had a proper father but from what he could tell a man was generally a man because of or in spite of one.
Call Dean biased, but there were other things about Sam he was not so ready to lay at the feet of his father, and that was more about his steadfastness, and his justice, and his curiosity, and his romance with books, and the marvelling amused way he looked out at the world when he forgot himself enough for a moment's peace.

And he liked Dean. Somehow, some way. He liked Dean.

“Hey, get back in the cells and get some sleep,” Dean said, and Sam rose to his feet like a crooked old man and headed through. Dean listened to him settle; cleaned and loaded guns until his hands were black, then laid his .45 in his lap, leaned back in the chair facing the door and put his feet on the desk, and waited.

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Dean dreamed he was horseback with Sam riding pillion, one of his long arms slung around Dean's waist and his chest pressed against Dean's back, his legs bracketing Dean's. Dean's girl flew them through the spare snowy highlands and wove a ribbon through Monument Valley; all together they jumped the Grande, clogged with red dust, and stormed the knee-high fields of Montana amidst a thunder of bison, black-brown and surging like the tide around them, a force of nature past control or reckoning. The stars turned bright and innumerable above. Sam whispered poetry into the sweat of Dean's neck.

A gun halted them south of Santa Fe, ivory handle worn like the groove of Dean's palm but held in the air by no one and pressed to Dean's chest. They were stopped crossing train tracks, and Dean looked down to see the hammer click back. Despair took him over. Dean wasn't big enough to hold that bullet, to keep it inside and safe; no saviour, no knight, armour-clad to halt it on its greedy way through to Sam. Waiting for the pain to come he turned his head and saw a locomotive bearing down on their broadside, black and steaming. Its cowcatcher was so bright and silver it was the only point of light left as the smoke and iron struck out the sun, screaming.

Dean woke with a gasp and nearly fell out his chair, ass numb and joints corroded. Dawn, and yelling coming from the cells, not his dream. He stumbled stiff-legged back there, rubbed at his eyes and saw Sam doubled over by the basin, clutching his head. Bobby was up and craning out of his cot too, and Dean pressed him down, knelt by Sam and fluttered his hand across Sam's back.

Sam's face was screwed up like it had been in the aftermath of the church, and he groaned like his skull was splitting in two. Dean, useless, heard himself whispering the kind of nonsense he gave his girl when it was shoeing time.

It passed as quick as it came on, leaving Sam gasping, clammy. His fingers clutched in Dean's sleeve, his shirt.

“Cassie,” he said. Dean's blood ran cold.

“What.”

“They got her. Or, ah--” He winced, and clutched his head “--they're going to her place.”

Dean was on his feet and moving. Buckled his gun belt. Grabbed a rifle and tossed it to Bobby, who levered himself to sitting with a wince and grunt of his own, braced himself upright with a good view of Masters.

Sam pushed himself up and teetered a moment.

“Stay,” Dean barked, and Sam came forward and locked his hand around Dean's wrist.
“It's not safe for you,” Sam said, still half out of the room, battered and squinting like the light hurt. Dreaming true things that night.

“How many?”

Sam gave him a pained look. “Five? Six? Maybe?”

“Walker?”

“Yes. I'm coming.”

“Sam, look at yourself. No.”

“You can't stop me,” Sam said simply, and seemed to pull himself together by the certitude of that alone, straightened his spine, loading himself down quick and sure.

Dean ran them through the dim grey dawn, heavy cloud keeping the sun at bay, greetings of the birds turning to anger as they passed, a beacon marking their path through town. Cassie's place seemed undisturbed; but as they watched from across the street the curtains twitched as a lookout canvassed the street and turned away, and another man strolled around the corner and settled in by the steps, foot hooked up on the porch railing.

Sam took him down with a thrown knife, a sure and silent kill but the man lurched back and banged against the window, hit the ground with a thud. Loud, but that was maybe a good thing, the door swinging open and a couple more cramming through, guns coming up.

Dean shot them dead, two bullets like mortars shattering the still morning, and stepped over their bodies.

Inside was chaos and destruction. They'd pulled out and ripped all her archives. Drying ink smeared rudely, type scattered. Cassie was trussed to a chair in the centre. She looked unharmed, eyes rolling when she saw them, straining through her gag to indicate the back room. Dean nodded at her and waved at Sam to lock the front door in case any were coming around behind, stepped carefully through.

It was empty at first and second glance, which just left upstairs and he turned to call Sam in. Turned wrong, or maybe after all these months it was just his time, seizing up with lightning searing through his spine, knocking his legs out from under him. His guns hit the floor and his body the second afterwards.

It was a bad one he realised, sucking in a breath that fought him, the worst one yet, even his good arm numb and his head muffled and ringing in shock, thoughts blown. Oh God, it was bad.

Someone was yelling, Sam's voice, and Sam's sawed-off firing and another man joining Dean on the floor, his chest gone to red pulp and surprised look on his face, Dean's buddy there too. Blood on him but none on Dean. What had happened to Dean was bloodless and deep inside and not even Sam's hands on him could help, could pull him back to himself.

What helped was when Gordon Walker struck Sam across the back of his head with his gun, and Sam dropped like a stone on the floor next to Dean. That woke Dean up fast, crisp smell of gunpowder in the air and Cassie making sharp distressed noises in the other room and Sam face down and lifeless, blood already wetting his hair.

Dean scraped his hand over to his gun and lifted it a couple of inches. It was too heavy to keep steady and his finger wouldn't hook through the trigger guard. Walker's man came down the stairs,
kicked aside the boots of his dead comrade and stood by Walker's shoulder and they both laughed at Dean.

“Well, Dean, that was easier than I thought,” Walker said, lilting with mild disappointment, putting his gun away and checking through the doorway for any back up coming Dean's way. None, of course, but what he saw in there made him frown, the chair rattling as Cassie struggled. “Untie her.”

“She'll run,” his man said.

“Let her. The Sheriff's half dead, he's not coming.” He looked down at Dean, as his man shrugged and headed through. “What's wrong with you?”

Dean lifted his gun a little higher and tried to stop it falling to the side and Walker smiled down at him, that sanguine white smile and his eyes with a gloss of kindness. At the bottom of all that was a fanaticism that Dean didn't recall from the cantina; and that chilled Dean's blood too. The gun wavered in his grip.

Walker leaned down and plucked it from his hand like Dean was a baby, turned it over with an approving glance, tucked it in his belt.

“I gotta get my boss back, Dean. That's just good manners.”

Dean worked to get his tongue moving, enough air in his lungs to speak. “I'll be your trade then. You only need one.”

“You know what,” Walker said, waving a thoughtful finger in the air. “You're right.”

“Don't you touch him,” he snarled, with a futile attempt to surge off the floor; got as far as propping his shoulders on the wall.

Walker's man rejoined them and laughed again. Walker shared an amused look with him and pulled Dean's gun, let the barrel drift towards the back of Sam's skull.


Gordon shook his head, scornful. “You disappoint me, Dean.”

Dean's hands clenched empty and numb, one last desperate straw, instinct only. His throat so dry it clicked when he swallowed.

“Your boss want him dead?”

A shadow passed over Gordon's face and his man sneered. Dean was right that there was discord in the gang and he clung to it, to the distraction, trying to get his feet under him; but his whole body was disobeying, thick and nerveless, belonging to someone else.

Gordon pursed his lips and looked down at Sam, eyes black.

“Gordon!” He gave up his straining. “Take me. Get it over with.”

Gordon nodded quick at his man, who bent over Dean, roped his hands and took his gunbelt, foul-smelling of cigars and smoke and just plain stink. Dean turned his face, nose wrinkling. Sam was still as death, arm outflung; it hurt, it hurt to see him like that but he was breathing, hair fluttering over his mouth, and his face was slack but not that torporic grey that signalled emergency. He was
safe, for now.

Dean closed his eyes on the sight and let them drag him away.

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They stashed him in some half-built home on the edge of town, far from Masters' saloon and the jail; propped him against the wall with his hands tied behind him, and his ankles bound, too. Gordon's man sat in a chair by the door, that sneer fixed permanent on his grimy face but quiet at least.

Nothing happened. For so long.

A square of faded sun on the floor shifted so slowly it spurred three separate crashing waves of panic in Dean, boiling helplessness that he had to fight to keep off his face. He was needed elsewhere. He shouldn't be here, motionless, useless, shouldn't have been so weak, and the unknown cut just as deep. Did Cassie get safely to the jail? Was Sam awake? Was he okay, was he okay?

His mouth dried out and his head began pounding from the comedown and the worry. The numbness lingered too, wrapped around him like a lover; didn't fade like it usually did but was dragged away tendril by tendril. And was cold in here, feet blocks in his boots, fingers still battling for feeling, twisting in the rope. It was tight but he could reach the knot; any other time he would have been able to work his way out, and that knowledge was its own crucifixion.

Gordon took over the watch some time into the morning, stood over him and stared down, a tin cup in his hand and a placid, helpful look on his face.

"You need a doctor?"

"It'll pass," Dean said, abraded.

"How about some water instead?"

Dean clenched his jaw, jerked his head in a nod and Gordon held the cup to his lips, politely ignoring the shame burning in Dean's cheeks.

He took the chair over to the window and sat, kept his eyes on Dean. "How is it we never met before this?"

"Just lucky I guess."

"I had some expectation we'd find out who was faster."

"Give it time," Dean said, flexing his fingers, measuring the distance to the door now it was unguarded.

"Hoping your boy will come for you?" Gordon said, and kicked back. Dean's gun was in his hand again and he ran his thumb along the engraving. "Me too."

"The boss won't like that." A vicious flinch in Gordon's expression put the lie to all his calm, the rift deeper than Dean would have thought. "You don't like Masters very much, do you?"

"One problem at a time, Dean."

All that Dean knew about this man was that he was a gun; one of the best, maybe, but just a gun
like Dean. And that wasn't the upright life of a Marshal or a Ranger but nor was it the madness that overtook a lot of those who lived without law, or the banked-up savagery that birthed some men into the Indian Wars or the Rebellion. It was a wandering insecure life of twenty-thousand far-flung miles, a queer and unforgiving way to be, an eternal stranger; but it had a commonality with respectable and normal people, even where those people turned their noses up at you.

Not Gordon, no longer. Looking at him now, Dean realised that somewhere on that trail Gordon Walker had stepped off; found the door to a hidden shadow land, the same place Sam lived, and Masters, and the kid Max Miller. Found it, knocked on it and stepped through.

“What is she?” he asked.

Gordon’s eyes gleamed.

“Pure evil,” he said, not meaning the human evil that rotted families or laughed through a massacre; he meant the evil that preachers warned of, that dried wells and spoiled grain and took firstborns.

“So kill her.”

“Oh, I will. But in the meantime...” Gordon smiled and leaned towards Dean, resting his elbows on his knees. “She's been telling me things.”

“What things?”


“Like what?”

“Like your boy.”

“Don't talk about him.”

Gordon hummed, turned back to the window. No sun but his eyes were still sparkling with that monomaniacal fire.

Talking with pure evil. Whatever he knew, he only half knew it.

“What's going on here, Dean, you have no idea. Not yet. This is just a glimpse of something in a far-away mirror.”

“You gonna start talking sense, or is it time for me to take a siesta?”

Gordon rounded on him and leaned forward, elbows on knees. “Let me be plain, then. There's a war coming, and we need every man we can get.”

“You've got men,” Dean said, taken aback, seeing where he was headed.

“I've got true believers, I've got my reputation, and I've got men desperate enough for coin that they'll work under a woman and a Negro. What I don't have is a professional.”

“You leave Sam alone,” Dean said. “You get out of here. And I might consider it.”

Gordon gave him a soft regretful look. “No. Sam has to go. I'm sorry Dean, I really am. But you saw him kill my man, same as I did. That's just the beginning. He's a monster. They all are.”
“He's a good kid.” It was a waste of breath to insist. He tried anyway. “Had a hard life, is all.”

“Who hasn't? It hurts, I know. I've been where you are. I know what it's like. But.” The softness dropped out of Gordon's face, all that sincerity expired, carved away into hard implacable surety. “Family has to take care of family. When your dog goes rabid, you put it down.”

There was no reasoning with him. No convincing. He was too far gone. Would rather go around killing kids like it was a mercy, all on the say-so of a witch or whatever creature she was, than hear a complication or subtlety.

Dean spat on the floor and bared his teeth. “You crazy son of a bitch,” he said. “If you touch him, you'll be sorry.”

Gordon rose to his feet and stood over him, voice like granite. “Take some responsibility, Dean. Your father, now. A man like that? He would have had the courage to do something about it.”

Dean paused.

“My father?” he said, thrown, skin crawling with a sneaking timorous fear that he'd walked into an ambush, had come to this parley unarmed and unawares. “You know my father?”

“Ah, you got me there,” Gordon said, holding his hands up. “I only met the man once. But anyone who knows how to listen has heard John Winchester's name ring out plenty.”

The room tilted.


Gordon took half a step back in surprise; laughed, high and incredulous. “The brains didn't go to you, I suppose.”

“That's not true.”

Gordon grinned. “Oh, I assure you it is.”

“Shut your mouth,” Dean whispered, airless, heart beating too hard and fast and Gordon was still laughing.

“Well. There it is. Little Sammy is your problem and no mistake.”

Dean was staring blind at the floor, dumbstruck. Reeling and nauseous, and Sam. Sam. So long out there without anyone watching his back, and an iron-willed drunk for a father, and Dean hadn't been there for him. He hadn't known.

It was impossible. It couldn't be.

Gordon talked at him a while, words Dean couldn't begin to fathom. When Dean looked up he was gone. Other men came and went. One took Dean outside to relieve himself, half carrying him, and he went, stumbling, like a child, without fight or complaint.

Back in the room. The clouds swelled thicker, day going dark too early. Dean's eyes adjusted to the light, and his body came back to him partially, with reluctance. His wrists raw from the rope; raw inside and out.

Truth settled in his gut like lead.
Just the beginning. Max had said that too, before turning the gun around on himself, eyes red-rimmed with tears, so afraid. And afterwards, Dean had taken a bullet and had been saved, and he’d known then that his days weren't his own. He'd been waiting. Sam's hand against the scar had burned and remade him like a claim and Dean had mistaken it entirely.

He would have taken Sam to bed, for the love of God.

He felt sick. Masters knew. Masters would have loved it, would have thrilled to have Dean take this feeling and make it dirty instead of clean. Twist Sam up even further instead of leading him into the light, too selfish, too greedy for any part of Sam he could see or touch, taste or feel.

It was a relief in a way, balm to a looming sense that this thing for Sam was starting to be too much for Dean to handle, too strong, too strange. Dean had been with enough people, had been far enough gone on Cassie to know that it wasn't meant to be like that, to be overrun, heart mind and body.

And right from the start, almost. Had he—had he known Sam?

Four years or so between them. Jim Murphy would have found him some time around Sam's birth. Jim had brought Dean out of the woods, cleaned him up and gave him a name and a home and Dean had forgotten how or why he was there in the first place, fallen into the struggle of being an ill-fit orphan in a small remote parish of older and stronger boys. No reason to stay once Jim died, the habit of solitude in Dean too long by then, the knowledge that he wasn't from the same place as most folk. He had wrapped himself up in that, and found himself a mission, and never thought about the provenance of his blood or the origin of his fate.

His people were dead was what he was told, and whatever memory of them he might have had been taken by that lost wandering week. And now, at age twenty-six, Dean had a new name and a father too. Too late, but a father all the same, and a family.

He was supposed to be Sam's brother after all.

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His recruitment failed, Gordon never came back. Two of his men did instead, nearly pulled out Dean's shoulders dragging him outside. Shoved a rag in his mouth and threw him choking for breath over a horse; turned him around so completely jogging through the falling night that he didn't realise he was at the jail until he was thrown on the porch, bouncing painfully in front of the door.

“Sheriff!” Gordon called from across the road, out of sight when Dean twisted his neck. “Hey, Singer!”

The door opened carefully, muzzle of Bobby's gun sticking through; flew wide to show Bobby standing there in shock, a plain target leaning heavily on the doorjamb. Dean hollered at him through his gag, and he woke, pivoted out of the line of sight.

Behind him, deep in the room, was Sam. Jody and Cassie were hanging onto him for dear life. In the dim yellow light he looked feral, like he came from the woods same as Dean, true brothers, blood still matted in his hair and smeared on his neck; a bruise coming up on his cheekbone. And his eyes, on fire.

He leapt towards Dean, and Cassie yelled, her hands locked around his wrist, her boots scraping on the floor.
Gordon's voice came loud and clear.

“He's got no bullets in him, Sheriff. Send Masters out, and he'll stay that way.”

Sam stopped pulling and stood straight. Snapped back into something close to calm and shook the women off, brushed his hair from his face.

“Give me the keys, Jody,” he said, and she blinked and took an uneasy step back.

“Ain't no way.” She looked over to Bobby for help. “We can't just hand her over. We free Masters and they'll run right over us.”

“Jody!” Cassie said, and looked at Bobby too. “Bobby, please.”

Bobby stared down at Dean.

“Give me the keys,” Sam said again, eyes steady on Jody, hand out.

“She's got a point,” Bobby said, grim. “Masters is dangerous beyond anything we've seen before.”

Injustice ripped through Dean. All he'd learned and the shift his soul had taken and all for naught; he wasn't going to get to do what was here for anyway.

If he had to hand the job to anyone, best it was Bobby.

*Keep him safe,* Dean thought at him, urgent, tried to make it real words, tried to press it right into his brain, and Bobby's eyes turned down grave and sad.

A double hammer clicked in the silence. Sam's arm raised to point his sawed-off at Bobby.

“Unlock that cell, Jody,” he said, as calm as ten seconds ago.

“You wouldn't,” she said.

“You've got no idea what I would or wouldn't do.”

“Clock's ticking, Sheriff!” Gordon called, and Bobby shook himself.

“Do it, Jody,” he said, staring at Sam.

The keys rattled and Sam shifted the shotgun to somewhere out of Dean's sight, tracked her to the door as she paused and surveyed the road. Her dress worse for wear at this point; her hair out of its pins, yellow and lush on her shoulders.

“Out,” Bobby growled, rifle chest-height.

She stepped daintily over Dean's thighs, the grubby bottom of her skirts dragging heavy over his body, making his flesh crawl.

At the top of the step down she turned for a last look at them. Gagged still like Dean, and bound like Dean, and she blinked coyly at him and curtsied, fucking *curtsied*, while he snarled up at her.

He'd be there when she died. He decided that then, watching her smile somehow around her gag, impotent on the ground as she flicked a glance at Sam, winked at him. He'd be the one to kill her. He'd see the light go out of those eyes.
Sam had his hands under Dean's arms before she even hit the road, dragging him in. Jody kicked the door shut, locked it and shifted to the window.

“Hey Dean, hey. You're okay?” Sam hit the floor next to Dean and tore the gag away.

“Yeah,” Dean croaked, worked his jaw, lips sore and stretched, grunted as Sam cut his bonds and his joints broke open like lake ice. Sam shushed him and got an arm under his back, started lifting.

Dean wasn't a girl, tried to push him away but he was still numb and frozen. Mostly from the ties he prayed, from being immobile but it was clear that Max's curse was lingering too, and on top of that Sam was solid and strong as anyone Dean had ever known. Sam hauled him right up and deposited him on a chair and finally relinquished ground to stand back only a few feet, brows drawn up and anxious.

“I don't know if you should have done that,” Dean said, and Sam set his jaw.

“Go ahead and tell me you would have done it differently.”

Dean stared at him a moment and didn't know what to tell him at all, such fervour in him directed Dean's way. Dean had thought somehow he'd be looking at the kid with new eyes and would be someone new as well, but here he was, barely able to stand under his own power, still his useless self, and Sam was still Sam, rare and beautiful, looking at him like he was rare and beautiful too.

Maybe he didn't need to say anything. Maybe he could tuck it away in a secret corner of himself deep enough that it didn't have to be true at all. Nothing would change.

“What?” Sam said, eyes dark on him, voice dragging with foreboding; barely blinked as Cassie elbowed past with a mug of water. Dean drained it and dropped it trying to give it back, clattering on the floor. He watched it tumble over to where Jody was on watch by the window and tried to open and close his hand, clumsy.

“What did Walker do to you?” Bobby said, limping over, crutch wedged under his arm.

“That's Jo Harvelle's bullet,” Sam spat.

“That's,” Dean said, and stopped, throat closing over the word.

“It's better than it was this morning,” Sam said, soft and reassuring. Dean couldn't look at him. He turned to Bobby, who was leaning heavily on his crutch, gazing with foreknowledge at the two of them.

A cunning old man and more secretive than Dean would ever have guessed. Half dead last night he had jumped at the name Winchester like it was infamous. Dean wondered if he'd spoken a whole truth since Dean landed in Eldorado. Since Dean had met him even.

“How much do you know that you haven't told me?” he rasped, and Bobby's eyes narrowed.

“I know a lot about a lot of things, boy.”

“You know she isn't human?”

In his periphery Sam straightened like a knife unfolding. The fine hairs on the back of Dean's neck stood up and a held-breath silence fell on the room, warning to anyone who'd seen danger before. Dean kept fixed on Bobby.
Bobby never blinked.

“She's a demon.” He said it like it was nothing; like he might have trusted Dean with it years ago, if he'd ever found a reason to trust Dean.

“What?” Cassie put her hands on her hips, sent an appealing glance at Sam for help in the madness; for naught, Sam so still and remote he might have been trying to slip out the room between motes of dust. “You're crazier sober than you are drunk, Singer.”

“There are ways of telling,” said Jody, and Cassie snorted.

“Dean, you can't believe this.”

“Walker said as much,” Dean said, and Bobby nodded.

“All the years I've been in this and I only heard rumours of demonic possession. This is the second I've seen this year, with my own eyes, and I'm getting word of more.”

“You know why?” Sam's voice was barren, a desert.

“Well, kid, that's a good question,” Bobby said, and tapped his crutch on the floor, and turned to Sam. “You got an answer?”

Sam twitched, and Bobby sent Dean a look out of the corner of his eye, some species of shame in there. Dean went light-headed with the knowledge of what was coming.

“Bobby, wait.”

“That thing we just let go had plenty to say on the matter,” Bobby said. “Most of which I wouldn't credit. The stuff about your father, on the other hand.”

“Goddamn it, Bobby.”

“Some I knew,” Bobby said, and Sam paled. “Some I didn't. Like about his sons.”

“Bobby.” Dean raised his voice, and pushed himself upright, clutching the back of the chair. “It ain't your name. It ain't your place to say.”

“Sons?” Sam said, baffled, voice broken on a blow from an unexpected corner.

“Why'd you come here, Kansas?” Jody ambled over, folded her arms. “I don't think I ever heard a proper reason.”

“I brought him,” Dean said, louder, trying to be heard. “Would you all just shut up for a second?”

“Sons?”

“Hell, kid,” Bobby said, and thumbed in Dean's direction. “Who do you think this is?”

Silence.

“That's Dean,” Cassie said, uncertain.

Sam paled further and took a hesitant step back, any readiness or danger in him overcome by disbelief. Wide eyes on Dean.
Dean shook his head, mute. He didn't want to. He was sick of putting this kid through the wringer.

“And the rest?” Sam said it like he already knew.

“Sam. Sit down.”

“And the rest?”

Dean swallowed. “Winchester.”

Sam flinched like Dean had slapped him.

“Sam,” he said, and Sam quailed further, head bowed, trying to hide himself but Dean could see. Under his shock there was a dawning absence of shock, an affirmation of fate and malediction turning inwards, carving him up. Making it something bad. Making himself bad when he was the best thing that had ever happened to Dean.

“No, Sam,” he said, and reached out, but Sam wasn't listening, turned his back on them all and retreated into the cells. The gate groaned as he passed, clutching at it with all his weight. One of the cots creaked.

“Hot damn.” Jody clapped her hand on Dean's shoulder and pushed him back into his chair with a thump. Didn't even need to push very hard, Dean was still so weak on his feet. She handed over her flask and Dean tore his eyes away from where Sam had been, accepted it dazedly. “You knew?”

“Looks like Walker's got a big mouth,” Bobby said.

“You didn't need to do it like that, Bobby. That wasn't fair.”

“Fair?” Bobby scowled. “Fair's got nothing to do with it. I got a duty to this town. She shows up, then he shows up? With you?”

“He got you sober,” Dean glared. “He never gave you cause.”

“Ah, hell.” Bobby glanced at the cells and mellowed. “Look. I buy that he didn't know. I ain't saying he's here to marry her, but I had to test him. This ain't a coincidence. A storm's coming, Dean, and that kid, you: you're smack in the middle of it.”

“No,” Cassie said, still puzzling, pacing. “No way. You're talking Masters' word on this?”

“They got ways to know things,” Jody said.

Cassie threw her a dirty look.

“She's hardly reliable. She'd lie.”

“Cassie,” Bobby said. “Trust me. This ain't the time for a debate. We gotta plan. If we're lucky they'll take the night to regroup, but I never been that lucky before.”

Planning could go screw. Dean couldn't scrounge up a half a care for the Harvelle situation right now. A passel of fucking guns was enough planning for Dean. Dean needed that time to talk Sam around, take him somewhere kind and quiet and sit beside him. Maybe sleep, give his body time to wake back up. Sam could get some rest too, calm his brain out of its churning worries and suspicions. He'd see. He'd see how good this was. How good it was going to be. A brother was something certain. A brother was something you could have for ever.
“Dean,” Bobby said. “Are you with me on this?”

He rubbed at his face with a clumsy hand. “Bobby--”

“Where's Kansas?” Jody said, and Dean's heart stopped and his head snapped over.

“What?”

She was standing at the gate to the cells, and looked back at him. “He ain't here.”

Fear carried Dean like a breeze. The cells were empty air and a rumpled cot where someone had sat and a rotten-egg smell. An impossible feeling clawed at Dean; it was an impossible thing. There was no door back there, no window, no place to hide.

But Sam was gone.

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Ten minutes and he was horseback.

He had the track out to Cold Oak spinning out in front of him, and he had his girl who knew how to follow it in the dark. He had Jody's .45s that he could hold almost steady. He had Cassie's stricken face and the comforting pressure of her hand still warm on his thigh.

And he had a small bottle of holy water that Bobby had shoved in his pocket, stalling him on the way out the door.

“This ain't rustlers and wife-beaters, boy,” Bobby insisted. “You've never seen anything like this before. Consider what you're doing.”

Dean just sneered at him. Could be God himself come down for Judgement Day, didn't make no difference. He'd pushed past and found himself halted again, Bobby's hand locked in his jacket, ugly warning look on his face. Dean ground his teeth and jerked out of his grip.

“He's my family, you forgotten?”

“Blood is one thing. Family is another.”

“He's got no one else.”

“And maybe there's a reason for that.”

Dean tilted his head. “You wanna clarify?”

A sigh from Bobby and grief too under the urgency. “Some people need saving, Dean, and some people are past that. It ain't always easy to tell the difference.”

Dean nodded to himself, and stepped up close.

“That's the last time, Bobby,” he'd said, and had never heard his own voice sound so cold before; for sure had never made such use of his height over Bobby, looming to make the blood run from his face. “You say anything like that to me again I ain't liable for my actions.”

Bobby twisted his mouth. “Just. Don't do anything stupid.”

Dean blew his breath out through his nose.
“Well, I can't help that,” he'd said, and called Cassie with him to help him saddle up, Bobby's curse and his crutch thumping on the boards fading as they went.

He'd half expected to be caught up with at the edge of town, even with Bobby's leg shot up and all, but his girl was too good in the dark or he pushed her too hard, and he was deep on the trail before long and knew he'd be alone. And that was okay. He could sit straight, he could neck-rein, and he kept his gun hand curled in close, clenching his fist mindlessly, trying to force feeling back in.

His girl paused at the creek, at the edge of the clearing, ears swivelling towards the rock and muscles in her neck tense. No one there, but in the still quiet pause a spike to the head came on him so sudden he thought he'd been shot again before hearing it, wringing him down and almost out of the saddle; he had to grab his girl's mane and she staggered under him to keep them balanced.

In his head were pictures, nightmare flashes stabbing in: flames, and Sam's severe desperate face flickering down at him; and bigger than that, Sam and those Harvelle ranch hands in the corral at Cold Oak, unarmed and ranged against each other. That tiny crying girl had her mouth open in another scream. Around the corral were bonfires, and men with guns pointed in.

He choked and clutched his head, gasping. Grabbed the pommel and tried to sit upright, kicked his girl weakly. She walked forward with a snort like she doubted his sanity.

As they crossed the pressure in his head let up, and she sensed it, broke into a canter, water splashing up, every bone in his body jolting, every part of him displaced five miles down the road. He should be there, he should be there. These months and days of feints and tests, and it wasn't Harvelle's ranch at all that was at stake; it was those kids, something about all those kids holed up with her, and the dead ones, Max Miller and the girl Lily.

And Sam. Sam throwing him, and talking about himself with that grim solitary look in his eyes. There had been bodies on the ground in that corral, and it hadn't been bullets that put them down.

Demons, Bobby had said. And here was Dean on the back foot with a useless gun hand. Well, it probably wouldn't be a shooting fight anyway.

A mile out, something changed. The air tightening around him or a rush of foul whispers on the breeze trying to carry him forward. And a glow on the horizon.

True terror swamped his heart and he geed his girl on faster, and she carried him so careful and quick, pounding past the big dead tree on the Masters fence line, its limbs reaching out like nightmare claws, black in front of a brightening orange sky.

Cold Oak was on fire.

His girl took him into the heart of it without flinching, right into the roar and snap of the flame, the oppressive stench of smoke and the slap of heat. The buildings were alight, and the cowpen had five bodies lying limp and bloody inside, all of them too small; and three of Gordon's men were dead and broken on the outside, one burning, half-sprawled atop a bonfire; but there was no one else, anywhere.

“Sam!” he hollered, and whirled his girl, looking for a sign, for movement that wasn't the false dash of firelight; saw nothing, and kicked her on around the back.

There was an outhouse there, a tinderbox shell whose roof fell in as he came around the corner, ducking under the explosion of spark and ember; and beyond that a stables with a roof already smoking, and between them a man on the ground, trying to stagger to his feet.
Dean threw himself out of the saddle and took him back down to the ground with a smashing thud, rolled off under the momentum and had to scramble in the dirt to get him back, taking a solid boot-heel to the shoulder. He clambered up Gordon's body, turned him and slammed him down. Gordon's head snapped back with a satisfying crack.

“Where is he?”

Gordon gasped and spat at Dean's face, and Dean hauled off and punched him in the mouth, feeling his knuckles slice open on teeth, Gordon's lips smearing. He grabbed his shirt and shook him.

“Where is he?” he roared again, and Gordon started laughing, high and lost in the bellow of the fire.

He was gone. Dean pressed him down back into the ground and looked up and around, wiping his face on his sleeve. His girl was dancing away, nostrils wide and eyes white and her glossy coat looked ablaze itself. The house, thirty feet away, seemed like it was swelling at the seams, windows bursting in the heat. Anyone in there--

The stables. He had to be in the stables.

He turned back to Gordon.

“Masters,” he said, and Gordon lost his hysteric grin, snarled.

“I took my shot. I hit her square. She got away anyway.”

He thumped Gordon against the ground again and pushed himself up, just barely, the shoulder that Gordon had kicked almost giving out. He staggered a few steps towards the stable, batted away an ember that landed on his jacket.

“Winchester,” Gordon called, rough with smoke, his failure, the night; Dean stopped, looked back at him. “We still got business.”

“Which of us is best?” Dean said, and Gordon coughed, held his chest, and grinned a dark bloody grin.

“Wouldn't be sporting to try now.”

He was wearing Dean's gun, Dean realised, the nickel-plate of his Colt flickering orange. Dean stumbled, half-fell back to him, bent down and wrenched it free, pressed the barrel down hard over Gordon's heart. Gordon closed his eyes, beatific.

“I don't need to try, Gordon,” he ground out, and pressed down with the muzzle until Gordon looked at him. “You come near us again and I'll kill you. I won't think twice.”

He pulled Gordon's other pistol free and threw it into the dark and left him there, rolling in the dirt, sparks and flame floating down around him.

The stables were empty.

He banged the door open with his good shoulder. It smashed through his bones anyway and he cried out, fire inside as well as hunting him without. It was dark in there and thick with smoke,
shoving into his lungs. Barren, nothing but straw ready to go up fast under his feet and every stall bare, no one crumpled in a corner, no one there to call Dean's name gladly and come to him, smiling and free.

He turned around to start the search again and the loft came down with a calamitous wrench of timber and the air was on fire, a giant wave of sparks and burning straw rolling towards him. He threw his arms up and reeled through the tack room and outside again, gasping, choking.

He skinned his knees hitting the ground and the smoke ripped at the inside of his throat. His stomach clenched and lurched in rebellion, retching nothing, his body bucking under the force of it, absolute refusal. Hands fisted in the dirt, he stared at the house, eyes streaming. Heat swam in the air. It was burning, burning wild, and the longer he stared at that light that was almost too bright it seemed right somehow, fire the end of it and the beginning too in a way that came from the centre of him, something deep and buried.

On his feet. Sam was in there, he thought. He had to get his brother outside.

He stepped forward.

Behind him, out in the dark and far away, a horse screamed.

He whirled and could see nothing but the fire still, flickering green over the night. The horse screamed again, and someone shot it, a thin remote slap of sound that came back to Dean and woke him out of his daze.

“Sam?” he said. It was less than a whisper. He took a deep breath and coughed so hard it nearly knocked him down again, doubled-over and staggering forwards into the dark, his eyes adjusting too slow, kicking rocks and stumbling over scrub, those clouds still covering the moon and stars, the black night thick and turbid around him like it resented his passing.

“Sam?” he called again, stronger now, and leaned forward into a run, endless and aimless, hands wavering ghostlike in front of him.

He passed the dead horse, slipping in the thin scrim of its blood, and got turned around somehow. Another gunshot sounded off to the left; a handgun, he realised through the haze, not Sam's gun, someone else's: he panted, wheezing, halted by a cruel pang that maybe he was lost, had fucked it up, all that revelation of purpose useless when he was out here and Sam was back there in the fire needing him.

Hooves pounding. A second horse galloped by, blood-frothed at the mouth, riderless; he spun to watch it go, back towards the blazing terror of Cold Oak, and far away to his right: Masters' clear laugh, bell-bright and maddening.

The moon broke through as he neared, like this one spot on the face of the earth was for him to see. Bodies seething and as his eyes adjusted Jo Harvelle landed at his feet, grunting at the impact, face shining with blood and her hair escaped its plait. Her mother's voice called out her name in alarm.

“Yes, yes,” she cried back, and took Dean's proffered hand with no room in her it seemed for surprise, clutched him strong and let him haul her up, and pulled him along to a bare place on the ground where the abomination Masters was staked out and writhing with what little give the rope had. Ellen Harvelle was hammering a spike into the ground.

And there was Sam, a shadow standing tall against the night, who crouched as Dean watched and laid a hand on Masters' forehead and began chanting. Latin, a language Dean could recognise but
never learned, strong and immutable as iron.

Relief put Dean back down on his knees like a prayerful man, breath restored to him, and sight, and blood and thought and spirit too, it seemed. Sam heard him, broke off and turned to Dean with wide shocked eyes shining in the moonlight and Dean's name on his lips now, and Dean couldn't help it. He smiled.

Sam grinned back.

“Winchester!” Ellen barked, and threw herself over Masters’ legs. Sam turned back, hand hovering towards her head again. She darted her head up and her teeth clacked in the empty air where Sam's fingers had been before he snatched them back.

Jo backhanded her and she didn't seem to feel it. Masters was shot so many times, her dress so dark with blood Dean thought it was made that colour at first. He fumbled in his pocket for the holy water.

Sam started up his chant again, and she screamed and bucked and threw Ellen off, got her hand free and hit Jo so hard she fell like a ragdoll and stayed down. She waved at Ellen, sent her flying backwards into the air.

“Hey!” Dean barked before she could turn to Sam, and half-stood, half-crawled forward. She bent her neck to see him and grinned, looked back up at Sam, who was still chanting, and said something that made him falter and stutter to a halt.

Dean was by her dress now, hands dirty with her blood, and he heard her say it.

“Will you tell him the truth, Samuel?”

She and Sam were eye-to-eye like a snake and its prey. Even tied up and damaged she was more dangerous than anything Dean had ever seen.

“Finish it, Sam,” Dean said, alarmed, uncorking the bottle and throwing the water at her face. She screamed again and thrashed, more pain than rage this time, a steaming sulphurous smell rising.

Sam opened his mouth and restarted the chant, and her head snapped back, chest coming off the ground and every sinew in her body straining. Smoke burst out of her mouth with a soundless physical roar, shot between them and blew them apart on its way up to the sky.

Dean hit the ground, knocked his head and lost his wind and his sense for a terrible moment, whimpered and rolled onto his side, curled around in agony. Before him, he saw Ellen limping towards her daughter, and when he looked over away on the other side of the girl that used to be a demon there was Sam, laid out flat and still.

The ground beside Sam was flint and thorn. Dean grabbed Sam's chest and shook him and his body rocked back and forth in a limp indifferent way, merciless.

“Sam,” he said, naked and afraid, in Sam's face. Slapped him across the cheek. Pulled Sam's eyelid up and in the dim light saw they had rolled up white. His hair splayed out like a black halo and his clever mouth slack.

Denial gripped his throat and squeezed. He shook Sam again, rougher, pressed his ear over Sam’s heart, heard nothing but the baying in his own head, the clamour of bleak negation. Not like this. Not after everything. He clenched his fists in Sam's shirt and bit down on the howl that was threatening to lift him right out of his body. Not like this. He'd crawl into Hell if he had to.
A hand landed on his head.

“Dean?” Sam said, scratchy and weak and barely a word but alive, alive and with him, chest rising in a gasp under Dean's fingers twisted white-knuckled in his shirt and his eyes cracking open when Dean looked up, surged up to hover over him again, searching his face for pain or injury or any sign that he was any longer at risk; so grateful when he couldn't find it that he sagged down and tipped his forehead against Sam's.

“Dean,” Sam said again on a breath so intimate it made Dean shake, eyes screwed shut now, their noses bumping and the feel of his skin against Dean's, this kid that he found in a no-name cantina, strong enough to take these hits and still somehow claw his way back to him. His brother.

“You came for me,” Sam whispered, pressing his face hard against Dean's, brow against brow, breathing hot and damp against his cheek, digging his fingers into Dean's scalp like he could pull Dean down through his skin and into his bones.

“Always, always,” Dean said, and far in the east the sky was lightening.

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The sun found them shattered and half-dozing.

The air was still and a miasmic stink of smoke hung around Dean. He had soot in his mouth, his nose, the corners of his eyes; the skin of his face felt tight and hot.

Jo was beaten up but alive, clutching her ribs. She'd cried for a time, quiet and exhausted, wiped her face and left long streaks dirt and dark blood. Ellen had an arm around her, tucked in close, and looked no better herself.

Sam was sitting next to Dean, hands hooked around his knees and his head lowered. Exhaustion or defeat in the line of his shoulders; Dean couldn't tell. Probably both.

By some unspoken agreement they were waiting for the morning to come on proper before they started the walk back, two miles at least to Cold Oak and then the rest of the way. How he'd run it last night was a mystery, and Dean wasn't looking forward to retracing his steps, his feet sore, his back sore, grazed head to toe. Something wrong with his shoulder, Gordon's bootheel likely stamped into the bone.

The pink left the sky, and the sun warmed. None of them were ready for it but Ellen levered herself to her feet, stiff, groaning, and the rest of them followed suit.

“What about her?” Sam nudged the corner of Masters' dress with his toe.

They looked down at her a while. Her legs and dress splayed out. One arm still staked out, thin, lace cuffs at the wrist torn and tangled into the rope. Her hair dusty now, its shine lost.

Her eyes were open.

Ellen took off her jacket and lay it across the girl's face and chest. Jo curled her lip and looked away.

“What about that exorcism?” Her eyes were sharp on Sam.

“From a book,” Sam said, and gave her a bland look back.
“I’d sure like to see that book,” Ellen said, and Sam nodded in a way that wasn't quite agreement. She noticed. “Hey, I got five dead kids back there.”

“And look who's standing,” Jo said.

“Don't you put those kids on him,” Dean said, rough and sore, and Jo switched her gaze.

“I ain't putting them just on him, Winchester.” She spat his name like it was dirty.

Sam drew himself up tall. “Dean's got nothing to do with it.”

“Aside from shooting one of them?”

“You don't wanna talk to me about shooting people,” Sam said. Dean didn't know how he could still sound so fierce after this endless night.

“This can wait,” Dean said.

“They came to us for help,” Ellen said, in pain, and her daughter spoke over her.

“You're all the same.” Jo spat, voice breaking, rage and sorrow and too much of both. The tears started up again. Ellen put a hand on her shoulder and she shrugged out from under it, wiped furiously at her eyes.

“Your Ava was the one that killed most of them,” Sam snapped, pitiless. “I broke her neck. Just so you know who to come to for blood.”

“This can wait,” Dean said, loud and clear, and walked right into the middle of them. Sam turned away and Dean kept him going, gave him a shove and kept his hands in Sam's jacket, pushed him on across the plain. Riled up now he'd lost all of the softness of the dawn.

Dean let him go and came up to walk alongside. Glanced at his cutting profile, foreboding dragging in his chest.

“You make friends so easy, what do you need me for?”

Sam sighed, and his head dropped. “I know, I know,” was all he said, and he sounded so tired it made Dean's heart ache.

He took stock of himself. Ran his hands through his hair, tried to brush out the dust and ash. His jacket was nearly ruined, pocked with burn marks and a big hole where that ember had landed.

Sam watched him poke his finger through from the inside.

“Andy got the guards to spread the fire,” Sam said, careful distance between him and the meaning of the words. “He was trying to get us out. It went wrong.”

Just about everything that could go wrong had gone wrong, Dean figured, and kept walking. The buildings didn't seem to be getting any closer, smeared and black, air heavy above them.

“And the Harvelles came after that?”

“I chased her right into them.”

Chased? Dean didn't think Masters had been chased by anything in her life. Maybe she hadn't banked on the Harvelles, but she'd led Sam out there into the dark for some purpose. She had
motives on top of motives.

“What was that she said about telling me the truth?”

Sam froze, a bare fraction of a second, guilty. Dean wasn't looking at him, but he knew what was coming next was a lie.

“Suppose it was about my father.” Sam paused. “Our,” he said, awkwardly. “Demons, they like to dig the knife in and they love to use the truth if they think it'll hurt. Suppose she figured we didn't know.”

“Our father,” Dean tried out, words heavy and foreign on his tongue. Harder to say somehow than demon, than exorcism; Dean was halfway to thinking about them in the same familiar way Sam talked, like he'd known about them his whole life. That wasn't much of a surprise, Sam both smarter and more close-mouthed than any person Dean had ever met. Dean was willing to bet he knew all sorts of things beyond Dean's imagining. “You gonna tell me what we got on our plates now?”

Sam threw a look at Dean, quick and sideways through his lashes.

“It's bad, Dean.”

“Yeah,” said Dean, quiet. “I know that.”

“She wanted one left. The strongest.”

That was Sam, all right.

“They say why?”

Sam shrugged stiffly. So maybe they did, and maybe they didn't, but he had an idea, and he thought he could handle it alone.

“You can say, Sam,” he said, and watched Sam's throat bob.

“I've been nothing but trouble to you,” he said. It wasn't really an answer.

“You're my brother,” Dean said. “I never had one before but I think that's how it's supposed to work.”

Sam pressed his lips together until they were thin and white. “I told you I didn't want a brother.”

“Well, you got one.”

“If I want anyone I want a partner.”

“You got that, too.”

Sam shook his head, staring blind at the ground while he walked, and Dean studied his sun-washed face and thought again how beautiful he was, even tired and sore and beaten, caution pinching his voice.

“I want—” Sam cringed, like the blow had already landed. “Things I've got no right asking for. No right under the laws of man or God.”

Dean swallowed. He had thought this was maybe coming and that was good, it was good to get this
set up right now at the start before either of them got confused.

“Those things – no, Sam.” He tried to say it kind. “That ain't...that ain't how it's meant to be. We got turned around is all. But now we got a chance here for something good. For family.”

Sam looked up at the sky, blinking, face tight.

“Fool,” he said, bleak, and this time Dean thought he knew who it was pointed at. It's all right, he wanted to say. It's going to be good. It's going to perfect. He wanted to bang his arm against Sam's, like friends, like brothers, but Sam had lengthened his stride, was stepping out ahead of him, broke-shouldered, hands in his pockets, walking like he was alone on the face of the moon, leaving Dean stranded between him and the women murmuring behind them.

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The wagon came up from the direction of Cold Oak as they were stopped for Ellen and Sam to untack the dead horse, Jo's little palomino. She stood next to Dean, still and pale and shrunk down, and Dean put his arm around her back and watched Sam strain to pull the girth from under the deadweight of its body.

The horse hadn't been chewed on by anything yet. Dean figured it might be a while before the coyotes and the vultures and the rest got hungry enough to try for something Masters had gone near.

Jody and Bobby were sitting up front of the wagon, and Dean's girl was hitched to the back. She whickered when she saw Dean, nodding her head high in the air.

Bobby pulled up next to them and looked down at Dean with relief softening his eyes, gruffing his voice.

“Thought she finally threw you.”

“She would never,” Dean said, untying her, scratching under her mane, leaning forward to breathe her in and whisper to her, his thanks, and how proud he was of her bravery. Sam came up behind him and heaved the dead horse's saddle into the tray. Dean quit rubbing his face against his girl's warm neck and turned his head to see Sam roll his shoulders to ease them, run his hand absently along Dean's girl's rump.

“You all are a sorry-looking bunch and no mistake,” said Jody. “You slept on a cactus or what?” Ellen threw the bridle in the back and brushed herself down, exhausted. “We failed is what.”

“They're all dead,” said Jo, sounding dead herself.

Sam shifted, eyes fixed on the horizon.

“This was bigger than you,” Dean said, directing it at Ellen. “It ain't your fault.”

Bobby sighed and turned on the bench to look at the ruins of Cold Oak, small and broken, floating weary smoke up into the sky.

“It was something all right.”

Ellen sighed too, and tousled her daughter's hair. “Well, unless this old coot's got any more horses hidden around, it looks like it's the wagon for us, girlie.”
“And Masters?” Bobby said.

“I tried to send her back,” Sam said, and Dean thought: *to Hell.* “She fled.”

“So, we got a pissed-off demon on our hands,” said Bobby.

“Seems like,” Dean said. Somewhere out there. Strong enough to take that much punishment and still bat a grown woman like Ellen away like a fly.

Just the beginning, he thought with a chill.

But there was nothing to be changed from here, and Dean was too sore and tired anyway to be afraid. Fear could keep until tomorrow.

“Be nice,” he whispered to his girl, and passed the reins to Sam and dragged himself up into the tray. Made himself some room, moved the rifles and the lantern and held out his hand for Jo and Ellen. Jody tossed down blankets, and Dean wrapped one around his shoulders.

Sam was staring, reins still loose in his hand. Dean gave him the nod and he swung up into the saddle, smooth and easy like the night had taken no toll on him at all. Dean's girl fidgeted and Sam hushed her with a murmur, rubbed the base of her neck.

He looked good up there.

“Stirrups a bit short,” was all he said. Dean rolled his eyes.

Cold Oak looked like it had been hit by the hand of God, still smouldering in places. The bodies inside the corral and outside were black too, unnaturally so. Jody's nag wouldn't take the wagon anywhere it.

“How are we going to clean this up?” Jo said in a small, overwhelmed voice. “How are we going to lay them to rest?”

No one had an answer for her.

Sam sat still and straight on Dean's girl, both of them as dark as the other with the haze of the night rising around them, like a storybook wight or death omen. Staring down at the corral, his face was impassive, unmoved. But those pictures that had hit Dean on the ride out: the bonfires, the guns, and a handful of kids at war in the dark. There had been evil there; pure evil, like Gordon said. Dean couldn't imagine how he'd coped, summoned from a safe place and plunged into that pit.

They returned Ellen and Jo to their empty home, weighed down by the dead horse's tack, no one left to welcome them but their barman. They headed inside without farewell, mute and sapped away into two slight women disappearing into the gloom of their home.

Dean averted his face as Jody clucked her horse on.

Four feet from Dean, in arm's reach if he tried, was Sam, keeping Dean's girl alongside the wagon. Close in body, but he hadn't said a word since they started out, mind running paths Dean was pretty sure he could map. Thinking too much, always thinking too much.

“We're riding out tomorrow,” Dean said, voice roughed up from the smoke but clear and firm for all that. Sam's gaze snapped to him.

“Wait, Dean,” Sam said, and Dean ignored him, twisted round to see Bobby. The old man didn't
like the idea, flicking a keen glance over to Sam; Dean worried briefly if they ought to be riding out that night, but he was too tired for that.

“You know riding out so soon doesn't look good,” Bobby said.

“Nothing I've ever done looks good.”

Bobby sighed and turned back to the front, muttering. “Like talking to a mule sometimes.”

“Ah, I'm prettier than a mule.”

Bobby snorted. “Boy, you look like you been ten days in the desert without shade.”

“Well, if you'd hitched up old Bella here like I told you to we would'a been there hours ago,” Jody said. “Instead you had to pretend you could ride. Bleeding all over my goddamn saddle pad.”

Bobby grumbled. “I just can't do anything right according to you, can I?”

“You wouldn't stay dead at your own funeral,” Jody said, and Dean smiled to himself, cosied down into the blanket, stared out at the road slipping behind them like a river.

“You'll stay on though, Jody, as deputy.”

“You asking or telling?”

“Yeah, I'm asking.”

There was a long silence. Dean closed his eyes.

“You start being nice to me I'll quit you for sure. Shock would be too much for me. I'd sooner have you hungover and nasty.”

“Keep on like that, you won't have to wait long.”

They turned a corner and the warming sun hit Dean's skin. And Sam's eyes too that he could feel, his brother, shifting in his girl's saddle so close Dean could almost hear his heart beat; and somehow, with wooden board for a bed and a musty blanket for a pillow, he fell asleep.

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They ended up at Bobby's house.

Bobby and Sam fixed them some food while Dean and Jody took care of the horses, and that turned out to be a mistake. Sam was heading out as he came back in, that familiar dark skies look on his face. Dean watched his broad back walk away and wondered if this was how it would be now, always watching Sam leave, if he was lucky enough for Sam to come back in the first place.

Inside, Bobby was sitting with a full plate of beans and toast in front of him and a half-empty tumbler. He didn't seem to be doing anything with the food so Dean pulled the plate over, gave Bobby a few minutes to start.

He didn't. Just drank and frowned into his drink until Jody came in, set herself up with a plate and glass, leaning against the counter.

“What did you say to him, then?” Dean asked, around a mouthful of beans. Bobby frowned more.
“Nothing that came as a surprise. Too clever for his own good, that kid. And he knows more than he tells.”

“He doesn't have much trust in him is all,” Dean said. “He'll tell me some time.”

“You got too much trust in you.”

Dean finished what he was chewing and wiped his mouth on his handkerchief, put it down deliberately and looked Bobby in the eye.

“I respect you, Bobby, and the time you're going through. But you be careful. You be careful how you talk about him to me.”

“You ain't known him five minutes,” Jody said, eating one-handed, fork scratching against her plate.

“And you've known him less than that, both of you. I don't want to hear it.”

“Then tell me about Cold Oak,” Bobby said, stern and unmoveable.

He told Bobby what he knew outright, which was not much, and kept Sam's business to himself, and what he suspected, and could tell that Bobby knew that, and didn't like it.

Gordon still alive, most probably, made the frown carve deeper into Bobby's forehead; and Masters fleeing like that, unstoppable, made him mutter and turn to his books. He and Harvelle had been consulting each other, Dean learned, in the brief rageful period after Karen's death, before the drink took over.

One of the books, Bobby showed Dean, had J. Winchester written inside the cover in the exotic flowing script of a dead hand. It had come to him through the late Harvelle husband, who had been a friend of Bobby's it seemed, and a friend of Winchester Senior, and of those other men who knew that these otherworld things were not ravings, not Biblical delusions but a real threat treading the same ground that they trod.

Dean pushed the book away and stood up to wash himself clean of the night.

Bobby took some of those books up to the Harvelle ranch in the afternoon, after Jody moseyed off to the jail. Dean went poking about town, thoughts always falling to Sam and the chances that had brought them together, the kind of fate that Dean recognised as being true. A useless self-deceiving trek, no long tall shadows at the jail or church or any of the places that Dean found himself. With Masters' place closed the Harvelle saloon was dancing, full of malcontents and gossips; he got a whiskey on the house from their barkeep and saw people turn away from him, the ruination of Cold Oak already spreading and growing in blasphemy, and the name Dean Murphy in there as always, muddied and foul.

Dean downed his drink and left. It wasn't his name anyway. Not any more.

Cassie had her mother and her friend Sophia with her at the newspaper, three women kneeling shoulder to shoulder in the front room, murmuring and sifting through the mess of her paper. He helped them right the press and then seemed to be only in the way, clumsy under two mistrustful gazes. Cassie took him by the elbow into the kitchen and made him tea that carried the faint dry tang of ink.

“So,” she said. “Demons.”
He rolled the mug between his palms, letting it burn. “Guess being a hired gun doesn't look so bad anymore, does it?”

“I think I'll stay in the newspaper business,” she said, sardonic, and he kissed her on the forehead and left them sorting type.

He waited then, alone in the kitchen of Bobby's house. Back to sitting at the table, yawning, turning pages on one of Bobby's books, crazy names and fairy stories until his eyes blurred. Until it was fully dark, and the door creaked under Sam's hand.

Dean was so relieved to see him it didn't even register as relief at first, unlocking in his muscles, some pressure or burdening preoccupation in his lungs and head easing. He leaned back and slid over the bottle and a glass for Sam to busy himself with while Dean inspected him. Couldn't think where he'd been. Nowhere really in this small town to go to but he'd found somewhere. He was far advanced from Dean on that account. If he wanted to he might be able to hide for ever.

Dean shut the book and Sam glanced at it, took in the Latin on the cover without blinking. Dean waited some more.

“Listen,” said Sam, eventually, but Dean didn't.

“Bobby and Harvelle think they can put together some solid knowledge about demons.”

“Dean.”

“And he's also heard tell of a gun that might work on her.”

Sam nodded. “Okay.”

They were quiet a long time. Dean studied his face, unembarrassed; tried to see where they matched. Nothing on the surface. Sam sharp where he was round, golden where he was pale, elegant where he was blunt. But the solitary road, the need for something better than what they had. They matched there.

“All I know about him is he was a drunk and he taught you to shoot.”

Sam stared at the glass in his hand, and knocked it back. “And he's dead.”

“And he's dead,” Dean said.

“See you in the morning, Dean,” Sam said, and laid a hand on his shoulder as he passed by, a brief press of his long fingers that Dean felt like a brand, like the fire had found him after all; he clenched his hands on the table, recognising the danger. Every time Sam was near he wanted to reach up and hold him, or pull him down, or find some way to bind them together.

He sat there as Sam settled down in the front room and then sat there some more, until the moon disappeared above the window, eyes feeling like ground glass, muscles heavy with a tiredness beyond tiredness. Finished his drink and headed through; put J. Winchester's book by Sam's boots, and resettled the blanket over his shoulders as he laid still and pretended to be asleep, hair soft over his eyes.

Bobby had cleared the bed for Dean in some fit of reconciliation, and Dean sagged down onto it, atop the covers, and still his mind was turning over. What if he went back to Jim's church, went through the parish records. What if there was some sign of him, how he came to be wandering in those woods instead of with his brother and his father. Never came to Eldorado, never drew a gun
on the hundred people he'd drawn on, or the kid Max Miller.

What if Dean had grown up a Winchester instead of a Murphy, with someone to run with, and tease, and tell about girls. What if he'd had that same knowledge that Sam guarded so fierce and silent, like to know the shape of evil in the world was to know the evil in Sam himself.

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He woke before dawn, freezing, and knowing something to be wrong.

The front room was empty. Had no one jammed into the confines of the couch. No one standing by the window, or stoking the fire, or peering in from the kitchen. Just a pillow and a book set neatly on the sideboard, and a leather jacket resting over the arm.

Sam was in the stables, whispering something by lantern light to Dean's Judas girl as she snuffled at him, scratching her between the eyes. His buckskin was tacked, saddlebags full, blanket rolled up and tied down. Sawed-off secure in the saddle holster.

Sam sighed when he heard Dean's tread, touched his forehead briefly to Dean's girl's. He had dark circles under his eyes, turned to look at Dean like he was underwater, bone-tired, resistant muscles. Dean felt no pity.

“You're up early,” Sam said.

Dean stared at him a while.

“Guess I have to if I want to keep up with you.”

Dean held out the jacket and Sam shook his head. “You need a new one. It'll fit you better anyway.”

“You son of a bitch,” Dean said, and heard his voice break on the hurt. “You fucking yellow-belly.”

Sam pressed the heel of his palm hard to his forehead, mouth twisting down and throat working. Chickened out again, turned his back on Dean and headed over to the buckskin, checked the girth, brushed imaginary dirt from his flank.

Dean could murder him.

“What do you think I've had in my life, Sam? You think I'm so rich with friends and places to be that I don't care you're slinking off without a how d'ye do?”

“I'm not—”

“You have to step over an army of brothers and sisters and cousins to get out that door this morning?”

Sam clenched his jaw and glared. “Do you see me surrounded, Dean? Do you think there is anyone left? Huh? Where do you think they are?”

“That's what I'm—”

“You believe in Heaven?” he snapped, going white with anger. “If I'm lucky, it's Heaven, 'cause that other place is real too, Dean. You think I could live with myself, asking you to come into that?”
“It ain't,” Dean said, too loud, making the buckskin toss his head in alarm. He breathed, tried to steady himself. “It ain't a matter of asking. It never has been. I wish you would listen to me.”

Sam shook his head again and turned away, clutched at his saddle, eyes screwed shut.

“Dean,” he pleaded. “I'm trying to tell you. Once you open this door. You can't, you don't know. I can't.” He broke off like it hurt, voice racked over the pain of some losing battle inside, and then, high and afraid, breaths coming fast: “Dean.”

“Shh.” Fear infected Dean too and he went to him, pried him away from the saddle and drew him in. “Hey,” he said, soft, and rubbed Sam's back and pressed a hand in his hair until he lay his head on Dean's shoulder, a great tremble running through him and his breath still bolting, his hands wound in Dean's shirt, crushed between them, fists over Dean's heart. “Hey, it's okay.”

“What I wish,” Sam whispered, hoarse and quiet enough into the skin of Dean's neck that Dean could tell here was the true unspoken secret, beyond demons, beyond their parentage, beyond anything he'd said in the church; something maybe never spoken aloud before or even daringly thought. “Is that someone had said to me, at the start, your name doesn't matter, or your, your blood, or any fate or plan some other might have for you. And I wish that could have been true.”

Dean swallowed and tightened his grip. It was a hard and sorry thing, to wish for things to be other than they were. He knew that.

“Like a child,” Sam said, rising into a sneer, and then he let go the front of Dean's shirt and his arms wrapped around tight around Dean's back, and his voice wavered again. “I wish you could have been there.”

“Me too,” Dean murmured. “Me too.”

He turned his head and pressed his lips to Sam's temple, and Sam craned back, eyes bright with sorrow and surprise, his mouth parted. Right there and so warm, so close to knocking Dean sideways into that other untellable story, thick in the scant air between them, alive and crowing about the careworn curve of his brow and how solid and present he was in Dean's arms. They stood there, like that, for seconds that Dean couldn't count. It was a near thing.

Dean ripped his gaze away and clapped him softly on the cheek and stepped back, through the resistant strength of his embrace; got him at arm's length, and his heart beat a little easier then.

“You know what I think?” he said, and Sam blinked, stepped back as well and took a deep breath, pinched the bridge of his nose, cleared his throat.

“You can think?” he said, sore but making a go of it. Christ, Dean was proud of him. The kid just didn't know how to lay down.

“I think you either never saddled a horse before in your life, or you were taking your sweet time for some other reason.”

Sam gawked at him a moment, jaw hanging. Ducked his head and hid the beginnings of a smile, rubbed at the back of his neck, false offence in his voice. “I've spent twenty-two years tacking up horses.”

“Then it must be some other reason.”

Sam held his breath; blew it out and lifted his shoulder, wry. “Maybe.”
“One hundred percent,” Dean said, folding his arms, rocking back on his heels in surety.

And Sam looked at him with the corners of his eyes crinkling and Dean saw it happen, saw him surrender, collapse into a fond exasperation pointed Dean's way.

“Oh, okay,” he said, and laughed, mirrored Dean's grin with a delight of his own. “Okay, Dean.”

So they rose into their saddles and met the dawn on its newborn terms, nothing with them but their saddlebags and the clothes on their back and their brotherhood. The town was still in shadow, rooftops gilded, but already awake and moving. Bellows firing up at the smithy. Women carrying water and children dodging around the horses to chase a dog between buildings. Old Thompson throwing the morning slop at his hogs. Cassie pegging up paper on the lines outside her front door, wiping her hands on her apron and waving at them through her yawn.

They nodded to Bobby who was smoking his breakfast pipe on the porch outside of the jail, chair tipped back against the wall.

“Stay away from that bourbon, Bobby,” Dean called to him as they passed. Bobby tipped his hat.

“Watch yourselves, boys, and write me when you stop long enough for mail, you hear? I'll have news.”

The way out of town was firm and smooth and Dean let the noise of the horses and leather seep into his bones. A feeling was bubbling in him light and high, wanting to be close to the sky and he steered them at first chance off the southbound coach road and onto a prairie track, the land opening up around them.

“Dean?” Sam said after a few minutes, and Dean looked over. “Where are we even going?”

“Where were you planning?”

He shrugged. “Forty miles in any direction and then the bottom of a bottle.”

He said it like it was funny. Dean curled his lip and scratched at his stubble. “You got a fallback?”

“Over the Mountains of the Moon,” Sam said, and Dean rolled his eyes. Sam laughed, a rich free and clear sound. “Down the Valley of the Shadow. Ride, boldly ride, the shade replied, if you seek for El Dorado.”

“Well, you've seen it,” Dean said. “I hope it lived up to your expectations.”

Sam got a look like it was hard to decide. “I've been to nicer places.”

“More worse ones I'd bet.”

“Yeah, you might win that bet. Say, where's your hat?”

“Burned up in a stables, I reckon,” Dean said, nodding back the way they came, and Sam grinned and stretched out his big hand across the gap to ruffle through Dean's hair.

Dean ducked and swatted him away.

“Ride, boldly ride,” Dean said, and grinned back, and launched his girl into a gallop, and took the road out of town flying with his brother by his side.
The end.

End Notes

_Sam and Dean will return._

(prob not for a while though.) Feedback/concrit welcome.

_Rebloggable tumblr link for those so inclined._

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