Prologue:

“Something's coming. Darkness on the horizon.” Missouri Moseley turns troubled eyes to the shadowed figure in her doorway.

“You feel it too?” John Winchester's voice comes out low and gravelly, heavy with exhaustion and fear. He reeks of destiny, dark and troubled.

“I do.” Missouri offers her tarot deck, watching as John chooses a card at random. She knows what it is even before he throws the Ten of Pentacles in reverse. Family Misfortune. Caution.

John stares at it, and a cold feeling of foreboding crawls up his spine.

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“Hey, beautiful,” Dean murmurs. Sleepy eyes blink up at him, and Dean can't help but run his hands through her hair, light brown curls tangling in his fingers. “I gotta go now, but I'll be back soon, okay?”

“Okay,” she mumbles thickly, leaning into his hand. She smiles at him, lazy and wide, and Dean gives into the urge to lean down and press a kiss to her forehead.

“I love you,” he whispers. Part of him wants to crawl into bed with her and never let go, but he needs to do this, so he pulls himself away from her, forces himself to leave. He pauses at the bedroom door to watch Mer snuggle back in his bed, looking small and fragile. His need to protect her, keep her safe, wells up in him, makes his head spin. He wants to leave so he can fight anything that might harm her; he wants to stay so he can protect her from the world.

He checks the salt lines on the window sill and the protective runes painted on the walls one last time before he goes, closing the door softly behind him.

It never gets any easier.
Chapter 1


Dean shoves his hands further into his pockets as he catches his first look at Sam in nearly four years. His brother is taller than when he left, a little broader. He grew into his gangly teenage body at some point. But the most obvious change is his smile. Open and carefree and happy. Content.

A group of people in the audience whoop and cheer as Sam receives his diploma, a bright white piece of paper tied with a bow. Four years of separation, all for this moment. Sam pumps his fist triumphantly in the air as he exits the stage and retakes his seat, still grinning broadly, the rolled scrap of paper clutched in his hand.

Dean spends the rest of the graduation ceremony staring at the back of Sam's head, thankful that their last name is close to the end of the alphabet. Otherwise, he'd lose his mind waiting for the rest of the world to have their moment in the limelight.

The people around him are making him itch: the bored siblings who have either been there, done that or are secretly yearning for their chance; weepy mommas, this moment bittersweet as their chicks really do grow up; proud puffed-up poppas who are busy pretending not to be weepy.

“Thank fuck,” he grumbles when it's finally over. He wades through the crowd, trying to get a glimpse of Sammy. He has no idea what he'll say after four years of silence, but Sam deserves to know someone was here to see him graduate. That they hadn't deserted him, even if Sam had jumped ship without a backwards glance.

Dean almost runs over him. He turns around and Sam's right behind him, kissing some bottle blonde with great tits, hands sliding down down down. Dean watches, frozen, as Sam and his girl are mobbed by enthusiastic college kids and recent graduates.

There it is, right in front of him: Sammy living the life he's always wanted. Normal. Wife, 2.5 kids, white picket fence, clean-cut friends with no dark pasts. The dog Dad never let them have.

Promises of the future that Dean can't give him.

Dean backs away and heads for his car, proud to say he watched Sam walk at his college graduation. He sincerely hopes Sammy enjoys normal, has a wonderful life. That it doesn't disappoint him.

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“Samuel Winchester, Stanford grad!” Mike crows, pulling Sam into a giant bear hug. Sam laughs and messes up Mike's carefully gelled hair. Then Jess is there, looking gorgeous and happy. He ignores the catcalls and jeers when she kisses him, raking her nails against his scalp. He slides his hands under her ass, the cheap nylon of her graduation gown thin enough that he can feel the lack of underwear under her dress. She giggles into the kiss when he groans and they break apart gasping for air, goofy grins on their faces.

“Jeeze, dude!” Jerry punches him in the shoulder and Sam tenses. Not even four years of college have broken him of his father's conditioning. “Hot people shouldn't be allowed to get together. Y'all drove that
dude away! He took one look at you and vamoosed, couldn't take the heat.” Jerry licks his finger and touches it to Sam's ass, making a sizzling noise. Sam rolls his eyes and glances over his shoulder where Jerry pointed. He doesn't see anyone at first, but the crowd parts just right and Sam forgets how to breathe. He only catches a fleeting glimpse of his brother's back, but Sam would know Dean anywhere.

“I'll be right back,” Sam mutters, taking off after Dean.

“Sam? Where ya going? Dude! Sam!” Jerry yells. But Sam's gone, daily runs at bumfuck in the morning serving him well.

Sam stumbles when he catches his first good look at Dean, in profile, waiting for the light to change. Dean looks...like Dean. Ancient beat-up leather jacket, worn jeans, short hair.

“Dean”

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Dean is waiting to cross the street when he hears someone call his name. His heart rate picks up, and he stares at the light, commanding it to change. Fuck it, he's in California. Pedestrian has the right of way, right? He jogs across the street, ignoring the increasingly loud calls.

“Dean!” Sam's hand lands hot and heavy on Dean's shoulder, and he pauses to savor the touch, to collect himself, before turning around. They both ignore the fact that he was running away.

“Hey, Sammy,” he says, cocky grin firmly in place, his tone insolent and breezy.

“Dean,” Sam breathes, his hand clutching his brother's shoulder. His brother. Who's here. After four years. Sam tries to think of something—anything—to say, but his mind is still caught on Dean being here. At his graduation.

“Um...Sam?” Dean glances at the hand on his shoulder pointedly.

Sam blushes and yanks his hand away. “So, uh, what are you doing? Here, I mean.”

Dean shrugs nonchalantly. “Was in the area.” They both know it's a complete and utter lie. They both let it go and subside into an awkward silence. Dean shifts from foot to foot, hands jammed deep in his jacket pockets, eyes skittering around. It never used to be this hard. He has too much to say; doesn’t know where to start. “So, I'm gonna just—”

“Stay,” Sam blurts before Dean can make his excuses and leave. If Dean disappears now Sam is pretty sure it'll be another four years before they see each other again. It's painfully obvious Dean had never meant for Sam to know he was here. “There's this party. At my place. Tonight. I'd, uh...”

“Okay,” Dean agrees. He doesn't allow himself to think about how easy it had been to make that decision. Sam's smile makes him feel...well, just feel.

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“Sam, what's up with you tonight?” Jess laughs. Sam has developed some kind of weird OCD in the three
hours since he graduated, checking and rechecking everything in the apartment. He's even vacuumed. Before today, Jess would've sworn up one side and down the other that Sam was allergic to cleaning.

“Do we have the Jack Daniels and Johnnie Walker Black Label?” Sam asks. Jess watches in amazed horror as Sam actually moves the couch so he can get underneath it.

“Seriously, Sam, what the hell’s going on?”

Sam pauses in his frenetic cleaning, eyeing Jess speculatively. “Ah, well. At graduation? I ran into...there was...Dean.”

“Dean?” Jess purrs suggestively, sidling up to Sam. Her hands travel over Sam's pecs, down to his abs.

“And who is Dean? An ex?” She licks Sam's ear and chuckles when he gasps.

Sam groans, old memories struggling towards the surface. “He's...oh God, he's my...” Sam growls and kisses her, tumbling them both onto the couch. Jess giggles and wraps her legs around his waist. “Off, off!” Sam paws at her jeans and she laughs at him again, muttering something about cavemen. Jess, with her marvelous, wonderful fingers, unzips her jeans and Sam wedges his hand in the snug material of her panties. Lacy, frilly things that are smokin' hot but hide all the best parts. She tries to tug his shirt off, but he's only willing to give up the one arm, so it hangs haphazardly on his body. He's just about to get to the good stuff when the fucking doorbell rings.

He and Jess curse in unison. Someone starts banging on the door and ringing bell incessantly.

“Hey! Lovebirds! Stop fucking on the couch and open the door!”

“I hate Mike,” Sam growls. Jess giggles and bites him right above his nipple. He kisses her hungrily, because he loves Jess's kinks and his cock pulses hungrily between his legs and he can. “Seriously. Loathe.”

“Oooooh, you're pulling out the big words!” Jess says breathlessly.

“It's six letters,” Sam jokes, smiling down at her.

“Come on, open the goddamn door or I'm looking through the windows!” Mike hollers.

“I bet they're on the floor,” Jerry muses helpfully. “It always takes them longer when they're on the floor.”

Sam swears viciously, pulling his shirt back on and watching sadly as Jess zips herself back up.

“Later tonight,” she promises huskily. Sam whimpers; Jess always keeps her promises. She sashays to the door with an extra swish to her hips. Sam's idiot friends—because she sure as hell isn't claiming them right now—grin at her from the stoop.

“Damn, girl, it's about time. Did he at least get you off?”

“Shut the hell up, Mikey,” Jess warns.

“I'm just sayin',” Mike protests, pushing his way inside, arms full of alcohol, “that we gotta make sure Sam's taking care of his girl half as good as his boys.”
“Haha,” Sam grumbles sarcastically, stealing one of Mike's beers. He's been dating Jess since sophomore year, and he's only had two—no, one sort-of boyfriend.

“Dude! Not cool!” Mike protests. Sam sticks his tongue out at his friend.

“Jesus, Jess, you really went overboard with the cleaning,” Jerry observes. “You and Sam realize you hadn't christened the rug under the couch or something?”

Before Sam has a chance to respond, the doorbell rings again. Jerry and Mike stare at the door with narrowed, offended eyes.

“You suddenly have a couple of other best friends who're willing to annoy you early, Sambo?” Mike asks with mock affront.

“I'd need a couple of best friends first,” Sam fires back, tossing his empty beer can at Mike's head. Jess rolls her eyes at their antics and goes to answer the door. God DAMN.

The guy standing on her doorstep is gorgeous. He's shorter than Sam (who isn't?), with beautiful green eyes and a tight, hot body. He's exactly Sam's type, and she lets her eyes travel over him. Nice. Very nice.

“You must be Dean.” The guy smiles at her, and Jess feels her body react to him of its own accord. Oh yeah, definitely Sam's type. She leans against the doorjamb, molding to it in the way that had driven Sam into her bed the first time. Dean gives her a slow, appreciative once-over.

“Sam sure knows how to pick 'em,” she says with a grin, and Dean couldn't agree more.

“Jess? Who's at the door?” Sam comes around the bend and stops when he sees his brother. Dean is actually here. Sam blinks, but Dean's still standing there. He knows he's staring but he can't stop. Dean came.

“I got bored,” Dean offers, and Sam can hear the veiled undercurrent of discomfort. Sam smiles softly at him, a warm glow that fills the empty spaces in Dean's chest.

Yeah?” Sam asks, unable to stop the goofy smile on his face. Jess glances between the two of them, feeling the undercurrent of something deep jump between them. She briefly wonders if things are good enough between them for a threesome. They can't be so bad off if Dean showed up for Sam's graduation, right?

“Why don't you come in, I'm sure we can unbore you,” Jess offers and motions Dean in. The air of vulnerability disappears behind a smooth mask of cocky self-assurance.

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Dean relaxes in his seat, half-full tumbler of Black Label in his hand. He lets the chatter of Sam's college friends flow around him. They're alright people, harmless enough. Completely naïve, babes in the woods, but that's probably why Sammy likes them. And he can tell they truly like Sam, which puts them a step above the majority of fucktards in the world.
Sam keeps stealing little glances at him. If he thinks Dean isn't catching them, Sam is sorely out of
practice. Or college has made him dumber. That's always a possibility.

“So Dean, tell us something.” Dean turns his attention to Mike, a red-headed cut-up with an easy smile.
Dean takes a sip of his whisky, raising his eyebrows in expectation. “When'd you date Sambo here?”
Dean chokes on his drink, the alcohol burning his throat as it works its way down his windpipe. He turns
and glares at Sam. Jess's flirting makes so much more sense now. And it means Sam has never told his
friends about him. They probably don't even know Sam has a brother. Sam catches the look and glances
away.

“Yeah,” Jess adds, “I thought I knew about all his boys.”

“Dean's not my...” Sam trails off, because...no. Sam clears his throat. “Dean's my brother.”

“Your what now?” Jerry asks.

“Oh my God,” Jess breathes, looking at Dean with awed eyes. Dean shifts uncomfortably in his chair.
“Oh my God, this...this is your older brother?” Jess smacks Sam with a pillow. “You should have told me!
Jesus, Sam!” She turns to Dean, her eyes alight with questions. Dean knows what's coming, and Jess will
be sorely disappointed if she honestly thinks he'll tell her anything about their past. “You're about the only
part of his family he's ever talked about. And it took me two years to pry the information out of him.”
Sam blushes and covers his face with his hands. He does not need Dean hearing these things, knowing that
Sam's affections run this deep.

“Yeah?” Dean asks, smirking. The information leaves a sour taste in his mouth. He tries to wash it away
with Scotch whisky, but not even Johnny can cut the taste of bitter disappointment. “Like what?”

“You have a brother?” Mike explodes staring at Dean like it's his fault Sam's a bastard.

“He does,” Dean says smoothly. “He doesn't like that I'm hotter, so he doesn't talk about me much.” Sam
resists the urge to throw his beer bottle at Dean's head.

Jess corners Sam when they party is in full swing and Dean is occupied hitting on all of Jess's attractive
friends (of which there are many).

“Why didn't you tell me it was him?” she hisses, dumping an armful of cans in the recycling bin. “You let
me think he was...and I was...” Sam turns and presses her against the refrigerator.

“You may recall,” he says in her ear, “that I was trying to tell you when you distracted me!” Jess's expression
turns sultry and minx-like.

“Oh, I distracted you, did I?” Sam nods, nibbling at her full lips. “Then I think I should apologize.” She
cups Sam through his jeans, massaging his half-hard cock through the layers.

“Whoa, sorry, just wanted another beer,” Dean says, not sounding sorry at all. Sam glares at Dean, who
holds his hands up, all innocence and apology. Sam snorts. Dean, innocent. Yeah, right.
Jess slips from beneath Sam, heading back towards the party. “You boys catch up. I'm going to be a good hostess.”

For the first time, Dean and Sam are well and truly alone.

“Girl's hot, dude. My little Sammy, all growned up.” Dean tilts his head back and chugs, emptying almost a whole beer straight into his stomach. When he rights himself, Sam's eyes are focused on his chin where one errant drop has escaped.

Sam clears his throat and his head. “Yeah, Jess is...she's great.”

Dean quenches the jealousy at San's butter-soft tone, eyes gazing off into the distance and looking like the penultimate chick-flick Fabio with his long flowing hair. Dean reaches down to check his manhood. Still there, thank God. He pops open another beer.

“She's a little out of your league though, Sammy.”

“Shut up,” Sam says, blushing. It's not strictly untrue. They subside into awkward silence, neither of them sure of what to say. Four years is a long time.

“What about you?” Sam asks. “You got...” he waves his hands expressively, trailing off because this is Dean. God's gift to women and the occasional very lucky guy. Sam had been Dean's only—he cuts that thought off before it even has a chance to form.

“I do.” Sam almost misses the soft admission, uttered with reverence.

Sam blinks. “...you do?” To say Sam is shocked doesn't quite cover it. And he doesn't think about the knot that's developed in his stomach.

“Yeah, she's my—”

“Saaaaaaaaamaambo!” Two drunk-looking frat boys burst into the small room looking for Sam to do a keg stand, and the moment is gone.
Chapter 2

Dean groans, the dull ache in his back waking him up well before he wants to be awake and alert. He rolls off the couch and into a crouch, twisting his spine so it cracks. Damn that feels good.

Dean wrinkles his nose as the scent of stale beer and drunk people invades his senses. He only ever goes to college parties because the girls are easy on the eyes and easier in bed, but they aren't worth it if he doesn't get any. And he definitely doesn't crash on lumpy couches that destroy his back when he has a perfectly good, if dubiously decorated, motel room at his disposal.

So why had he done this again?

Oh, yeah. Because Sam had asked him to, with those big puppy dog eyes and drunk sloppy grin.

Dean scowls and wades through the discarded beer cans, navigates a pool of something toxic, and finds his leather jacket safely tucked away in the hall closet. He ignores a drunken coed sprawled on the floor and fishes his phone out of his pocket.

He has to hand it to Sammy though: his baby brother knows how to throw a party.

His phone beeps as he turns it on, blinking one new voicemail. Dean slips out onto the front stoop to dial his message service. His father's voice crackles through the line, a relief after silence for so many days.

"Dean, something...is starting to happen I...ink it's...I need to...what's going...you may need S...to help you. Be very careful, Dean. T...care of her."

"I can never go home." The hairs on the back of Dean's neck stand up at the woman's voice, something undeniably supernatural about it. Clearest fucking EVP he's ever heard. "I can never go home."

"Dean?" He spins around, reaching instinctively for a gun that isn't there. Sam is standing in the doorway, hair flying in every direction, eyes misty with sleep. He yawns and stretches, his threadbare sleep-shirt riding up to show a pale patch of skin, darker hairs disappearing into the waistband of his sweats. The look on Dean's face wakes Sam up. "What's wrong?"

Dean hits replay and passes Sam the phone without a word. Sam's jaw tightens as he listens to the message.

"That's the first I've heard from him in a few days. Something's wrong."

"You know how Dad gets during a hunt. The connection is just bad, he was probably just checking in." Sam would have an easier time convincing Dean if he actually believed the shit he's trying to sell.

"And the ghost at the end?" Sam's lips press together. "I'm going to find him," Dean says, turning towards where he's parked the Impala. Dad's a few hours away, he can be there by dusk. Sam watches his brother walk away, and something inside pushes him towards Dean. Four years is a long time to be angry, to carry around the weight of his family. His regrets. He makes his choice in an instant.

"Hey. Give me a minute and I'll go with you." Sam doesn't think too hard about what prompts him to go on one last foray into the life he's tried so hard to escape. He's out, has a full ride to Stanford law...but at
This is the first time he's seen or heard from Dean in three years. One call in between freshman and sophomore year and Sam had still been too wrapped up in himself to return it. He's realized over the course of the night how much he's missed Dean, how no one can fill that particular place in his heart—not even Jess. Sam chalks it up to gut instinct; that's the first thing Dean had taught him about hunting, after all, trusting his gut.

Dean studies Sam and finally nods, uncharacteristically silent, and follows Sam back inside the house. He's itching to get on the road, find Dad, but he'll be patient for Sammy. They still have to go by his motel and check him out, pick up his stuff but...to have Sam sitting in the passenger seat again, the world as it should be? Dean can't pass that up. And he can always hope.

Jess is sitting at the kitchen counter, a pot of coffee beside her.

"Everything okay?" she asks, glancing between the two brothers.

"Our Dad may be in trouble, he hasn't checked in for a while. We're gonna go look for him," Sam tells her, worried at how easy it is to slip back into half-truths and lies of omission. He kisses her lightly, acutely aware of Dean's gaze. "I should only be gone a couple of days—a week at the most."

"I hope he's alright," Jess murmurs, face open and sympathetic.

"I'm sure he's fine. Dad always comes through in the end—the man's indestructible. But still..."

"You worry," Jess says with an understanding smile. She runs her hands affectionately through Sam's floppy hair and Dean has to look away. The familiarity of it all, the intimacy between them. He feels like an intruder in Sam's happy, normal life.

"I'm gonna go pack. Take care of Dean for me?" He pauses for one last kiss before thundering up the stairs. Dean's discomfort grows once Sam is out of the room. Jess is studying him in that annoying way all the women not interested in what he has to offer tend to do. Like they want to burrow into him and find out what makes him tick. And now she's looking at him with sad, understanding eyes.

He really doesn't want to be alone with Jess and her well-meaning looks of concern. He especially doesn't want to get to know her as Sammy's girlfriend—though he can't help thinking, again, that Sam has great taste in women—because even after four years it still fucking hurts.

"You're really worried about your dad, huh?" she asks. Dean raises an eyebrow in question but doesn't offer anything else. Jess fidgets. "Sam told me about your dad. A little. Not much. I kind of thought...I mean, I used to think your dad...that he..." Jess trails off uncomfortably and she distracts herself with her coffee. Her face is bright red and, in a flash, Dean gets what she's talking about.

He straightens and gets utterly, blindingly mad at Sam because what Jess is suggesting? No. Absolutely not. How could Sam let anyone think...

Jess steps back from him, quick to go on, "No, no, Sam set me straight. Promised nothing like...that...happened. There are just these scars that he won't talk about, and things about his past he avoids. I found out about you by accident and then couldn't shut him up, but he never let anything slip
about his dad. So I get the feeling he's going more because you're upset rather than because he thinks something's really wrong.” Dean covers his surprise by draining the rest of his coffee, lets the bitter liquid slide hot into his stomach. When he comes up for air, Jess is looking at him with amazed respect. The loud clatter of Sam's giant feet on the steps is a godsend.

“Got everything?” Dean asks, setting his cup down.

“All the essentials,” Sam says agreeably. He scoops Jess up, presses her against the table and slips some tongue into the kiss. Dean turns away, their affection and easy rapport making his stomach churn. Jesus, when did he turn into...this? He mentally snaps himself out of it. They have a hunt and it's time to get on the road. Dean noisily slurps at the dredges of his coffee, telling Sam in his annoyingly passive-aggressive way to hurry the hell up.

“Call me when you get there?” Jess asks.

“Of course,” Sam agrees, staring deep into her eyes. Dean groans and bangs his head against the wall. This is like a really bad chick flick. The wet sounds of kissing fill the air and he starts hammering his head against the unforgiving surface. Sam breezes by him, bag slung over his shoulder.

“You coming?” he calls over his shoulder. Dean feels the age-old urge to kill his brother rise up. For the first time in years Dean feels utterly content.

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Things are at once comfortably familiar and awkwardly new. Sam sits in the passenger seat of the Impala like he never left, the leather welcoming him like an old friend. Sam's fingers drum against his knee and he stares out at the passing scenery.

In the intervening years, Dean has never quite adapted to Sam's absence, even going so far as to pick up the occasional hitchhiker just to make the unforgiving silence go away. But the reality of Sam being here is more complex than he'd remembered or imagined. He doesn't know what to say to his new, college-educated baby brother. Doesn't know where to start cataloguing all the changes he has gone through since Sam left—though Mer would be the logical place to start.

Besides, Sam graduated the other day. He has a shiny piece of paper filled with calligraphy that says he's smart. Sam should notice things. And Dean knows his brother, so eventually Sam's going to start asking questions and want to talk and Dean...is going to fight him for a little while then give in. Just enough so that Sam can fill in the blanks and Dean can pretend it never happened.

“I'm gonna ask Jess to marry me,” Sam says into the silence. Well. Sammy never does do things by half. That's the Winchester in him, Dad to the core; the both have a nasty habit of dropping A-Bombs out of the blue. 'You're not going on this one, Dean.' 'I've paired up with another hunter, why don't you take a break, Dean?' 'I'm leaving for college, talk to you in four years when I stumble upon you at my graduation, Dean.' 'I'm going to marry Jane Normal and have 2.3 kids, a dog, a white picket fence and normal normalcy, Dean.'

But really, it's not THAT much of a surprise because Jess is hot, into Sam, comes with a great rack and a nice ass. Why wouldn't Sam marry her?
Still, it's one thing to know and another thing to know.

Dean's nails bite into the leather of the steering wheel, and he lets up on his grip before he maims his baby.

“You knock her up or something?” he asks, proud that his voice comes out low and mocking. Sam scowls and punches Dean in the shoulder. Dean grins the most cocky, obnoxious smirk he owns.

“Jerk,” Sam mutters prissily.

“Bitch,” Dean returns happily. And suddenly they're bickering again, like they never stopped. As if Stanford never happened and Jess wasn't around. Sam still pretends to hate Dean's music while popping in his favorite Metallica tape. Dean sneaks a bean burrito at their last gas stop and Sam places that particular Dean-smile seconds before the first SBD-bomb hits. They pull into a crappy motel; Sam scowls at Evan Lorne's credit card paying their way, and they fall into their separate beds. It's a little weird when Sam shuts and locks the door to change clothes, but Dean's determined not to be too much of a jerk on this trip, and Sam's kept the bitchfaces to a minimum. Sam is almost asleep when Dean puts on a porn called “Werewolf Women of the SS.”

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They find Dad's journal, a woman in white, and a new set of cops out for their blood in Centennial. Business as usual. Dad is long gone, nothing but a few coordinates (their marching orders as a goodbye). Sam doesn't miss this at all.

Sam stares out the window, jaw tight, pissed at Dad all over again because he always pulls this shit without thinking about what it does to Dean; he never considers a few words would be all it took to smooth things over. John Winchester's always taking Dean for granted, his perfect soldier. Sam's not sure which he hates more: Dean's attitude or Dad's. Which is the lesser evil, blind faith or blind stubbornness?

They pull up in front of Sam's apartment, the Impala idling with a purr.

“You gonna follow those coordinates?” Sam asks, even though he knows the answer.

Dean shrugs. “It's something to do.”

“Alright. Well, uh, give me a call sometime, okay? It's...been too long.” Dean's look is inscrutable, and Sam shifts under its weight.

“You have a phone too, Sammy. Number hasn't changed.” Dean feels a petty, vicious surge of satisfaction when Sam flushes and can't meet his eyes.

“You'll call me if you find him? Maybe I can meet up with you later, huh?”

“Yeah, alright.” Dean's tone isn't promising. Sam nods and retrieves his duffle out of the back. Sam turns to head for the house, and Dean can't help it. “Sam! You know, we made a hell of a team back there.” Sam smiles tightly, hand gripping the side of the car.

“Yeah,” he agrees. Because they really do. Did.
Sam trudges up the steps to his house, feet strangely heavy. Dean watches him go, watches Sam walk away from him again. The house is dark and uninviting as Dean pulls away, something sinister itching at the back of his mind.

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Sam dumps his bag in the foyer and wearily makes his way up stairs.

Fuck.

This whole debacle has awakened the part of him that lusts after the adrenalin rush of a hunt, craves the feeling of taking out something dangerous and saving lives. It makes him uneasy. When he came to Stanford his need for stability and acceptance had drowned out the voice. Forced it to be content with early morning runs and the occasional kata.

But now the need is wide awake and he can feel it in his chest, restless and growing. What does that mean for him and Jess? If he can't control it, if she isn't enough to subdue it again...

He flops down on the bed, exhausted. All he wants to do is sleep. His problems will still be there in the morning. He thinks he feels something wet on his forehead, but ignores it. When he feels it again, Sam opens his eyes and the world explodes into flames.
Chapter 3

Dean and Sam spend a week looking for the demon that killed Jess. A week looking for a lead, a week since Sam said, focused and intense, “We have work to do.” A week away from home.

Dean sighs. Sam is upset and he doesn't know how to fix it. He's asked—okay, maybe not in so many words, but Sam understood—and all he'd gotten were mumbled assurances that Sam is alright. Sam is not alright. Sam is a lying liar.

Dean can sense the darkness in his brother—can always sense it with Sam, even miles away. Sam's in pain, and his emotions ricochet through Dean's brain leaving dark bruises on his psyche and a headache in their wake. But there isn't anything Dean can do if Sam won't let him.

So here they are, in a hotel half-way to Blackwater Ridge, Colorado. Following Dad's coordinates.

Dean needs to make a phone call. He steps outside and scans for Sam—not that he can miss Sasquatch or anything—while the phone rings.

“'lo?” Dean's heart jumps and a sappy smile takes over his face, but he can't help it.

“Hey, baby girl. How ya doing?” Dean has to pull the phone away from his ear with a laugh, Mer's happy squeal nearly deafening him.

“I'm great! Whit and I went shopping.” Dean winces. Those two shopping? Never a good sign. Especially for his bank account. “When're you coming home?”

“I dunno, Mer. I, uh, got caught up in something big. But I'll be home as soon as I can, okay?” Dean holds his breath, waiting for her to say something. “Mer?”

“You promise?” Dean leans his head against the deck's support post, hating the tremulous note in his girl's voice. Because no, he can't promise. He needs to do this for Sam, see this out for as long as Sam wants to. Needs to. And he doesn't want to choose between them. “It's okay,” Mer assures him, utterly sincere. It's worse, that she really means it. Dean squeezes his eyes shut and presses the heel of his hand against his eyes. “We're doing okay.”

“Yeah,” Dean mutters. He can hear the strain in his own voice.

Sam balances his armful of junk food, cursing as a Twinkie falls to the ground. He trips over his feet in an attempt not to step on it and fails miserably. He ends up flat on his ass, one crushed Twinkie and various sugary non-foods scattered around him.

This is officially the lowest point of his life.

He sighs and stands up, but sinks back down when he catches sight of Dean's silhouette against the door, phone pressed to his ear. He looks...focused. Intent.

14
Sam hunkers down, feeling bad about eavesdropping on Dean's conversation...oh, who is he kidding? He so doesn't. Dean has been elusive about this Mer chick he's hooked up with. Sam is really interested in meeting whoever caught Dean's attention so completely because Dean? Not the settling down kind of guy.

“Swear on my life, Mer. I won't be gone much longer.” Dean sounds like each word hurts him to speak and for the first time Sam realizes that his brother has a life he's putting on hold for Sam. The selfish part of Sam is smugly pleased that Dean still places Sam above all others.

That selfish part of Sam? Also hates this Mer person.

“Promise,” Dean says, heartfelt. “I love you, too.” Dean hangs up the phone, his throat tight. He scrubs a hand through his hair and shakes it off; time to make sure Sam hasn't gotten himself kidnapped by the local bad guy.

Sam hears Dean's footsteps approaching and throws himself at the scattered candy, trying to make it look like he's just pulled his klutz act.

“Need some help there, Sammy?”

“Nah, you know...just...whatever.” Dean smirks and helps Sam gather up their dinner. He briefly considers eating the crushed Twinkie anyways before he catches Sam's look.

“It's wrapped in plastic!” he protests. Sam rolls his eyes in disgust. He and Dean reach for the same candy bar and the tips of their fingers brush.

****

Something is bothering Sam. Again. More than normal. Dean can feel the tight knot of anxiety in the part of his brain labeled 'Sam,' sure. But he can also see it: his brother is wearing Bitchface #24, which isn't a pure Bitchface as it comes with a huge, steaming side of Guiltface. Sam is probably thinking about Jess again, blaming himself in some twisted way for the demon killing her.

“Wanna drive for a while?” Dean offers, more to break the silence than anything else.

“Dean, your whole life, you never asked me to drive.”

Dean shrugs noncommittally, because so what? He can make sacrifices and learn to be sensitive and shit.  “Thought you might want to. Never mind.”

Sam rolls his eyes and goes back to brooding out the window while Dean settles in for the long haul to Colorado. He doesn't really expect Dad to be there, but they can't not go. Searching for Dad is the only thing keeping Sammy with him right now, so Dean? Totally willing to roll with it. Besides, he'd picked up a My Little Pony at their last gas stop. It would be a shame to let it go to waste.

They don't find Dad, but they do find a Wendigo and a groups of kids banding together to help each other out after their parents' death. It hits pretty close to home, so he and Sam busly do not acknowledge the similarities of their situations or the closeness of the siblings. Which just means everything they're not saying is always there, strung out between them.

That one moment, where they both went for the same knife and ended up practically holding hands over
the blade, didn't really help either. Sam gets quiet and intense and hides under his hair.

Dean ignores Sam's side-long looks and emo-brooding. It's just further proof that Sam's a giant girl, a conclusion compounded by the fact that when Dean gets himself abducted, Sam worries himself into a period. (Though the part of Dean that doesn't get to come out and play thinks it's kind of nice to know his brother really cares after all. That he doesn't get as wrapped up in the hunt and revenge as Dad always does.) They're both pretty beat up when they get into the car to drive to the next hunt. Dean doesn't even fight with Sam for the car keys, or complain about the stupid music he insists on playing.

“I'm never going camping again,” Sam mutters, flicking dirt and loam off his shirt. Dean smirks at him and slips further down in the seat. Sam sets out going East on 78, and Dean feels the call of Home and Mer, snuggled in a small town in Iowa. When he takes over the driving, he'll start moving them that way. 78 to 80 to 178 to Baker's Avenue. And eventually, he'll get around to telling Sam. Maybe before they're standing in front of his actual, true-to-God house. Or in front of Mer. Whichever comes first.

They get sidetracked by another hunt, and Dean doesn't know whether to be pleased or nervous. He gets a stay of execution, and Wisconsin really isn't that far from Iowa. He calls Mer every night, and she never again asks when he's coming home. He almost wishes she would. This new case they're working on is rough.

Lucas, the painfully shy kid who may be the key to their case, pulls at Dean's heartstrings. So young, so lost. Sam's shocked that Dean's actually good with kids. That Dean likes kids.

“Kids are the best? You don't even like kids!”

“I love kids!” Of course Dean likes kids—they get him. Kids know how to live. People waiting on you hand and foot, buying you shit, thinking you're adorable. When you say inappropriate things, you're just being so gosh-darn cute. Kids are awesome.

“Name three children that you even know.” Dean could name an entire class of kids, doesn't know where to start. Sam scoffs dismissively. “Forget it.”

“I'm thinking!” Sam rolls his eyes and walks away. So much for that.

Lucas seems to have some sort of connection to whatever is killing people. Sam makes a throw-away comment about trauma making kids psychic and Dean tenses for a second before relaxing. No way Sam knows. Sam's oblivious; he's never thought to ask why Dean came bursting through the door after he'd already driven away the night Jess died, or the hundred other little things that he's done over the course of their lives.

Besides, it's not a big deal. It only really works with the people Dean loves, and that's a mighty short list. There's a total of three living people on it, though sometimes Cassie still tugs at the edges of his consciousness, vague impressions of intense emotion.

Lucas pings. Dean doesn't know how to describe it any other way. Some people just resonate, like he
needs them to be okay. Lucas is one of them. Even after all the years going soft at Stanford, Sam recognizes it too, realizes there’s something special about this hunt.

Dean crouches down and sketches out a picture of his family, pointedly ignoring Sam. He takes special care with Mom: her stick-body is straighter, her arms and legs more symmetrically placed. He pushes his drawing towards Lucas.

“This is my family. That's my dad, that's my mom, that's my geek brother, and that's me.” He swears Lucas pauses and his lips quirk. “Okay, so I'm a sucky artist.” Dean takes a moment to gather his thoughts and organizes what he wants to say. He’s incredibly aware of Sam and Andrea hovering in the background, but he'll only get one chance with Lucas.

“You're scared,” Dean says to the kid, but this is about more than that. “It's okay, I understand. See, when I was your age, I saw something real bad happen to my mom, and I was scared, too. I didn't feel like talking, just like you. But see, my mom—I know she wanted me to be brave. I think about that every day. And I do my best to be brave. And maybe...maybe your dad wants you to be brave, too.”

There's a sudden stillness to Lucas that isn't totally physical, and Dean watches with bated breath as the little boy quickly sketches out a picture and then thrusts it at Dean, watching him from the most peripheral edges of his vision.

Thus, with a combination of gumshoe detective work and Lucas's drawings, Dean and Sam uncover a decades-old murder. Dean's glad he never had a bike growing up, because it's creepy to dig through years of moss and detritus to unearth the once-red bicycle of a murdered kid. It leaves a sour taste in his mouth and the pull of Home gets stronger. Yet in spite of that, Dean's enjoying his time with Sam, getting to know his brother again. He wasn't lying those weeks ago (Jesus, that long?) when he said they made a good team. He's worked with other hunters over the last four years. None of them can read him like Sam. (Though to be fair, Dean never really has to work at avoiding chick-flick moments with any of the other hunters.)

But all of that just means that when Sam wakes Dean up at 5:45 in the morning (really, Sam, where does the day go?), it's intentional. Just because Sam has insomnia doesn't mean he has to share it with Dean. Although the only time Dean gets any sleep is when Sam's not sleeping, because Dean listens to every whimper and strangled noise that makes it past Sam's throat when he's having a nightmare. It's a constant battle to keep himself on his bed, to respect Sam's boundaries even when everything in him wants to act like the big brother he is. Because that's part of the problem, too: he doesn't necessarily want to act like a big brother.

Taking Sam home is looking more and more like a good idea when he gets a call from an old friend in Pennsylvania. Fuck. Dean hates planes. And Pennsylvania.

****

Sam bangs on the bathroom door. “Dean!” he yells. The door swings open and Sam forgets why he was angry. Dean’s got a towel wrapped around his waist, and he hasn't been slacking since Sam left. He's 26 and still...Dean. The towel wrapped around his head is ludicrous but so him that Sam has to fight the smile threatening to chase away his scowl. “You've been in there forever.”

Dean shoots Sam a look of affronted disdain. “You can't rush perfection.”
Sam sits heavily on the bed when the door clicks closed. He thought he was done with...that. He’d met Jess and forgotten about everyone who came before.

Not tru-ue, the ruthlessly truthful part of him sing-songs. Sam ignores it. Besides, it's a moot point. Dean has the mysterious Mer. No matter what Sam feels, he's not going to be that guy. Or that brother. And that's the end of that.

Sam gives a token protest for their Homeland Security cover—really, on the sliding scale of illegal shit, it's not that bad, but he feels it's his duty to be the moral compass here. They're escorted back to the wreckage of the plane, spread out through the equivalent of two high school gyms. Dean pulls out some beat-up piece of equipment that would out them as impostors immediately should one of the guards come check up on them.

“What is that?” Sam asks.

“It's an EMF meter. It reads electromagnetic frequencies,” Dean says. He's looking at Sam almost expectantly. If he was a dog, his tail would probably be wagging.

“I know what an EMF is,” Sam says sarcastically. Just how out of practice does Dean think he is, exactly? “But why does that one look like a busted-up walkman?”

“Because that's what I made it out of. It's homemade.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Sam mutters without thinking. He cringes when Dean deflates and realizes what a complete and utter jackass he is. Because honestly? It's actually kind of cool that Dean can do that. Sam sure as hell can't. And now Dean looks like Sam just kicked his puppy, and Sam feels like he just kicked Dean's puppy. He's going to have to find some way to apologize because when they're not playing at homeland security, that thing could come in kind of handy.

Then the walkman buzzes and they've got a genuine case to work on.

****

Dean doesn't hate planes. Hate is reserved for things he can kill, or at least maim very, very badly. Planes? There are not words for how much Dean loathes them. Planes are a man-made disruption of the natural order of the world. They were probably engineered by people listening to a demonic muse.

Dean clutches at Sam's arm as the plane starts shaking. What the hell was he thinking, getting on an aircraft that's going to go down exactly 40 minutes into the flight? He keeps a hold of Sam's arm because as long as they're together, nothing's going to happen. And if it does? They're going down side-by-side. Sam lifts his hand off his arm, and Dean steels himself for the rejection and the terror of having nothing at all to anchor himself to.

It never comes. Sam settles Dean's hand into his own and threads their fingers together. Dean's so stunned that for a few minutes he forgets to panic. Then the plane dips and rattles and fuck. This.

“Dean,” Sam says, sounding ridiculously calm. “Just relax.”
“Just try to shut up,” Dean forces through gritted teeth.

“Everything's going to be alright, Dean.”

“Sam, this plane is going to crash, okay? So quit treating me like I'm freakin' four!” Dean snaps. They both ignore how tightly he's holding on to Sam's hand.

“You need to calm down,” Sam says rationally.

“Well, I'm sorry I can't!” Dean winces; that may have come out way more petulant than he wanted it to.

“Yes, you can,” Sam says and when the fuck did Sam develop that kind of patience? It makes Dean mad, which is a nice change of pace from mind-numbing terror.

“Dude, stow the touchy-feely, self-help-yoga crap. It's not helping!” Sam just looks at him, utterly implacable, and Dean gives in. He sucks in a breath and tries to remember all of the breathing exercises he's ever seen parodied on TV. He swears he sees Sam's lips twitch when he purses his lips and breathes out. He feels like an idiot.

But it works.

He calms down, feels his heart rate return to normal, and soon he's all too aware that he's holding hands with Sam and they're about thirty minutes into their forty-minute flight. He pulls his hand away from Sam, who lets it go with only the barest resistance. The moment he's separated from Sam, though, the fear starts creeping back and it's all he can do to keep his cool.

Dean's really grateful when the demon makes itself known. It gives him something to focus on other than the fact that they're a million miles in the air with a thin sheet of metal between them and nothing. He throws himself into the fight with the co-pilot, rolling around in the service area. Sam recites Latin as fast as he can (which is so not fast enough, especially for the amount of talking Sam always wants to do), and Dean wonders why none of the passengers are even the least bit curious about the grunts and noises coming from behind the thin curtain. Then again, if there's one thing hunting has taught him, it's that people will only see what they want and are willfully blind.

But then it’s done. The co-pilot lays dazed on the ground and a bunch of travelers are scared out of their minds, and Sam's ignoring the crack the demon made about Jess. Sam gives Dean a hand up and holds on just a little longer than necessary. His eyes rove over Dean, intense. The first time, he's checking for wounds. The second time, he's just checking. It makes Dean's skin prickle with awareness. Sam's looking. It's hot, but it doesn't mean anything—except it does, and Dean's high enough on adrenaline that he decides to start running some tests to see just how interested Sam still is. He's going to be the annoying half-naked gnat in Sam's ear, reminding his brother what he gave up for a flimsy piece of paper all those years ago. He's got a couple shirts that are two sizes too small saved for occasions such as this.

So when they're firmly on solid ground—Dean's not embarrassed that he greets his Mother Earth with a reverent kiss and a full-bodied hug—he drags them to a bar and flirts with everything that has a pulse. Except for the really burly dude who smells like pickled pig's feet and gives 'butch' a whole new meaning. He keeps half an eye on Sam the whole time, but the bastard only glances at him long enough to know where he is in the room in case something goes down. In retaliation, Dean tries to find out exactly how many drinks he can con out of the bartenders.
Sam's been nursing the same beer all night, but he's seriously considering trading up. So far, Dean's gone through the room like a teenager on Viagra. He's currently situated at the bar, and Sam's tracking four simultaneous flirtations.

Though, interestingly enough, Dean's latest plays have been lacking follow-through. A lot of it has just been Dean's innate inability to not flirt since it's wired in his system like breathing. But still, even when it's a sure thing, Dean hasn't looked twice.

This is different. This is Dean on the prowl, looking for something. Someone. And Dean never goes home alone when he wants someone. Except Dean's supposed to be taken. He's got a girl waiting for him somewhere out in the world. He shouldn't be doing this.

Sam's lost in his thoughts when Dean plunks down in the booth. Not on the other side, but right next to Sam. Dean, who has conned at least ten drinks off the bartenders, is happily drunk. He cozies up to Sam and throws an arm around his shoulders.

“Sammy.”

Sam rolls his eyes and tries to shove Dean off, but he won't be moved. “It's Sam,” he mutters, though he knows it won't do any good. Dean grunts and presses his leg tight against Sam's. Dean's head starts lolling and Sam decides it's time to get him back to the hotel.

Easier said than done.

Dean alternates between being uncooperative dead-weight and an octopus. His hands are everwhere and Sam's going to go insane if this keeps up. Sam dumps Dean onto his bed, and just when he thinks he's safe, Dean pulls him down so their bodies press together.

“Hey Sammy,” Dean breathes. He's aroused, and his hands slip under Sam's shirt.

Sam swallows, tries to control his own reaction. “Go to sleep, Dean,” he orders.

“Okay.” He wraps his arms around Sam's body, snuggles into Sam's chest and falls asleep between one moment and the next. Sam doesn't have the heart to push Dean off—and for the first time since Jess died Sam sleeps without dreaming.

****

The entire Bloody Mary debacle gives Dean the heebie-jeebies. The phrase leaves a bad taste in his mouth and sends shivers up his spine. The psychotic murdering ghost-bitch is a relief next to that intangible feeling of creepy.

Sam's been closed off since the night Dean got drunk. Even his emotions, usually unavoidably present in Dean's head, are diluted, like they're fighting to get through.

Dean backs off. Message received, though he doesn't know why he's getting Bitchface #11: you've done
something morally reprehensible, feel guilty.

Sam's also been having nightmares, which are a more pressing issue. Sam wakes up screaming more nights that not. He'll eventually get over whatever is causing the bitchface. The nightmares about Jess? Not so much. Dean can smell the guilt, sharp and acidic. He can also smell there's a secret Sam's been keeping, but that's all tied up with Jess and Dean is so not going there. If Sam wants to drag him into a chick flick moment, well, Sam's a giant girl with man-feet. Dean is a perfectly proportioned bastion of masculinity with his priorities well in order.

But when Sam offers himself up to Mary like a sacrificial lamb, Dean can't take it anymore. His brother has done the martyr thing for a freaking month and it's tired and played to death. At least he recognizes it enough to know he can summon Mary, but Dean has had enough. He pulls over because this conversation is best done stationary.

“[You know what, that's it. This is about Jessica, isn’t it? You think that's your dirty little secret, that you killed her somehow? – The funny thing is they both have far bigger secrets than Jess. “Sam, this has got to stop, man. I mean, the nightmares and calling her name out in the middle of the night—it's gonna kill you. Now listen to me. It wasn't your fault. If you wanna blame something, then blame the thing that killed her. Or hell, why don’t you take a swing at me? I mean, I'm the one that dragged you away from her in the first place.”

“I don't blame you.”

“Well, you shouldn't blame yourself. 'Cause there's nothing you could've done.” The moment he says it, he senses the shift in Sam's emotions. He's inadvertently touched on whatever secret Sam's keeping.

“I could've warned her.”

“About what? You didn't know what was going to happen.” Sam remains uncharacteristically stoic as he stares out the front windshield. And then Dean gets it.

_Sam had known_. Somehow. Dean doesn't say anything out loud because unspoken, unsubstantiated, it's still Sam's secret and they have to take care of Mary somehow.

But they're going to talk about this later. When the bitch is gone and the traumatized girl curled up in their hotel room is safe. The shelve it and drive on, because Hunting doesn't wait for family drama. Dean gleefully shatters the giant, ornate mirror that's caused this whole mess. Problem solved!

Except the bitch _crawls out of the fucking mirror_ instead of dying like she should. Luckily, Dean did some reading and Mary gets caught by her own reflection and he really could have done without seeing her melt into nothing. And because this night has been made of suck, Dean lets Sam off the hook. But just for the night. (Plus, they have a hot chick in their hotel room who needs escorting home. Dean is nothing if not a gentleman.)

But when she's gone it's just Sam and Dean and Jessica's ghost in the car with them. Sam tries to give Dean the brush off, but Dean's not buying that crock of shit. It takes a lot of needling to get Sam to talk. And when he does, Dean almost wishes he hadn't pushed.

Sam can see the future.
“Who's going to win the super bowl?” Dean asks.

Sam gapes, because this is not how he expected Dean to react. He just admitted he'd had dreams of Jess's death weeks before it happened and...what?

“Look, if you don't know, that's fine, I'm not going to kick you out. But if you could sleep on it, twiddle the psychic dials a bit, that would be awesome.” Dean grins widely, the look he uses when he's not quite okay with something but he will be given time. Sam's at a complete loss because he just admitted newly developing paranormal powers to his Hunter brother and Dean's just...smiling.

Dean's phone rings. “Tell me who it is?” he asks Sam with a smirk.

“Dude, is that Wicked?” This night could not possibly get anymore surreal.

“Shut up, Sam.” It's Mer's ringtone and he didn't pick it, though he has to admit that Defying Gravity song? Not bad. Idina Menzel's kind of hot in green, too. “Hello?”

“I don't care what you're in the middle of, Dean Winchester, but unless someone's about to die you best get your ass home as fast as your precious little car can carry you.”

Dean winces. “Hello to you too, Whit. Before you ask, I'm fine. A little bloody around the eyes but everything is--”

“Mer hasn't smiled in a week.” That stops Dean short because Mer is the smiliest human being he's ever met in his life. “She doesn't have an opinion on anything.” She's also the most opinionated. “And she's sulking around the house, clutching that bear you gave her.” Oh, Whit's laying the guilt on thick.

“Can I talk to her?”

“No,” Whit says viciously.

“C'mon, Whit.”

“Nope. You'll have to call home yourself and then we'll see if she wants to pick up the phone.”

He pulls the phone away from his face to scowl at it. Whit plays dirty and she knows it.

“She brushed Finn off the other day.”

“Shit.”

“And John.”

“Dammit.”

“So when can we expect you?”

Dean shuts the phone without responding; somewhere in Iowa, Whitney Steton is smugly patting herself
on the back for a job well done.

“Hey Sammy?” Dean says as nonchalantly as possible. He ignores the muttered “It's Sam.” “Wanna go to Iowa?”
Chapter 4

Dean fidgets uncomfortably in the driver's seat. It's late, most of the houses on the street long dark. Sam is staring out the window at Dean's house, and Dean's acutely aware it's a modest split-level with the paint peeling off in places. One of the windows only has a shutter on the right side, and the whole place just looks sad.

“It's, uh, nothing much,” Dean mumbles.

“Dude,” Sam says in amazement, “you have a house.”

Dean shrugs. “Needed somewhere to store my Xbox.”

Sam's still a little dazed by the fact that Dean has a fucking house. He follows Dean up the stairs, trying to reconcile the idea of his brother having a mortgage and a semi-stable job at an auto-body shop with...the idea that is his brother. Dean unlocks the front door—with his door key—and flips on the lights.

There's a room off to the right housing what looks like weights and some of Dean's lesser-used hunting equipment. The living room is up a short flight of stairs, a huge TV and the aforementioned Xbox the prime focus of the room. A large, comfortable-looking sofa and chair set takes up the rest of the space. Sam is impressed with Dean's decorating taste; the whole room has a subtle African feel to it. Sam can see the kitchen in front of them, and he assumes the bedrooms are up the small set of stairs to the right.

“Want a beer?” Dean asks, throwing his keys haphazardly on a table.

“Uh, sure.” Sam puts his duffle on the ground, conscious of the meticulously neat home. At least that's not surprising about Dean. He follows Dean into the kitchen, and is weirded out to see the amount and types of food in Dean's fridge. There are fresh fruits and vegetables in there, along with what looks like leftovers that aren't take out.

“Dean? Is that you?” Sam spins around, choking a little on his beer. A woman, sleep-rumpled but gorgeous, stands in front of him. She has long mahogany hair, deep brown eyes, richly dark skin and a killer body. She's exactly Dean's type (except for the competent intelligence Sam can feel oozing out of her; Dean's usually not too picky about smarts in his hookups), and Sam figures this must be Mer. She's not what Sam expected at all.

“Hey Whitney. This is Sam. Sam, Whit.”

“Whitney?” Sam asks before he can stop himself. Dean realizes he hasn't explained ANYTHING to Sam.

“Oh my God! This is Sam? Why didn't you tell me?” Whitney punches Dean in the shoulder, then wraps Sam up in a giant bear hug. She barely comes up to his sternum. Sam pats her awkwardly on the back while shooting pleading looks Dean's way. The bastard just leaves him to suffer.

“Jesus, I just did, Whit!” Dean whines, rubbing his abused arm. “Abusive bitch.”

“I'm ignoring you,” Whi informs Dean primly.

“You mean it was always that easy? I should have done that ages ago.” Dean moves towards the stairs that
lead to the bedrooms, calling “I'll be right back” over his shoulder.

Sam watches him go, until his attention is drawn back to Whitney. “So you're the infamous Sam, huh?”

“Um, yeah, I guess that's me.” Whit looks at him expectantly, but Sam has no idea what to say. “So are you and Dean, uh...” Sam waves his hand expressively. Whitney stares at him for a few seconds before bursting into laughter.

“Me and Dean?” For some reason, she finds the idea hilarious. Sam's face scrunches up as she laughs at him, rich and genuine with tears leaking out of her eyes. “S-s-sorry. It's just...yeah, NO. We're roommates of a sort. He, uh. He saved me from this...thing. It got my family. Mom, dad, brother. He couldn't save them but...yeah. This is the house I grew up in, and I couldn't keep it by myself. So Dean helped out and, well, it worked. He and Mer needed a place like this, and I was happy to provide it. They've helped me more than they'll ever know.”

“I've heard Dean mention Mer a couple of times, which is why I was surprised when he called you Whitney,” Sam admitted with a wry grin. Whit's nose wrinkles in confusion.

“Why would you...” Before Sam can respond, Dean's footsteps echo down the stairs. Sam turns around and stares. Dean is the most unsettled Sam's ever seen, glancing at Sam from beneath his lashes and shifting from foot to foot. He's got his nervous smile on: it's a little too wide and doesn't reach his eyes. A girl steps from behind him, green eyes curious, her hand swallowed by Dean's.

“Sam.” Dean's voice comes out a strained croak, and he clears his throat to start again. “Sam. This is Mary. Mer, this is your Uncle Sam.”

Sam stares at her. At Dean's daughter. Dean's daughter in Dean's house. She's the spitting image of him, from the green eyes to the full lips. Her hair is dirty-blond and falls in gentle waves to her shoulder, thin and natural in the way little kids are. She's...she's Dean's.

She cocks her head to one side, and Sam feels something brush against him. Not physically, but deep inside, like a sonar probe pinging him to see what kind of sound he makes.

“Nunca Sammy!” He blinks and there's a toddler clinging to his legs. He looks up at Dean for direction, but his brother just watches them with an unreadable expression. Mer tugs on his pant leg, and Sam kneels down to look into her familiar green eyes. She smiles and puts her tiny hands on either side of his head, directly over his temples. He feels the brush again, and a welcoming, happy tingle suffuses him. “I's been waiting soooooooo long!”

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Sam glances down at the sleeping bundle in his lap. Whitney, after a whispered condemnation at Dean for not warning Sam about having a kid and a roommate, disappears up the stairs into her own room to give them some privacy.

“You have a kid,” Sam says stupidly.

“Yeah,” Dean agrees, his eyes fixed on Mer. She hasn't let Sam go since she chastised him for making her wait for him.
“You...have a kid.”

“I noticed.”

“But...how?”

“Well, Sammy, when a man and a woman share a very special hug—” Sam snorts and throws a pillow at Dean—gently so as not to disturb his newest fan.

“Shut up. That's not what I meant. Where's her mother?” Dean scowls and starts pulling the label off his beer.

“She showed up with Mer a few months after you left. I'd broken my leg in a hunt, was cooped up while Dad went off alone. She tracked me down, handed me a one-month-old baby, told me Mer was mine and I could do whatever I wanted with her. She washed her hands of it. Took off, haven't heard from her since. No address or phone number. Didn't even catch her name. And then it was just me and a baby.”

“So Dad knows?”

“Of course Dad knows,” Dean scoffs. “How do you think Mer's still alive? I spent the first two months freaking out.” Sam tries to picture their father acting, well, fatherly with the young girl curled on his lap. He knows, logically, that Dad had done the whole parenting thing with Dean. But to think of Dad actually changing a diaper or mixing formula is...odd. Sam's whole life it's always been Dean.

Sam runs his fingers through Mer's baby-soft hair. Dean watches them with such a soft, open expression it makes Sam's heart squeeze. He's never seen Dean like this before. He's different, and it explains so much of the little things Sam had noticed on the road. How Dean is harder in some ways, softer in others. How he doesn't look at the waitresses with the same intensity, and that whole thing with Lucas.

Sam's torn. He wants to yell at Dean for not telling him about this. For keeping Mer squirreled away in Iowa while Sam went on living his life in ignorance. But they've had this conversation and no. Sam wouldn't have picked up. Didn't pick up. Wouldn't have opened the letters. Would have let his stupid anger and harsh words and self-pity deprive him of four years of his niece's life, and that would have been ten times worse than knowing he'd just never been told.

“You...tried to call,” Sam murmurs. One call between freshman and sophomore year. Dean just shrugs.

Sam wants to hug Dean, hear about raising Mer, get to know her, find out what kind of person she is even though she's still so little. Dean wears fatherhood well, and Sam admits to a bit of jealousy. He glances up and catches Dean looking at him intensely, and Sam recognizes that look too. It's the one Dean always gets around Dad after a strenuous but successful hunt, or when he's done something he's proud of and waiting to be acknowledged. Sam has seen that look morph into disappointment and sadness too many times to count, so he swallows his anger—at himself and at Dean for not trying harder—and offers an olive branch.

“So she's four?”

“Yeah,” Dean says, and he smiles. “Four years old, and smarter than is good for her. She's special.” Sam
arches an eyebrow at the way Dean emphasizes special. It's thrown too casually into the conversation for.

“What kind of special?” Sam runs through the gamut of 'special' problems covered in his developmental psych class. Not obviously Downs or FAS. No speech impediments or mental processing issues apparent. Dean shifts in his seat, eyes darting away from Sam.

“She doesn't like most people. Says they're too noisy and most of them aren't very nice. Did you feel something when she touched you? Like...”

“Warmth and welcome.” The soft feeling of total acceptance and love. Dean looks a little startled, but recovers quickly.

“Yeah. When she started talking she'd say these...things. The she couldn't know or understand. Dad and I took her to a friend of his in Lawrence. Woman named Missouri.” Dean took a deep breath. “She says Mer is one of the most powerful psychics she's ever come across.” Well that explains Dean's reaction to Sam's revelations. Can't really throw stones when his own daughter's just like Uncle Sam.

“So you're sayin' she's a freak?” Sam jokes, the gentle hand he runs through her hair and the smile on his face taking any sting out of the words.

Dean grins back. “Yep. She's my freak. But dude, watch what you think around her. She knows things.”

“Like what?”

“She'll respond to questions you haven't asked—or maybe never planned on asking. Or she'll do things, like bring you a cookie or some aspirin, without you even realizing you're hungry or have a headache.” Dean reaches over and rubs Mer's back while Sam absorbs that. It must be tough for her, hearing and knowing so much. “Missouri gave us some runes to help block out the noise from outside.”

The first thing Sam noticed was that Dean's house has protective symbols carved into the wall, sanctuary spells etched into the panes of glass, and bundles of guardian herbs disguised as decoration. Sam's willing to bet there are weapons scattered within easy reach in every room. There are probably more hidden protection spells too—under the carpet and in ultraviolet paint. Sam's sure that this house is the supernatural equivalent of Fort Knox.

It suddenly occurs to Sam that Dean's been traveling for well over a month without seeing Mer.

“Well do you do it?” Sam asks softly, loath to break the bubble that surrounds them, but he has to know. “Why do you keep hunting?”

“We have a responsibility.”

Sam growls, blindingly angry though he keeps his voice down for Mer's sake. “A responsibility? To what? To Dad and his crusade? Dad's got mom, and I've got Jess but...Mer deserves better than this life.”

Dean slams his beer on the coffee table, and Mer whimper in her sleep, her brow furrowing as their volatile emotions intrude on her dreams. Dean controls himself and brushes his hand against her head in apology.
“He came for her,” Dean whispers, his voice strained. “She was so small when I got her. I took her to the doctor, he said she was probably premature. Too eager to get into the world. And then I remembered what happened with you, so I put up every ward I could think of, waited armed to the teeth with Dad to make sure she was safe. The bastard still almost got her. Got through the wards, somehow, and he—” Dean choke off, too mad to speak because that fucking yellow-eyed son of a bitch had tried to steal his daughter. “So yeah, Sam. I've got a responsibility. Dad's been chasing this thing while you've been off at Stanford enjoying your normal life. This is big, Sam. This demon is powerful, more powerful than anything else we've run across. Something's coming, and it wants my kid. Forgive me if I'm going to do everything in my power to make the world a little bit safer for my little girl.”

Sam raises his hands in a placating gesture; he doesn't want to fight with Dean, not tonight and not about this. He can understand his brother's drive and determination, but at what cost to Mer? Dean's crusade to keep her safe isn't going to do much if he never gets to see her; Dean should know, they've lived through this with Dad. The girl in question grumbles in her sleep and begins to shift.

“Bed time,” Dean announces. He scoops Mer off Sam's lap, ignoring her sleepy requests for more 'nuncassam.' Sam trails him into Mer's room. It's themed around hunter green, and there's a beautiful mural on one wall that captures Sam's attention. It's a portrait of the whole Winchester family: Sam, Dean, John, and Mary. Sam touches it reverently; he hasn't seen any of his father's artwork in a long time, and rarely outside of the drawings in his journal. The portraits are painted with such care and devotion, particularly Mom's.

“Dad did it. Stayed a whole three weeks to do it right, too,” Dean says softly. Sam can feel Dean at his back, warm and solid. Old feelings and emotions come bubbling to the surface as Sam realizes that there's no one holding Dean back. No girlfriend like he thought.

Sam feels stretched thin. His fingers itch with the need to touch. He steps out of Mer's room, letting Dean tuck her in, to regain his bearings. Mer is so much more than the simple girlfriend he imagined, inextricably bound up with Dean.

Dean kisses Mer's brow and leaves her to her dreams, and Sam suddenly feels unbearably awkward. From the way Dean ducks his head and rubs the back of his neck, he feels it too. They've been dancing around this, the big pink elephant in the room that refuses to sit quietly in its corner but prances obnoxiously between them.

“Don't have a guest room,” Dean says apologetically. “Gave Whit the master.”

Sam shrugs it off. “I can sleep on the couch, no problem.”

“Yeah.” There's something here, a peak in the ebb and flow of their relationship, where things can change or go right on being the same. Dean's never been good with playing it safe, especially not around Sam. They can feel the hum in the air and Dean's lips part.

“Just give me a blanket and I'm set,” Sam blurts out, smiling so hard he can feel his dimples. Dean cocks his head, like he's trying to figure Sam out. Sam keeps his expression brightly blank. Maybe. Maybe, if Dean didn't have a daughter and they hadn't left things the way they had. Christ. Dean's expression shutters and he nods, going to the hall closet.

Dean rummages around and pulls out a blanket and the lumpiest pillow he can find. He doesn't think
about his motives, just watches Sam wander off to the den to settle his giant form on a couch Dean can't even nap on comfortably.

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Sam wakes up to loud laughter and clanking pans. He groans and buries his head under the godawful pillow and muffles his yelp as his back seizes up uncomfortably. The couch is evil. He wonders what Dean would do if he dumped a sack full of salt and kerosene over it.

“Nunca Sam!” He opens his eyes and pulls his head out from under his pillow. Dean's eyes look down at him from a child's face. “D'you want pancakes or wiffles?”

“Um.”

“Chose the pancakes,” a voice advises, and Mer gets swept from view. “Wiffles are not what you think they are.” Sam's eyes travel up and he meets the smiling eyes of Whitney, Mer giggling from her perch on one hip.

“Pancakes?” he suggests. Mer whoops and claps, kicking her heels into Whit's sides.

“Pancakes, pancakes! Hi ho, Silver!” Whit rolls her eyes and sashays into the kitchen.

“I'm not your beast of burden, little missy!” she tells Mer. “That's what your father's for.” Sam rolls off the couch, his spine cracking all the way up. He yawns and stumbles into the kitchen where a stack of buttery-gold pancakes disappear into a warm oven and bacon sizzles on a skillet. Mer carries an almost-full quart of milk to the table, lips pressed together in concentration. It's all very...domestic.

Sam stretches and his back twinges.

“Nunca Sam thought a bad word!” Mer yells gleefully, hopping off the chair she used to reach the table. Sam freezes and thinks, “Oh, shit!” “AND ANOTHER ONE!” Mer cackles gleefully. She flips onto her back and kicks her legs into the air as she laughs.

“Mer,” Whit warns. “What have we said about people's private thoughts?”

“But they're right there!” Mer whines, sitting up and fixing her with the saddest puppy dog eyes imaginable, wet and contrite. “I didn't mean to!”

“Apologize,” Whit instructs, voice stern. Mer pouts, just like Dean, lower lip pushed out and face set into a line that screams 'na-na na-na you can't make me I don't wanna.' “Mer!” Whit's got the warning tone Sam's heard from countless mothers down to an art.

Mer scuffs the ground with a toe, head down and arms crossed over her chest, and mutters, “Sorry,” so disgruntled and surly that Sam has to smile. Whitney sighs and lets it drop, apparently clued in that that particular tone is Winchester for 'that's the best you'll get, take it or leave it.' It makes something in his chest pull, because she's been here. She knows Mer, helped raised her. And by extension knows a part of Dean that Sam has only just realized exists.

The kitchen goes quiet, and Sam realizes Mer's looking at him, a little affronted, and Whit glances at him.
out of the corner of her eye.

“Um...” he says eloquently, glancing between the two of him. He scowls when Whit rolls her eyes and shakes her head. Mer looks increasingly disgruntled.

“Uncassam,” she says, supremely annoyed.

“Yeah?” he ventures.

“I *said* I’s sorry.” That's definitely a snort from Whitney's general vicinity.

“Um. Okay?” Mer huffs and rolls her eyes.

“UncaSAM!”

“What?”

“You're supposed to say 'It's okay' or 'I forgive you!'” Oh. OH. This time, when Whit chokes on her laugh, Sam finds himself joining in. Mer's expression darkens at his perceived slight, so he turns it into a cough.

“Y-yeah,” he manages, trying to keep the smile off his face. “It's okay. Don't do it again.” Mer isn't mollified at all, but she graciously nods her head in acknowledgment before flouncing off up the stairs, presumably to wake her father.

“You dodged a bullet there,” Whit tells him with a grin.

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Sam finds himself fascinated with Dean's house and the things in it. It feels homey and lived-in like none of the homes and motel rooms they rented when they were younger. This is a real home with history and life, dents in the wall and scuff marks on the floor.

Sam scrutinizes the various photographs that punctuate the interior landscape. There are a lot of Mer, but there are a few of Whit and Dean scattered in there. There's one that Sam stares at extra hard: Dean asleep on the couch with a tiny, swaddled baby asleep on his chest, one hand spanning the entire length of her body protectively. Sam touches it reverently, finger sliding over the clear glass.

His feet take him into Mer's room. Her bedspread is bright and cheerful. There's a huge stack of toys in the corner, almost as if Dean's making up for all the stuff they could never have. But the thing that draws Sam's attention is a large cork-board on one wall.

It's filled with polaroid pictures. There's Dean, Whit, the house, the Impala, a stuffed bear, Dean and Whit goofing off in the kitchen, a young child with sandy hair and clear blue eyes. Sam squints and makes out 'Finn' in scrawled, childish writing.

There's an empty space that seems out of place though. Sam touches it, trying to figure out what went there. There's no tack-hole; nothing had been there and then removed. Sam flashes back to what Mer had said when he arrived and it's suddenly hard to breathe.

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“I's been waiting sooooooooo long!”

That space is for him.

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Sam settles into the household with such ease it's almost like they've been waiting for him. Mer is an endless force of amusement and wit. Sam's shocked by her vocabulary and ability to express herself; she's the most verbose four-year-old he's ever come across. Dean blames Sam for that. Mer's psychic, Sam's a geek, and that explains the increase in obnoxiously large words that Dean swears up and down she hadn't used before Sam came home.

Sam feels a little weirded out by that, because while he's happy to make sure Dean's kid knows 'twinkie' and 'breakfast' aren't really synonyms, he'd like his thoughts to be private. But when Dean figures out Sam's damage he a) mocks him and b) explains that Mer's four. She can't understand most of his private thoughts because she has no basis of knowledge for most of those things and she's four. Unformed brain, different way of thinking all together. At least according to Missouri.

Dean trusts this Missouri person a lot, because most of what he says about Mer's abilities start with 'Missouri said...'. Like, "Missouri says words and language are fairly superficial thoughts, unlike memories and emotions which are buried deeper and more private. The first thing we need to impart is respect for the sanctity of another's inner thoughts. Most likely Mer won't be able to help some of the things she knows, but she can make an effort, and good habits start early." Sam wonders if that's true, or if Mer will just learn to stop telling them when she picks up on things because it gets her in trouble.

Except Dean and Whit (and now Sam) don't exactly punish Mer in the traditional sense. They just make it very, very apparent they're disappointed in her behavior. From what Sam can tell, it works far more effectively than a spanking or other forms of punishment would, because Mer slinks around and looks teary-eyed for days after she gets reprimanded.

To Sam's surprise, with a little concentration and practice, he finds that he can sense when Mer's mind brushes against his, and sometimes divine intent. He can tell when she's just checking in, seeking reassurance that he's there and okay, or when she's upset about something and seeking him out for a mental hug, just like she would if they were physically with her. When he and Dean go out, he sometimes feels a tug back towards Iowa, a subtle 'I miss you' or 'hurry home.'

It's very interesting when Sam realizes there are two people pinging his consciousness. He leaves Dean napping at home and is out getting groceries with Mer when he feels a checking-up/where are you brush against his mind. Which is odd because she's right there in the store with him, pushing her own tiny shopping cart filled with drinks: cranberry juice, chocolate milk, regular milk, orange juice, lemonade mix, and various tea bags—Mer has this weird fixations on liquids. If she doesn't have a wide selection of beverage choices, she gets cranky. And she'll drink them all, too.

Oddly enough, the only soda she'll drink is called Cheerwine, a Southern cherry soft drink that isn't actually sold anywhere in Iowa except in one place: an old gas station owner named Eaton has worked something out with the distribution companies and carries it in his store. Once a month they head to see Eaton all the way on the other side of town. He gives Mer a free can every time they go in to buy a flat because he feels like it's Southernizing her, and anyone who likes Cheerwine that much is good people.
“Hey, Mer?” Sam calls. She glances up from her intense study of two different brands of chai tea concentrate. “I'm right here.”

“Um, yeah,” Mer says, the 'duh' unspoken at the end. Sam's struck again with how unbelievably Dean's she is.

“You just, uh…” Sam frowns and pushes what he felt to the forefront of his head, tentatively projecting it towards her. He's not even sure if it'll work. She looks confused for a moment before her expression clears in understanding.

“Oh, that was Dada.” She has this funny way of saying the word, almost like she's British or finished up a magic trick with 'Dah-Dah!' “He doesn't like waking up alone. House's too quiet.” She goes back to her task while Sam quietly reels.

That explains so much. So many things he's overlooked or chalked up to Dean taking his protector role too seriously. And why Dean had known to come back to the house the night Jess died. Little things that happened on hunts, secrets Dean's guessed or acted like he always knew. They're an entire family of freaks.

Sam's determined to confront Dean about his well-kept little secret, only he never quite manages. Dean always has something pressing to talk to him about whenever Sam tries to bring it up.

So Sam lets Dean have his distractions, and files The Conversation away for another day, when Dean least expects it and can't run away.

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A couple of weeks into his new life Mer gives him a present. She looks so pleased with herself he's almost scared to open it, afraid his reaction won't live up to her expectations. But with a little prodding, he carefully pulls the shiny gift paper away from the tape, careful not to rip it too badly.

He stares down at a Polaroid camera.

“Sos you can carry us with you all the time,” Mer tells him seriously. Sam grins and hugs her, picking her up off her feet and swinging her around. She laughs and clings to him as the world blurs past.

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The first person Sam stalks for a picture is Dean. Dean is notorious about avoiding cameras, so it takes a lot of stealth and planning on Sam's part. He enlists Whit and Mer to help, charges them with distracting Dean. It helps that Dean doesn't know about Sam's new camera.

Even with their carefully coordinates sneak attack Sam only manages to get about three-fourths of Dean's face in the shot, lips just curling into a smile as Mer expounds on what happened at daycare. Dean glares and calls him all the names he can—without swearing. It's really funny, and Sam uses Whit's amusement to snap a picture of her. She looks beautiful in the soft lighting.

After that, Mer and Sam go on a picture-taking rampage. Sam has photographs of everything from the furniture in the living room to the Impala parked in front of the house. Mer steals Whit's sunglasses and
puts them on, vamping like a celebrity, and Sam immortalizes it in Polaroid form. She's got Dean's smirk AND his attitude, which is a deadly combination.

Sam ends up with a towering pile of photos and under Mer's direction labels them all. He's totally unsurprised to discover they've all been relabeled by the next morning, Mer's rounded handwriting just as distinctive as Dean's more controlled scrawl.

Sam just grins and stuffs his favorites in his wallet.

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Whit's a fluctuating presence in their life. She's quick to hand Mer off to Sam, taking longer shifts at the hospital and going out on dates. Sam doesn't know how to take Dean's utter bewilderment every time she appears in a dress, then bids them goodbye and disappears, leaving the three of them alone. The first couple of times it's awkward, Dean and Sam retreating to different parts of the house while Mer drifts between the two of them, gaze piercing and considering in a decidedly not-four-years-old kind of way. Sam has no idea how to decipher it, or what's going on in her head. Dean, it would seem, has had more practice ignoring his young daughter's eccentricities.

One day, Sam catches her in deep conversation with Dean, who looks panicky and pale, shaking his head in vehement denial at whatever she's trying to convey. He runs away—literally, jams his feet into his sneakers and bolts out the door—when Sam appears in the room. Mer turns and looks at him in that same inscrutable way and says, “You're both ridiculous.”

Sam gapes and stands there like the ridiculous idiot Mer says he is. Do four-year-olds have that kind of attitude? Mer sighs and slides out of the chair, wandering off to watch Arrested Development. Sam always avoids her when she's watching that show because she gets all the jokes. It wigs him out.

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“Are you serious?” Sam asks, jaw dropped. Dean glares at him and stuffs his face full of potato chips.

“No, really, Dean. She's never been to a fun park?”

Dean shrugs and glances towards where Mer watches TV and draws in the notebook no one's allowed to see, not even Dean.

“She's doing alright.”

“She has no socialization with kids her age!” Sam protests. “You don't want her to be that home schooled kid who everyone thinks is weird. Dean! She thinks Arrested Development is funny!” Dean shrugs.

“I'm told it's smart humor.”

“That's the problem!” Sam protests. Dean rolls his eyes.

“She doesn't like crowds, and we have neighborhood kids, Sam. They get together a couple times a week in the park down the street. And she has this friend named Finn who's at camp right now.”

“Dean, I know our childhood was fucked up, but you have a chance to give her normal,” Sam argues
earnestly. He can't properly interpret the look Dean gives him, but it makes Sam feel vaguely uncomfortable.

“And what would you consider 'normal,' Sammy?”

Sam decides to start Mer's 'normalization' with a trip to the local Chuck-E-Cheese. Skiball, go carts, laser tag, what's not to love? Dean's nervous and constantly checking on Mer. She rolls her eyes but bears her father's concerns, and starts pestering Sam with questions about the games and things at the fun house. Dean starts expounding on the wonder of tickets, and Sam can tell he's just as eager to get there as Mer, thinking about the Whack-a-Mole and all the prizes he'll win.

They're just walking in, Mer holding on to each of their hands, a happy knot of belonging singing in Sam's chest when she freezes at the threshold, eyes huge. Dean frowns and tugs her forward, but Mer digs her heels in and shakes her head, fear rolling off her. Dean drops to one knee, sheltering Mer and scanning for trouble.

“What's wrong, baby girl?” he asks softly, but Sam can see the outline of the knife at his back, vicious and curved. A child goes screaming by and Dean tenses. Mer looks like she's about to cry, little body trembling, and Sam's acutely aware of his own knife, strapped to his ankle.

“I wanna go home,” Mer whispers, taking a step back. Her gaze darts from person to person like she's looking for someone. “It's wrong.” Dean nods and sweeps her up in his arms without another word. Sam flanks them protectively, glaring at anyone who looks at them too long. They're tense until they get home, Mer curled in Sam's lap all the way.

She retreats to her room the moment they get in. Dean stares at the steps leading up to the rooms, jaw tense and eyes hard. He lasts five minutes before going up after her, the door to her room clicking softly as they sequester themselves, father and daughter.

Sam flicks through the channels downstairs, waiting for Dean to tell him what happened. There's nothing good on and he feels restless and superfluous.

Sam's half asleep when Dean stalks into the room, anger radiating from him. He snatches up the cordless phone and goes outside so he can pace as he talks. His phone call takes two minutes, and when he's done he cracks the plastic casing slamming it into the cradle.

Dean locks himself in his room and doesn't come out until morning, but by then Sam doesn't need to know what Mer saw.

On the front page of the paper is a headline: Pedophile Arrested at Local Children's Hot Spot.

Sam doesn't suggest any more trips.
Chapter 5

They're a couple months into playing house when Sam gets an e-mail from an old Stanford friend asking for help. Dean's shocked that Sam's keeping up with them, much less dragging him off to God knows where to help some chick who better be hot. (She is.)

The skinwalker? Uber creepy. When it sheds? Uber gross. Dean has a feeling that this is all going to go horribly wrong, but he can't leave Sam's friend out to dry.

Mer saves Sam's life. Well, kind of. He knows something's off with Dean when they reunite. He's acting weird and he feels...wrong. Like an echo, if he had to describe it. Mer calls as they're climbing into the Impala and Sam fights his incredulous expression when Dean hands him the phone with barely two sentences between him and his daughter. As much as Sam is becoming part of the family framework, Dean and Mer are very close, and they take their phone time seriously.

“She wants to talk to you,” the shapeshifter says. Sam manages a smile as he accepts the phone, his heart pounding.

“Hey Mer-bear,” he greets.

“That's a bad man and Daddy's hurt,” she whispers, as if the shapeshifter can hear her. Spots dance across his vision and Sam makes himself calm down; he can't help Dean in the midst of a panic attack.

“I know, Mer. We'll be home soon, safe and sound.” Silence on the other end. “I promise.” Sam tries to project whatever assurances he can, but inside he's knotted up. Mer sniffs on the other end and packs as much bravery into her tone as she can.

“Okay. I'll see you soon.” Her voice is so small, trembling with the attempt to be brave. Sam's heart breaks a little and rage against the skinwalker consumes him. No one makes his girl sound like that. No one.

The bastard's a tough cookie to break; it's tough for Sam too, because he's whaling on his brother's face. And the fucker, who got a heavy dose of Dean's memories along with his DNA, is spouting off.

“Where is he?” Sam asks. His face is set in a hard line, no chinks in his armor.

“Who knows? Could be anywhere. But man. He's sure got issues with you,” the shapeshifter taunts. “You got to go to college. He had to stay home. I mean, I had to stay home, with Dad. You don't think I had dreams of my own? But Dad needed me. And then I had a kid to raise, all by myself. Where the hell were you?”

Sam ignored the jibes, ignores the guilt that wells up in him when the thing wearing Dean's face hits a little too close to home. “Where is my brother?”

“I'm your brother! See... deep down, I'm just jealous. You've got friends. You've got a life. Me? I know I'm a freak. And sooner or later, everyone's gonna leave me. Even Mer.” Sam wonders if that's true, if Dean really thinks that. He curses himself for letting the thing crawl into their space, for letting it manipulate him so easily. “You left. Hell, I did everything Dad asked me to and he ditched me too. No explanation, no nothing, just poof! Left me with a whiney kid and your sorry ass. But still, this life, it's not
without its perks. I mean, I meet the nicest people! Like little Becky. You know... Dean would bang her if he had the chance.”

Sam keeps his face impassive, but inside he's seething because yeah. He does know. He's seen the looks Dean shoots Becky's way. Heard the innuendos. They're away from home, away from Mer, and Dean is allowed to do what he wants. Probably the only time he can do what he wants, because when he's home he's either soaking up time with Mer or working to support her. Serious, paying-taxes kind of work. Becky'll probably take Dean up on his offer, too, because they always do. That sounds petty and jealous in his head; he can only imagine what it would sound like if he said it aloud.

But that kind of thinking isn't helping him find Dean, and the shapeshifter isn't giving anything up. So Sam lets him go. Well, he doesn't let him go as much as encourage escape in a very subtle way. Though getting himself kidnapped? Well that wasn't quite what he had in mind. But hey, he found Dean! And they immediately get separated.

Sam ends the night tied up on Becky's floor, skinwalker-Dean telling him he should appreciate his brother more.

Well, Sam appreciates his brother just fine and the resulting fistfight is kind of awesome in that Sam doesn't hold back. At all.

And Dean Winchester is officially dead now. Which is kind of a relief—no more warrants, APBs, law enforcement agencies looking for him—and kind of scary. Hopefully no one realizes this Dean Winchester is the same Dean Winchester in Saybrook, Iowa, with a kid named Mary. Dean and Sam spent their formative years dodging child protective services. Mer deserves better than that.

But now Zack's free and Becky knows the truth about Sam and his family. She'll run interference with their friends which will work for a little while. Amazingly, Dean doesn't take Becky up on her tacit offer to stay a little longer and get patched up, instead heading to the Impala with nary a backwards glance. They stop at a truck stop to patch themselves up; one of the perks of having a nurse at home is free medical care, as if they needed another excuse to get home quick.

They don't talk to each other. It's a weird kind of agreement, because it's not exactly an uncomfortable tension between them, but there are definitely things that need to be said. Something to be worked out. Sam, for his part, is a bundle of relief, consternation, confusion and all other kinds of words and emotions that he doesn't have the energy to sort out right now. His eye is almost swollen shut, for starters, and his knuckles hurt like a bitch. So he lets himself drift, staring out at the passing countryside and trying not to think.

“Sorry, man,” Dean says twenty miles out of town. Sam starts out of his fugue and glances at Dean.

“About what?”

Dean gets a wistful look on his face, the kind of look that means he's being sincere. “I really wish things could be different, y’know? I really wish you could just be Joe College.”

Sam thinks about it, because Dean means it. Dean would give up everything for Sam because he loves his younger brother—even if everything meant he had to give up Sam himself. He's giving Sam an out, permission, of a kind, to go back to the life he left. Vacation into Hunting over, law school awaits.
“Nah, that's okay. Truth is, even at Stanford, deep down I never really fit in.” It's the first time he's admitted that, out loud or to himself. Dean's smile is worth it.

“Well, that's 'cause you're a freak.”

Sam smirks, “Yeah, thanks.”

“Well, I'm a freak too. I'm right there with you all the way.” It's as close to a confession Dean's going to give regarding his own abilities. But Mer's already told Sam what Dean can do, so he's not worried. And he's pretty sure Dean knows Mer spilled the beans.

“Yeah, I know you are,” Sam murmurs. He stares out the window, the Impala rumbling as she eats up the miles towards Iowa. He's tired, so he closes his eyes and tries to sleep.

Sleep has other ideas, hanging around at the periphery of his mind and laughing as his brain whirls around in dizzying circles.

All of the accusations and near-confessions from skinwalker-Dean race through his head. He can't turn them off. Especially the part about Becky, which is stuck on repeat. Images of Dean fucking her, touching her, torment him. He shifts towards the window so he can stare out at the darkening sky without Dean knowing.

As his thoughts chase one another, spiraling darker and darker into the 'what if' trap his mind has laid out for him, Sam realizes he really is in danger of becoming that sketchy emo kid Dean has always accused him of being. But he can't forget how they ended—or didn't end—without a word between them, without ever addressing what they were. He'd thought they might have been insoluble, but he'd been proven wrong. Four years of wrong.

Sam yelps as the car is jerked over to the side of the road and he bangs his head against the window. Dean sprints around the car and yanks Sam out of his seat before he can process what's happening.

“Dean what—” Dean slams Sam against the Impala.

“ Seriously, your emo bullshit is giving me a headache, so if you can tone down the brooding that would be fantastic.”

Sam growls and sends his brother stumbling back from him. “Get off me, Dean.” Dean glares at him and straightens his coat. They hover there, scowling at one another. Dean's gaze shifts to some point over Sam's shoulder, his jaw clenched.

“M not leaving,” Dean mutters, hunching over in on himself.

“What?” Sam asks suspiciously. Dean sighs and rolls his head from side to side. Sam smirks because Dean gearing up for a talk is exactly like Dean gearing up for a fight.

“I am not leaving,” he says clearly, each word forced out. “This is it. Just, y'know. You and me and Mer and maybe Whit if she stops being such a bitch. Whatever happened....in the past. It's fine. Everything is. Fine. Okay?”
Sam has to duck his head until the blush leaves his cheeks. Dean loves Whit. They snipe at each other all the time, call one another the worst names Sam's ever heard (when Mer's not around), and, maybe because Dean's never tried to fuck her, are actually friends.

“Can we get back on the road now?” Dean asks plaintively.

“Sure,” Sam says, stepping up to Dean, who finally looks at him, expression wary. Sam cups the back of Dean's neck and presses their foreheads together. Dean freezes, holds his breath, and Sam pushes all of his emotions, everything he feels and knows about Dean, towards his brother. He has no idea what Dean's getting from him or how his whole deal works, but when he sighs and relaxes into Sam's gesture, it's enough. Message received.

Me, too.

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“You look like shit.” Sam looks up through his swollen eye. Whit is a blurry vision in hospital green and smells like antiseptic, but her hands are gentle as she tends to his wounds and she has the good drugs. Perks of her job that they don't talk about or overtly acknowledge. She'd patched up Dean an hour ago and sent him off to sit with Mer, who has a cold and feels pretty miserable. Sam doesn't envy Dean that job at all.

“Give me your arm.” Sam obediently does so, wincing as the stretch of muscles pull at the wound, haphazardly bound by gauze. He'd cut it pretty bad on a piece of glass during one of the fights with the skinwalker. The gauze hurts when it pulls away from the scab, and Whit mutters something about goddamned stubborn bastards while she dabs at the blood. Whit's stitches are much neater than Dean's; hell, Sam might not even scar badly.

“Thanks,” he mumbles, feeling a heavy lassitude settle into his limbs.

“I think of it as practice. Makes my life interesting,” Whit says dryly. She tilts his head back and smears something cold and smelly over the bruises on his cheek and jaw. She prods his eye and Sam jerks away, trying to glare at her. “I'll get you a cold compress for that eye.”

She does one better, bringing him a bag of peas and a scotch. Bless her.

“Thank you, my child,” Whit laughs. “I need as many blessings as I can get!” Whit snags a beer out of the fridge and sits down across from Sam, idly packing the supplies away. Something about mixing alcohol and medication flits through Sam's brain, but Whit is a nurse. She knows about these things, and the Scotch is a pretty golden color.

“What was it like?” Sam asks before he can really think about what he's saying. Right now, he's thinking about this little family they've made. While Mer has taken to him like a duck to water, and Dean's made him feel welcome in his home, he hasn't quite figured out where he fits in his own head. For some reason, tonight he's decided that Whit is the person to ask. Because she's nice. Even though Dean says she's not, which is a lie because Whit had made him pancakes his first day here. Mean people don't make pancakes.

“You're good people,” Sam slurs, “no matter what Dean says.” Whit laughs and takes his pulse.
“Those pain pills hitting then?” Whit asks him. Sam frowns and the world feels woozy, warm and soft.

“Why're you here?” Sam asks her curiously.

“Well. There's not really any other place I'd rather be at the moment.” Sam nods enthusiastically. He gets that. Mer and Dean are here, after all. Sam frowns, because he thinks his mouth has been moving without his permission. He sure of it when Whit says, “Yeah. They are. Let's get you to bed, Sambo.”

“My name is Sam.”

“Oh, really? I'd never have known,” Whit deadpans.

“You're...” Sam gets distracted by the floor light in the corner. It is really very pretty. He wants to touch the colors, wrap them around his hand and never let them go. The light feels happy and tastes like effervescent rainbows.

“Oh wow. No more drugs for the psychic people,” Whit mutters to herself, watching Sam flail about to 'catch the light beams.' She bypasses the couch and tucks Sam into Dean's bed—because no way is he sleeping on that tiny little piece of furniture. He looks young, all beat up with his shaggy hair falling in his eyes and a guileless look on his face. He blinks sleepily at her, then wraps himself around Dean's pillow and falls asleep between one breath and the next.

Ah, fuck. There she goes, falling for another Winchester. As if two of 'em weren't handful enough.
A Haven in a Heartless World by Xela

Chapter 6

Life goes on in the aftermath of the skinwalker. Mer gets over her cold and bounces around the house like a Tasmanian devil, so much energy it takes the three of them combined to keep her busy. Whit casually comments on the quality of the light in the house until Sam's so red it can't be healthy, then laughs at him until she cries. By mutual agreement, Sam and Dean decide to slide back into hunting with an easy case. Which, naturally, turns out to be not so easy.

The whole Hookman incident sends Dean into a rant about how Mer's never leaving home. Ever. She's also never going to grow up or like boys or think about sex. Sam tries to keep his smile internal in order to keep all his body parts intact because there is not a doubt in his mind that Dean's completely serious about everything he says.

Sam also avoids mentioning that Dean's 'plan' to keep Mer safe is the fastest way to recreating the Hookman fiasco he can imagine. Again, he likes his bits and pieces so he keeps his mouth shut and buys Dean a couple of Hostess cupcakes as solace.

They've got bruises over their bruises, new cuts and abrasions over the old ones, which means they're both in for a good scolding by Whit. Still, when the case is over, they're excited to get home.

Mer's sitting on the front steps waiting for them when they pull up, face drawn in misery, Whitney rubbing her back in soothing circles. Dean curses and scoops her up despite how his body protests. He carries Mer inside, Sam and Whit trailing after them.

Surprisingly, the expected scolding doesn't come. Whit just cleans their cuts and checks them for concussion. She doesn't bandage them up, which seems weird to Sam, but he doesn't want to ask. The atmosphere around them is somber and thick, and no one raises their voices above a low murmur.

Mer has decided she doesn't like the ground, so Sam and Dean juggle her as they get ready for bed, Mer refusing to let go unless the other is there to grab her. Whit disappears and then comes back with hot mugs of tea that warm them up from the inside out. Dean's so tired he actually smiles in thanks, a real smile that lacks the taunting edge most of Whit and Dean's interactions have.

When Sam moves towards the couch, Mer yells, leaning away from Dean and reaching for Sam. Dean frowns and tries to pass her to Sam, but that's not what she wants. She hooks one arm around Dean's neck and the other around Sam's and holds on. Sam's got no choice but to half-carry her into Dean's room and lay stiffly beside them in bed.

Once she exhorts a promise from Sam that he won't leave, she turns to Dean with soulful eyes, and Dean strips off his shirt without a word. Mer touches every one of his bruises with solemn reverence, mapping the signs of violence spread over her father's chest. It's a ritual Dean submits to without any trace of the snark or condescension he'd deliver upon anyone else. There is something very grave about the way Mer checks him over, lips pressed together in concentration.

Sam's surprised when she turns to him with the same look. She doesn't move towards him, as if she's unsure if he'll participate in this tradition. He glances at Dean, who shrugs but watches both of them carefully. Sam slips out of his shirt.
He sucks in a breath at the first touch. The bruise on his shoulder turns to ice when she touches him, then tingles oddly. He's prepared for the next one, but it still feels really weird. Like she rubbed icy hot on him, but the sensation is concentrated and more intense. She's halfway through when her eyes start to droop. She keeps them open by sheer determination alone.

“Hey, baby girl, it's alright, he's better now,” Dean coaxes and tries to pull her away. Sam frowns, trying to figure out what's going on. Mer shakes her head and persists, laying her hand on a particularly vicious bruise on Sam's hip that she has no way of knowing is there unless she has x-ray vision and can see through flannel sleep-pants. “Mer.”

“No.” Clipped and short, she sounds just like her grandfather. Dean sighs and lets her finish; she'll fall asleep before too long, and he's not up for a fight tonight. Mer makes it almost all the way through healing Sam before her body sags and she crumples into an exhausted ball of sleepy girl. Sam helps Dean maneuver her under the covers and realizes his shoulder doesn't hurt quite as much as it should.

“Dean?” Sam asks, though the confirmation is purely ceremonial at this point.

“She can heal small wounds,” he confirms, brushing his hand over Mer's head. “And alleviate some of the pain. It takes a lot out of her.”

Sam stares at his niece. Dean's kid. Mer constantly surprises him, and he has a sneaking suspicion that she constantly surprises Dean too.

“She's amazing,” he murmurs.

“Yeah,” Dean says, sounding choked. “She really is.”

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Mer sticks unusually close to Sam after she heals him the first time. He doesn't really know what to make of it. Dean suffers Sam's litany of 'whys' with gritted teeth and new ways to insinuate Sam's a girl, before he finally snaps.

“I don't know, Sam. She's never healed anyone else before, not even Whit.” Dean rolls his eyes as Sam's face squinches in preparation for a lecture. “Jesus Nancy Drew, can you drop the 20 questions bit and just go with it? You're such a giant girl”

“What's wrong with being a girl?” Sam chokes on his water. Neither of them had heard Mer come in, and she's standing in the doorway, arms crossed and expression thunderous. Dean swallows and looks panicked.

“Yeah, Dean. What's wrong with being a girl?” Sam grins, wide and mocking.

“Nothing, sweetheart,” Dean says. “Being a girl is awesome.” His smile is nervous around the edges. Mer is not appeased.

“You keep saying like it's bad to uncassam.” Mer's chin starts wobbling and her eyes look suspiciously wet. And now Dean really is panicking, because he hates it when Mer cries. More than anything in the world,
including airplanes. “D'you wish I was a boy?” It's so pathetic and planned that Sam can't believe Dean falls for it. Dean assures Mer that she's perfect as she is, and boys are stupid, and he's so, so sorry. He gathers her up in his arms when she sniffs, loud and piteous.

Mer smirks at Sam over Dean's shoulder and Sam shakes his head. Kid's going to be trouble when she grows up. He grins.

He's so going to be there when it happens.

****

They go to check out a case in Oklahoma. A guy died of, reportedly, Mad Cow Disease, but Sam doesn't buy it and neither does Dean. They hop in the Impala and head out, Mer and Whit watching them go. Whit's displeasure follows them all the way to Oklahoma.

“You get used to it,” is Dean's only advice, and Sam realizes that their little house in Iowa really has become home. Sam wonders how Dad feels about it, but then they're off to development hell where 'Uncle Dusty' died.

For .00001 of a second, after the realtor assumes they're a gay couple, Sam imagines buying a house with Dean and Mer like the ones in Oasis Planes. Their version of the white picket fence. It can be just the three of them, where no one knows them or knows he and Dean are brothers. (Except for Whit, who has incongruously moved in next door in his dream-world.)

“Growing up in a place like this would freak me out,” Dean gripes. See dream. See dream grow. Grow dream, grow. See Dean shatter dream.

“Why?” Though it doesn't matter; it was always a pipe dream anyways.

“The manicured lawns, 'How was your day, honey?' I'd blow my brains out.” Sam doesn't mention that whenever Dean's been away at the body shop he always asks Mer how her day's been.

“There's nothing wrong with normal,” Sam says mildly, tamping down his disappointment. He doesn't mention anything about Mer maybe deserving normal. Dean doesn't like to think about school and Mer growing up and things changing. They're good like they are now, and Dean's fine with that.

“I'd take our family over normal any day,” Dean tells him. Sam lets it go because yeah. An empath, a psychic healer, and whatever Sam's got going on? They're not exactly normal. Plus, Iowa's pretty convenient for the work they do, and Whitney's kind of grown on him.

But still, these houses in Oasis Plains? Very nice. Especially the shower, which Dean hogs and hogs and hogs and Sam needs a crowbar to pry him out. He doesn't ask what Dean's been doing in there the whole time, but he comes out relaxed and easy.

****

If only it hadn't rained. Dean hates the rain. He glares at it with malevolence usually reserved for things that go dead in the night and it's all downhill after that. Dean's pissy and withdrawn the rest of the hunt.
They snipe at each other about everything. Dad, how they were raised, how Dean's raising Mer—"We're both raising her, jackass.” “But YOU'RE her father, Dean!”—the eternal debate about how Dean supplements his income, college, loyalty to family. Whether they should be hunting so much in the first place. Everything Sam says sends Dean spiraling into a sulk.

Sam manages not to punch Dean when he starts taking potshots and Sam's decision to go to college. They'll have to deal with it eventually, but not today. Not right now. (And no matter what Dean says, bow hunting is not an important lifeskill. Nor was Dad the caring, doting father Dean makes him out to be.)

But then they have a genuine Native American curse to deal with and people who need saving. Their family issues have never gotten in the way of saving lives. The developer's family issues, however, mean they're stuck on cursed land with swarms of insects out for their blood for the next twelve hours or so. Awesome.

They pack towels and tape over all the cracks they can find, but Sam could have told them it was futile. There's no way they can make an entire house air-tight. It's just not possible. He can hear the hum of a million insects getting louder and louder. Dean backs up, eyes darting around, trying to figure out how the hell they're going to get out of this one.

Dean gasps and doubles over, clutching his head.

"Dean!” Sam yells, keeping a wary eye on the fireplace. He can hear groaning metal and the sound of millions of bugs in the flue. “Dean!”

"Mer,” Dean gasps. “She's scared.” Seconds later panic and fear and anger sledgehammer into Sam's psyche. His eyes water and his head hurts.

"Shit.” Mer is REALLY scared. And mad.

"Yeah,” Dean murmurs weakly. Sam sends Mer a “we're okay/need to concentrate” message and she recedes a little. Enough that they can sprint up the stairs and hide in the attic. It buys them a couple of hours, until the bugs start eating through the roof. They try to ward them off with aerosol cans and patches of plywood, but there are too many of them and sunrise is too far off. The wood of the roof crumbles, then falls, and insects pour into the space.

The swarm heads straight for them when they just...stop. The bees buzz angrily around them, unfold like a blanket, and they're suddenly thrown into darkness.

“What's going on?” Matt, Sam's newest groupie, asks. It's like the insects are trapped against a shield, hurling their bodies at an invisible barrier.

“I have no idea,” Dean replies. Sam reaches towards the barrier and gasps, yanking his hand away.

“Mer,” Sam breathes.

“What?” Dean demands. Instead of reaching out physically, Dean closes his eyes and Sam feels the familiar mental brush that is his brother. He copies Dean, skates along the edges of his consciousness and yes—it's Mer surrounding them, keeping the bees at bay, furious and protective.
There's something else, too, beyond Mer's shield. Something sinister and ancient that wants them all dead, pressing against the barrier of love and righteous anger surrounding them. Mer is having none of that, no one's going to hurt her family. She throws the equivalent of a mental tantrum. She hurls loud psychic shrieks of displeasure outwards and wages war for them in a way no child should be able to.

Sam concentrates on her and learns to emulate what she's doing. He layers his own energy underneath hers, bolsters the places she's forgotten about, like the floor beneath their feet. He throws his own mental bombs into the fray, smirks as clusters of insects scatter under the assault or fall twitching to the ground. He learns from her how to wield his power, and then shows her how to strategize.

Dean slides up behind him and wraps his arms around Sam's waist, and suddenly Sam's more powerful than he was before. Sam unlocks Dean, channels his brother's energy through himself. Dean's lifeforce burns bright green-gold and doesn't so much destroy the bees as send them skittering far, far away. It expands through the house, into the yard around it, and there's not a single bug in the entire field. Mer murmurs her approval, brushes against them both just to make sure they're okay. Sam sends soft pulses of love and assurance back to her and he swears he can feel the warmth of her smile on his skin.

She recedes softly from them, powerful in her anger but fading fast. Sam has a brief flash of Mer grown up, standing before a group of people, older and completely self-assured and very, very hard. His chest aches for the woman he sees there. Then it's gone, the sun comes up and it's all over.

Sam starts returning to himself, fitting all the pieces of his mind back together. Dean manages a soft, tired smile as they detangle from one another. During the long hours of the night they'd changed and shifted until they pressed close together, Sam's head thrown back on Dean's shoulder, Dean's arms banded around Sam's chest.

Matt looks at them suspiciously because he had believed they were brothers. Matt's dad looks shaken, hand clutching his wife's.

“What...what was that?” Matt asks. Sam and Dean share a look; Dean has just about as much of a clue as Sam.

“Never question the good stuff,” Dean mutters. Matt lets it go.

When they're alone, Sam repeats Matt's questions. “What was that? Did you know—”

“No,” Dean cuts him off, jaw tense. Sam lets it drop, and Dean doesn't argue when he suggests stopping at the nearest motel. Sam glances at Dean from the corner of his eye. He'd suggest calling Mer, but it's still really early and the light brush of assurance from his mind to hers was more comforting than a telephone call would be.

“It's okay, you know,” Sam ventures. Dean's hands tighten around the steering wheel and his mouth turns down slightly. “It's just—”

“I know,” Dean snaps. “Whatever, it's fine.” Sam sighs, long and heavy.

Dean checks them in and stalks to the shower, anger clear with every jerky movement. He's in there barely five minutes before he's out again, skin tinged pink and water dripping out of his hair. His tone is clipped when he tells Sam the shower's free.
Sam, for the life of him, can't figure out what bug's crawled up Dean's ass—pun and really distasteful joke totally intended. Dean had warned Sam, almost so casually Sam had ignored it, that Mer was powerful, and her abilities would increase as she got older. So unless he hadn't believed his own words, then Dean shouldn't be so angry about this.

Sam sighs and lets it slide off with the water. It's not like Dean makes a habit of being sane and making sense.

He climbs out of the shower and wraps the too-small towel around his waist. God, he can't wait to get home. They have large, fluffy towels there that wrap all the way around his body and then some.

Sam hums happily and lets the water sluice over him. He'll get out in a minute.

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Dean looks up when Sam comes in and his mouth goes dry. The only way he can think of to fix it is to lick the water dripping off Sam's torso. He briefly indulges his fantasy before shaking it off. Nope, Sam had made himself perfectly clear, and there's so much crap between them they're better off not going there. The memory of Sam going off to college still burns. Dean goes back to sharpening his knife, growling when Sam snaps off the light mid-stroke.

He throws the whetstone in Sam's general direction as retaliation and slips the knife under his pillow.

They've only been asleep for half an hour when one of their cell phones rings. Dean groans and buries his head under his pillow, but the phone keeps ringing.

“Sam,” Dean whines, his brain not quite on line yet. He hears Sam mumbled something negative and rollover. “Sam!”

“S'not important!” Sam protests. The phone stops ringing, only to start again immediately after.

“It's home,” Dean says, his body tensing as the ringtone registers. Sam sits up, staring at the lighted square on the other side of the room. The phone stops ringing.

“If it's important, Whit'll call—” Dean's out of his bed as soon as the phone starts ringing again, Sam hot on his heels.

“Yeah?” Dean snaps out, heart pounding.

“Oh, thank God! Dean! I can't wake Mer up.” Dean stumbles back and Sam catches him.

“What do you mean—”

“She won't wake up! She's in bed, and I've poked and shaken her and I can't wake her up!” Whit's voice gains in strength and volume, approaching hysteria. Dean looks pale and hollow.

Sam snatches the phone up and guides Dean towards the bed. “Whit, calm down—no. Calm down. Mer did something spooky last night...yes, something Winchester-freaky. Stay with her, if she starts shaking or
getting hot or anything changes, get her to the hospital. Can you do that? Whit?”

“Yeah,” Whit said, her voice small. “Yeah, I can do that.” Dean pulls himself together and starts gathering their clothes. He has them ready to go in under a minute while Sam keeps talking to Whit, voice low and soothing. “Sam?”

“Alright, Whit. We're on our way. We're leaving now. Call if anything changes, you hear me?”

“Yeah. Okay.”

He slides into the passenger seat and Dean tears out of the lot, pointed towards Iowa.
Chapter 7

Dean peels out of the parking lot like Hell is after them. They tear across Oklahoma and Kansas; Sam spends most of the time praying they don't get pulled over because he can't promise Dean will stop or the cop will come away unscathed.

Sam figures either their luck has drastically improved or his prayers are working in mysterious ways because they blaze past not one but two state troopers without getting pulled, and probably more unmarked cars than he'd like to think about. They make the nine-and-a-half hour trip in just under six. Whit runs out of the house as soon as they pull up.

“She okay?” Dean asks, barreling past Whit.

“Hasn't changed.” She looks horrible, with dark circles under her eyes and wild hair.

Mer looks like she's napping, her hair spread across her pillow like Sleeping Beauty. Dean presses two fingers against her pulse point and lays his head on her chest. He closes his eyes and...there she is. Distant, like when she's exhausted and deeply asleep, but he can feel her in the back of his head.

Sam steps forward and brushes his fingers against her temples. He feels a spark of recognition and a gentle surge of awareness before her consciousness recedes again. He lets out a sigh of relief, echoed by Dean.

“She's fine,” Sam whispers to Whit, hovering anxiously behind them.

“You're sure?”

“Yeah,” Dean answers, pulling himself away from Mer. He looks wrecked, eyes sunken into his head and swaying on his feet. Sam hooks his arm around Dean's waist before he stumbles or falls. Whit casts one last glance at Mer's still form, unconvinced, but lets them shuffle her out of the room. Dean's harder to convince, stopping at the entrance and just staring at his daughter. He can't help one last ping, which Mer answers with the irritation of someone trying to get some rest.

After that, Dean stays pliant and biddable for Sam. Even if Sam wasn't so completely in tune with Dean's emotions he'd be able to tell his brother has hit a wall, sprinted to the edge of the cliff and skidded to a precarious stop. Sam strips Dean down to his boxers and tucks him into bed before taking care of himself.

He takes a minute to wash his face, brush his teeth and gather his thoughts. He climbs into bed with Dean before he can talk himself out of it. Dean lays stiff on his side, not even bothering to fake sleep. Sam sighs, wraps one long arm around Dean, and tugs. Dean slides into his arms, tense and unyielding.

“She's okay,” Sam whispers. “She's safe and okay.”

At first that gets him nothing, and Sam wonders if he seriously misjudged the situation. But then Dean starts trembling, small movements that build into bigger ones, until Dean's breath is shaking as much as his body. Sam holds his brother while he breaks apart, lets the terror he's been keeping locked inside finally free.

Sam wraps himself as tightly around Dean as possible, anchors his brother as best he can. Dean sucks in
huge, sobbing breaths of air, vulnerable because a helpless little kid owns his soul and his heart and he can’t protect her all the time. Especially when her mind goes walk-about in the world. Sam presses a kiss to the back of Dean's neck, light enough that he can pretend it didn't happen.

Dean's entire body pauses, like he's waiting for something to push him to action. Sam holds his breath, prays he didn't just f**k everything up. But all Dean does is let out a shuddering breath and go limp in Sam's arms, too drained to do anything but let sleep drag him down into blessed darkness.

****

They stick close to home for a long time after that. Dean has developed anxiety issues, getting nervous and fidgety when Mer's away for too long. Sam's had to fight with Dean to let Mer go to the weekly park get-together where he finally meets the elusive Finn, who is rather awesome. Not quite as awesome as Mer, but he can see why they're friends. Sam likes to think of himself as the voice of reason, post-Oasis Plains debacle.

The truth is, Sam's just as obsessive as Dean. He's just sneakier about it. He pings her almost constantly. Mer has always understood their need to check up on her; Sam is pretty sure Dean trained it into her when she was born, and she's always been warm and reassuring when either of them brushed against her. So when Mer snaps back a mental “I'm fine,” sharp and grating, Sam backs off. Just a little bit.

And Sam moves into Dean's room. Officially. After the first night, Dean had engaged Sam in a hot debate over something or other right before bed. Sam had been so wrapped up in telling him off that he hadn't even registered Dean shutting the door behind them and climbing into bed. The light snapping off and throwing the room into darkness had been his first clue. He paused, mid-rant, and stared at Dean, a dark lump under the comforter. Sam had weighed everything he knew about Dean and finally slid into the bed, keeping his distance. Dean had grunted once, rolled over, and fallen asleep.

His stuff, once tucked into one corner of the den, migrates into Dean's room within three days. Actually, on the third day, Whit dumps his duffle on the threshold of the room with a glare. Dean helps Sam make room for his clothes without a word.

It's kind of weird, but they settle into a holding pattern, and Sam occasionally wakes up with Dean wrapped around him like an octopus, which pulls Sam in all kinds of directions. But it satisfies his increasing need to be close to Dean, a hot itch that burrows under his skin and takes up residence, so Sam doesn't complain.

Dean walks around like everything is hunky dory. Sam hates him.

They fall into a routine that opens Sam wide for Dean's mockery because Sam is, essentially, a stay at home mom. Whit and Dean collectively bring home the bacon and Sam does all the shopping, cleaning, picking up and dropping off of Mer, and cooking. It's kind of nice. He has plenty of time to read, too, so he brushes up on his ancient Sumerian mythology and esoteric pre-bronze age symbols.

He ends up with pages and pages of notes and scribblings. One day, Dean comes in from the auto shop and thrusts a plastic-wrapped package at Sam's chest. He looks everywhere but at Sam, a faint blush staining his cheeks. Sam carefully pulls out a large leather-bound journal. It's sturdy and functional with a leather thong to mark the page.
Dean watches Sam out of the corner of his eye, trying to gauge Sam's reaction but getting nothing.

Sam very carefully lays the journal on the coffee table, then tackles Dean off the chair and wraps him up in a full-body hug.

“Sam what the—get off me!” Dean bucks, but Sam just laughs holds on tight like he used to do as a kid, when Dean declared himself 'too manly' to do hugs. It turns into an all-out tussle, Dean trying to get away and Sam keeping him pinned tightly.

They haven't sparred like this in ages, and they topple furniture as they wrestle around the room. Dean elbows Sam in the face and gains the upper hand, catching Sam up in a headlock. Sam gets Dean off him by pulling on his shirt until one of the seams gives.

“Dude, not cool!” Dean yelps, twisting to see if his shirt has ripped. Sam laughs and wrestles Dean to the ground. Dean almost squirms away, but Sam gets his legs up around Dean's hips and twists his arms behind his back. Dean falls on Sam's chest with a grunt.

“Gotcha!” Sammy sing-songs. Dean lifts his head and looks down at Sam. Sam's breath catches in his throat.

“Yeah,” Dean says. Sam's eyes zero in on Dean's lips, Mer and want and rightwrongDeanmine crash into one another. Dean's eyes darken and he jerks down just a little. Sam raises his head, gaze fluttering between Dean's eyes and his lips.

“Bo-oys!” Dean jerks to his feet faster than Sam can blink. Fuck. He lets his head thump against the floor before pushing himself up and trailing after Dean towards the entrance, willing his cock down. He's so lost in his thoughts he runs into Dean, who has stopped in the doorway.

Whit's kneeling beside Mer, face twisted into comic incomprehension as Mer earnestly whispers what could be the secrets of the universe to her, all the while trying to pull Whit out the door. Sam and Dean watch them for a little while, neither one of them able to figure out what, exactly, is going on.

“Um. Hello?” Dean ventures, and both girls start. Whit looks at them with speculative curiosity. Mer stares at both of them, stomps her little foot in annoyance, and stalks off with a scowl on her face.

“What was that about?” Sam asks.


Later that night, when Sam and Dean are trolling the internet and arguing about their next case, Whit tracks Mer down to try and wrap her head around what she heard.

“Hey, Miss Ma'am,” Whit says with a short knock. Mer looks up from her sketch pad and gives Whit one of those piercing looks that raises goosebumps on Whit's skin and makes her think Mer's tapped in to something way bigger than any of them guess.

“They belong,” Mer tells her, going back to her coloring. She literally colors: swirls of bright and dark hues
that almost make a picture but never quite do; like maybe if you had the right filter, or glanced at it sideways just so, it would make a whole lot of profound sense.

“How do they belong?” Whit asks, sliding down the wall. She picks up her own piece of paper and starts sketching.

“Mmmmmmm,” Mer hums, her tongue sticking out the side of her mouth. “They're pretty together.”

“Pretty?”

“Glowy. They should be together, like Lissa and Jer.”

“Lissa? The three-year-old from down the street?”

“Yes.”

“And Jer...”

“Oh, he's seven and knows everything.”

“Everything, huh?” Whit asks with a smile.

“Yes. And he fits. With Lissa, like Legos.” Whit blinks. She'd been thinking puzzle or some such would be the metaphor of choice. Mer can do a puzzle like no other, brow furrowed in concentration as she carefully selects each piece and puts it where it goes—regardless of whether or not she's filled in the other pieces around it. It's freaky to watch her assemble a 5,000 piece puzzle that way, with no real starting point or referencing the box.

“Okay, I'll bite. How are they like Legos?”

“They fit,” Mer explains patiently. “They snap together 'n make something newer and cooler—like the Millennium Falcon!” Whit had bought that stupid Star Wars Lego kit last Christmas and Mer had fallen in love, made them buy all the DVDs, sneered at the 'prequels' and declared Han Solo 'dreamy,' much to her father's horror. So Jer and Lissa are getting high honors here.

“So together, they're the Millennium Falcon. What are they apart?”

Mer sighs, heavy and sad. “Definitely TIE fighters.”

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Sam's nightmares take a turn one day. Instead of Jess and the fire, he's dreaming of a woman trapped in a house, beating at a window, long shadows cast over the side of a house. He wakes Dean up almost every night, to the point where he's thinking about moving back to the couch to give him a break. Sam starts sketching the weirdly familiar shadow on anything he can get his hands on. He can't figure out where he's seen it or what it is. Until Mer walks up and asks, “Why do you keep drawing trees?”

That's all Sam needs. He's off, rifling through the pictures tucked in Dad's journal—he's gone through it a hundred times since they got it—till he finds the one he's looking for. It's the tree he keeps drawing, the
one that pops up in his dreams these days. One with him and Dean and Mom. Where they're outside of their house in Lawrence.

Fuck.

He has no idea how he'll convince Dean to go there, but he knows, deep down inside, that they don't have a choice. There's something there that they need to do, something they can't avoid. Unfortunately, Dean's not buying the 'just trust me' line. So apparently, it's Sam's turn to 'fess up to his freakatude.

“I've had these nightmares.”

“I've noticed,” Dean says dryly. Nothing like a good punch to the chest to wake up in the morning.

“They're just...sometimes they come true.” Dean stares at him, waiting for more.

“People have weird dreams, man. I'm sure it was just a coincidence,” Dean assured him. Sam can tell Dean doesn't believe his own words.

“No,” Sam denies. He has to get this out, see this through. “I dreamt about the blood dripping, her on the ceiling, the fire, everything, and I didn't do anything about it because I didn't believe it and now I'm dreaming about that tree and a woman screaming trapped inside and—”

“Alright.”

“...what?”

“Alright. We'll go.” Sam's a little affronted because he expected it to be harder than that. Dean should be freaked out, sarcastic, fight him on this. Seeing him calm and agreeable? It's freaking Sam the hell out. Especially since this is Lawrence. Home. A place Dean doesn't like to think about, much less drop by for a visit.

“Dean...”

“Mer has dreams too,” Dean interrupts, and leaves to pack his bag. There's not much Sam can say to that.

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Usually when they go to leave, Mer gives them each a long, solemn hug and watches as the Impala's lights disappear down the street.

This time, she's sitting in front of the car with two of her own bags packed to the brim and a mutinous expression on her face.

“Uh oh,” Dean mutters under his breath.

“What do we do?” Sam asks.

“I have no idea,” Dean growls. He puts his weapons and duffle in the trunk and then goes to Mer, crouching down beside her.
“Hey, Mer-Bear, I—”

“No.” It's petulant and whiney and harder than diamonds. Mer's eyes glitter angrily.

“Mer,” Dean starts again.

“NO.”

“Mary!”

“You can't leave without me!” Mer screams, face turning red and tears welling in her eyes. Dean cringes and Sam shifts uncomfortably, wanting nothing more than to run and hide. She stands up and puts her hands on her hips. “You can't you can't you can't you can't you can't!” She stomps her foot, her entire body shaking with her ire.

“Jesus, MER! CALM DOWN!” Dean picks Mer up, her limbs flailing every which way, only to double over with a loud grunt when Mer's foot hits him square in the nuts. There are now two Winchesters on the ground, Mer continuing her tantrum while Dean cradles his very tender family jewels.

Sam glances between the two of them, trying to decide whether to tackle Mer or Dean first. When Mer curls in tight and then lets her hands and legs burst out in a violent fit of pique, he decides Dean is the safest route and goes to help him up.

“Should never 've had kids,” Dean moans. His eyes are suspiciously wet, but Sam pretends not to notice. There are a lot of reactions that can be forgiven due to a punch in the nuts.

“Wasn't aware you did it on purpose,” Sam says with a grin. He helps Dean up, rubbing his back and coaching him to breathe. By the time Dean feels like he can get up without being nauseated, Mer's tantrum has subsided into sniffing hiccups. Her face is blotchy and she has tear tracks all over her face and her nose is running.

“Alright, Mer,” Dean says, his voice deep with pain but patient. “Let's talk about what just happened.”

Mer wails, “You can't—”

“Mer!” Dean's voice is a dangerous whip-crack, sharp and uncompromising. Mer's eyes widen and she (wisely) shuts up. “Why do you want to come?” Mer shifts and glances away. She only looks like that when she's guilty. Dean doesn't flinch, just stares at her until she ducks her head.

“I hadda dream,” Mer sniffs, staring down at the ground. Her voice is a little hoarse from all the screaming, and Sam realizes this is the youngest she's ever seemed to him. Sam and Dean share a troubled glance.

“Okay. About what?” Dean asks. Mer mutters something that neither of them catch. “What was that?”

“I can't tell you.” Mer sounds miserable, and she looks it too. Sam doesn't think she's just saying it to be ornery.
“Mer. That's not acceptable. I don't—” Dean starts, but Mer interrupts him.

“I need to go,” she says plaintively, jaw set stubbornly. It looks like she's about to go for tantrum round two, and Dean holds up his hands.

“If you throw another fit you don't get to come,” Dean declares. Mer pouts and glares at her father, then turns pleading eyes to Sam. Oh no. He's not getting involved in this one. “Mer!” Dean warns.

“I had a dream, if I don't come, bad things happen,” Mer bites out, sulking. As if asking her to explain herself is the most annoying thing on the planet. Sam can tell Dean's trying to hide a smirk. Dean makes Mer wait for his answer because he doesn't want her to get used to walking all over him—not that she doesn't have him wrapped around her little finger.

“Mer. If you need or want something, you talk to me about it first. Explain it without the foot stomping. Save the bitching for uncassam. Otherwise you don't get whatever you want. Okay?” Mer's eyes are shiny, but she nods, chin wobbling, and doesn't let the tears fall. She raises her chin, trying to look brave and Dean freaking loves his kid. And honestly, Mer had him at 'dreams.' “You can come. We'll take you to see Missouri.” Mer brightens, her smile wide and happy, and she hugs both their legs in jubilation before running into the house to get Mer Bear. Sam goes to get the car seat out of the garage, Dean following to get more weapons.

“My kid is not going to turn into one of those cryptic know-it-alls,” Dean growls at him, and Sam doesn't bother to hold back his laugh.
Chapter 8

The closer they get to Lawrence the more subdued and tense Dean becomes, fingers drumming anxiously against the steering wheel. Sam wants nothing more than to reach over and grab his hand, just to make it stop.

Mer hasn't said a word in almost sixty miles.

But mutual agreement, they drive straight through, Dean handing the keys over without a word. The faster they get this trip over with, the faster they can get home. It's almost four in the morning when the Impala pulls up to a cozy two story house. Dean kills the engine and stares out into the darkness, face drawn and tight.

If Dean could have avoided it, he never would have come back here. Missouri's awesome and all, but Lawrence makes him jumpy. He blames his call to Dad on that. Sammy's nightmares getting worse, the poltergeist won't be banished. Nothing else explains what possessed him to leave that pathetic message on Dad's answering machine.

“Hey,” Sam says softly, thwacking Dean lightly on the arm. Dean starts and looks at Sam with incomprehension. There are dark circles under his eyes and he looks pale against the darkness. “I, uh. I know that—” A sharp rap on the window startles them both.

“Well come on then. I've been waiting on you all night. I have to get my beauty sleep.” A black woman with knowing eyes and a round, inviting face stares at them through the driver's side window.

“Gamma Mo!” Mer yells, the first thing she's said in hours, and she starts kicking the back of Sam's seat to get out.

“Oh, is that little Mary Winchester? Child, just look at how you've grown!” Dean jerks out of his stupor and climbs out of the car, a wide smile on his face. The woman turns to him and scowls. “And you.” Dean swallows and takes an inadvertent step back. “When was the last time you called me?”

“Uh. I, uh…”

“You, uh, ah, er what?” Missouri asks skeptically, crossing her arms and pinning Dean in place with a highly unforgiving look.

“Sorry?” Dean says with his most charming smile.

“Yeah, I just bet you are. Well, what are you waiting for? Give us a hug!” Dean grins and lets himself get wrapped up in Missouri's giant bear hug. Missouri always manages to make him feel comfortable, like everything in this world will be okay. He imagines that if they'd grown up in a normal family, this is what having a mom would've felt like.

“You did the right thing bringing her,” Missouri whispers, and a huge weight lifts from Dean's shoulders.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, and gave Missouri an extra hard squeeze before letting her go.

“Samuel Winchester, as I live and breathe.” Sam smiles self consciously, watching Dean move to let Mer
“Uh, hi,” Sam says with a small wave. Missouri looks as unimpressed with Sam as she had with Dean, so Sam sticks his hand out politely.

“Oh please,” Missouri snorts contemptuously and grabs his hand, “like I need anymore of THAT from this family.” Sam lets out a startled sound as she yanks him into a hug.

“Gamma Mo, Gamma Mo!” Mer struggles in Dean's arms, who rolls his eyes and sets her down on the ground.

“Mer, Mer, Mer, what have they been feeding you? You're growing like a weed!” Mer launches herself into Missouri's arms and snuggles in, looking like she might never leave. Not if she has the choice.

“Now, I know all about why you boys are here,” Missouri calls over her shoulder, leaving them to grab their bags and trail after her to the house. Her home is as warm and welcoming as the woman herself. “And it's good you're learning to trust yourself, Sam.”

“Uh.  Thanks?” Sam ventures.

“You're welcome. Now get inside and make yourselves at home. You have a busy day tomorrow.”

----

“Sam.  Sam.  Sam.  SAM.”

“WHAT?”

“Get up.” Sam groans and pulls the pillow over his head. Dean pokes him in the side with relentless determination. “Come on, we have a house to check.”

Sam stumbles down the stairs to the smell of bacon and eggs, pancakes and warm syrup. Mer sits on a counter stirring batter while Missouri tends the eggs and bacon. Dean is setting the table and pouring rinks. It looks domestic and cozy.

“—and then, and then, and then Jer was so mean and Caitlin pushed him on the floor! And Miss Kit wasn't very happy.”

“No, I imagine she wasn't,” Missouri says. “You gonna just stand there all day, Sam, or are you gonna come make some pancakes?”

“PANCAKES UNCASSAM!” Mer yells, throwing her hands (and stirring spoon) up in the air. Sam watches a glob of raw batter land on Missouri's beautifully finished cabinets and drip down.

“Alright, pancakes it is,” he agrees with a smile. Mer cheers, and Sam looks up just in time to catch a soft, unfamiliar look on Dean's face before it's time for breakfast.

----
“You'll be fine, Mer-Bear?” Dean checks, because he's never managed to leave without checking and checking and checking again. Usually, Mer puts up with her father's insanity with a patient smile. Today she's distracted, attention constantly sliding away. “Mer?”

“Yeah. Gamma Mo's making cookies!” Mer says brightly, but it rings hollow. Dean frowns and glances and Missouri for confirmation.

“Snicker doodles and chocolate chip,” Missouri agrees with a smile.

“Alright. We'll be back soon. And I have my phone!” Dean's feet stutter uncertainly towards the door, like he doesn't want to go.

“Yes, Dean,” Missouri says with fond exasperation. Sam tugs on Dean's shirt, urging him to get a move on. Dean frowns, because he can tell something's up with Mer and he really wants to know what's wrong.

“Bye, Mer,” Sam calls, and gets a half-wave for his troubles. They leave Mer and Missouri standing on the porch, Mer staring east, the opposite of the way they're going, eye squinched.

“What— ” Dean starts, but Missouri shushes him.

“Don't you worry your pretty little head about it, Dean. She'll be fine.”

****

Jesus, there's some bad mojo in their old house. They both feel it as soon as they walk up the path, a pervasive sense of not right. Something in that house is very, very angry and it has fixated on Jenny and her kids. They need back up, but even Missouri balks at the house, disturbed.

Mer straight up refuses to get out of the car; in fact, she didn't want to get in the car to go to the house. Missouri's purification spell doesn't work, and she's out of ideas. By mutual agreement, she gets Mer as far away from the house as she can and leaves the boys to fend for themselves. They'll do alright. Besides, she and Mer have an appointment at home.

Sure enough, she's got a guest sitting in her kitchen when they get home. Mer has half unbuckled herself—something she does NOT tell her parents she can do—by the time Missouri opens the car door. The little girl's off like a shot, her small legs covering ground with lightening speed. Missouri heads in at a more leisurely pace.

By the time she makes it to the kitchen, Mer is deep into a retelling of the epic struggles of Jer and Caitlin.

“—and Miss Kit made them go stand in a corner, because you shouldn't push people, even if they're stupid boys who deserve it.”

“Miss Kit sounds like a very smart woman.” Missouri leans against the doorway and watches Mer meticulously count out chocolate chips in groups of fourteen, for a reason that probably makes sense to Mer.

“Oh, she's AWESOME. The coolest EVER!”
“Ever, huh?”

“Yep! Gamma Mo! Look!” Mer bounces excitedly, radiating happiness. “Granpa's here!”

“I can see that,” Missouri says neutrally. John nods at her in greeting and ignores her glare with the ease of someone who’s been disappointing his children for longer than he cares to remember. He's going to disappoint them again by leaving, though they won't even know it. “Lots of things going on with those boys.” John flinches, and Missouri allows herself a small, humorless smile. Someone needs to take him down a peg.

“Oh, John Winchester,” she thinks. “Of all the mistakes you've ever made, this one will haunt you.” What she says is, “Make yourself at home. We've got some time before they finish.”

John takes her at her word and begins combining the cookie ingredients she hands him while Mer babbles on about her friends. John listens carefully to every word she says, storing them away for later. Mer continues moving her chocolate chips around, forming random groups and patterns on the table top. Missouri allows her mind to wander over the whole of the Winchester family.

She had never met John's Mary, but her mark rests over the entire family. Mer is named for her. Dean carries her around with him like an open wound, something he learned from his father. Sam misses her in ways he doesn't recognize because he's never not missed her. John has built his world around her absence. They're so special, all these men and the little girl at the center of their worlds. This family is touched by something, though whether it's evil or good remains to be seen.

Dean is more powerful than he realizes. He's got powers he may never know about because he's wrapped himself up so completely in his family that nothing else really gets through the veil. She blames growing up on the road, the people around him constantly changing so he had to connect with his only constants. Sam was his only anchor, so she's not too surprised by what they're moving towards. That's bigger than all of them, and she's not one to throw stones. Plus Mer would glare at her.

And Sam. He's as powerful as Mer, and though he hasn't tapped into that reserve yet, he's making scary progress. She gets a cold shiver when she thinks of such raw talent without having to work for it. For all his powers, she can't imagine how he missed his father's presence.

“It's 'cause he's not listening.” It takes a moment for Missouri to realize Mer is talking to her.

“What's that?”

“Why uncassam doesn't feel Granpa. He's not listening.”

“Hm. Well. He's going to have to do better than that, isn't he? You gonna teach him?” Mer giggles, and John smiles tightly. His discomfort with his boys' abilities clouds the air around them, and Mer hunkers down in her seat, acutely aware of her grandfather's conflicting emotions. The day Missouri Mosely rewards John's prejudices will be the day she's possessed by Lucifer himself, so she continues on. “What about Dean? Why isn't he listening?”

“He doesn’t want to know,” Mer says blithely. The only sign that Mer's pronouncement affects John is a tightening of his mouth, lines appearing at the corners. Missouri can tell Mer knew her announcement.
would upset John because she watches her grandfather out of the corner of her eye, gauging his reaction.

*Oh child, you are a sly one,* Missouri thinks, and the brief, smug look Mer shoots her is far older than her age.

They mix cookie batter in silence, the air heavy around them. Missouri tries to clear her mind and ignore John's thoughts, but it's not easy. The man's a font of dark energy and worry. When the swirl of emotions hits a peak, she decides to head it off at the pass.

“I'm going to do the dishes,” she calls of her shoulder. “You two go make yourself comfortable elsewhere.”

She can feel John staring at her back, but eventually he picks up Mer in his arms and moves into the living room. Lord have mercy, it's like a breath of fresh air when he clears the room.

----

John's pack rests against the couch in Missouri's waiting room. He's keenly aware of it, sitting there so innocently. Mer's arms tighten around his neck and she buries her face against him.

“Hey Mer,” He soothes, rubbing his hand down her back. She accepts the touch, then wiggles to get down. John obliges, setting her gently on her feet. She sticks her thumb in her mouth and stares at his pack like she knows what he has in there. For all he knows, she can feel it in spite of the muting spells on it.

He pulls a package wrapped in soft leather, protective markings etched on its surface, out of his bag. The package is thick and heavy, and very old. Mer stares at it, wide-eyed. John holds it out to her and opens his mouth to talk, but Mer shakes her head and backs away.

“Mer——”

“It's not Time,” she whispers, looking scared. “Every Time is set and you're not here. Supposed to be there. It's not for the now! For the tomorrows! Today will be yesterdays too soon and not for me! No!” John reels back in fear; he has no idea what Mer's saying, she isn't making any sense but she's obviously upset and terrified. Her eyes are glazed, wild and vacant. There's one thing he knows for certain though: this book was written for his granddaughter. It's destined for her, whether she wants it or not.

“I don't...I don't understand.” John unwraps the object to reveal a book, its pages yellowed with age. Mer starts trembling, her eyes glued to the cover.

“Not now. Not now. Don't wanna-can't! No! NO!” Mer crashes into the coffee table, and John reaches for her in alarm but she twists away from him. She's crying and has her hands over her ears. “It wants be gone! Too short, it's not tomorrows yet! LEAVE ME ALONE!”


“PUT THAT AWAY.” John starts at the command in Missouri's voice, blanches at how pale she's gone; her normally luminous skin looks tepid and wan.
“Okay. Okay,” John placates, scared by their reactions. Though really, when he actually thinks about it, a book of this much power and prophecy must bear a mark. “Mer, I'm putting it away, alright?” John slips it back into his satchel. Mer shakes until he's put the satchel just outside the door, pretty confident that anything that inspires such reactions in two psychics won't be bothered. He returns to the parlor and as soon as he sits down in one of the rocking chairs, Mer climbs onto his lap and hides her face in his chest. He rocks her gently, humming low under his breath so the vibrations of his voice rumble soothingly through her. God, she's shaking like a leaf, and he feels like a complete ass.

“You ARE an ass, John Winchester!” Missouri hisses, but her heart isn't in it. She looks as shaken as Mer does, and sits gingerly in her chair. The rocking motion quickly lulls Mer into a light sleep, which gives Missouri free reign with her tongue. “What do you mean bringing that into my house?”

“It's...it's Mer's.” Missouri scoffs and glares at him, her color rapidly returning now that the book is again wrapped in its spelled cover cloth.

“What do you mean? That's a powerful talisman, John Winchester. Fiercely powerful. How do you know it's Mer's?”

“I read it.”

“You...read it?” Missouri repeats incredulously. “Why do I find that hard to believe?”

“Part of it,” John clarifies. “The part I'm allowed to.” Missouri raises and eyebrow and probes into John's mind and...that stupid, stupid man.

“Oh Lordy.” John Winchester to a T, getting involved in things that are none of his business. But he looked, and now he has to bear the consequences, like it or not.

“Things...” John clutches Mary tighter to him. She still smells like baby, like Sam and Dean did when they were her age. She's just a kid, a really special kid, but she's still got time to laugh and live and play without worries or cares. “Things are going to get bad.” He wishes he had never found the book. Had never opened it and chased its secrets. But he gets the feeling that wasn't an option, and that pisses him off because he's no slave to fate. But that book would have found its way to him, and then Mer, regardless.

“Things are always getting bad,” Missouri mutters. “Be that as it may, it's not hers yet. She's four, John. She's a powerful psychic, but she's still just a baby. Don't you dare take that away from her.”

“I—”

“That...thing,” Missouri spits the word in distaste and glares in the book's general direction, “has more spells and supernatural imprints on it than anything I have ever felt. Trust me when I tell you it will take care of itself.”

“But—”

“Don't you dare 'but' me. You know I'm right.” John's lips press together in annoyance and he turns his attention back to his granddaughter. She's grown so much since he'd seen her last. And she looks more like Dean every day.
“You want to get rid of it.” Missouri gives voice to his secret, and John burns with shame. Missouri looks satisfied at his reaction. “It's a burden, and if there's one thing you don't need it's another weight on your shoulders. And that sucks for you, John Winchester, but if you love that little girl like I know you do, you'll take that away and keep it safe like you're supposed to. Y'hear?” She turns her gaze to him and he shrugs. He doesn't really have a choice here, and they both know it. This whole thing had been a desperate, selfish attempt to make life easier for him. The nerve of that man, being mad about a situation of his own making. But what he won't admit, what Missouri knows and will never say aloud, is that he's terrified of what else he's going to read.

They sit in silence, John stroking Mer's back and trying to remember every little detail about this moment. Too soon, Missouri stirs.

“Your boys are coming back.” She can't quite keep the note of censure from her tone, and her eyes burn as he gets in his truck and drives away, satchel on the passenger seat, the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Mer watches John go with wide eyes, hand tight in Missouri's, sadness not as well-contained as she thinks.
Chapter 9

Dean and Sam have two cases back-to-back that get taken care of without too much trouble. Well, as long as you don't count Sam and Dean trying to kill one another in an abandoned (and really creepy) insane asylum or the myth behind *Jeepers Creepers* coming to life and trying to eat people 'too much trouble.'

Okay, sometimes the life gets to them. They're both feeling pretty wound up, so Dean decides they need a night on the town before they head back home. Sam rolls his eyes but goes along with it. He's been having trouble sleeping since going back to Lawrence. More trouble. At this rate, he's going to forget that a 'goodnight's sleep' means about eight hours, uninterrupted. He's happy if he gets three hours without waking up in a cold sweat.

They're not in the bar five minutes before Dean's been hit on twice. Once by their waitress and once by the bartender. The very male bartender. But Dean ignores them both, and the third, the fourth, the fifth-sixth-seventh and on and on until The Blonde shows up. She's got legs up to forever and hair that actually shines in the light.

Dean sits up straighter when he sees her approaching and his body languages shifts into something much more...available. Sam struggles to keep his expression blank and bored.

“Either of you have a light?” She tries to make her voice sound deep and husky, and it's clear she's not talking to Sam at all. Sam doesn't even bother to look up. He hears the metallic snick of Dean's lighter opening. “You're not from around here, are you?” Sam snorts into his beer. Seriously?

“Can't say as we are. What's a pretty little thing like you doing in a dive like this?” Sam stares at Dean incredulously. Seriously?

One bad line does not deserve another.

To Sam's everlasting shock and disbelief, Dean and The Blonde disappear into the back of the bar. Well fuck. Sam drains his glass and throws some bills down on the table for tip. This place suddenly makes him feel claustrophobic and dirty, and the faster he goes to sleep (or tries), the faster he'll wake up to a brand new day.

Dean's in the middle of unbuttoning the super hot chick's shirt when something stabs through his brain. “Ow ow ow!” He jerks away and rubs the heel of his hands into his eyes, vision swimming and stomach rolling. “Fuck!”

“What's wrong, baby?” The Blonde trails her hand suggestively down Dean's chest, and Dean manages to muster up a leer. The pain recedes, and he's back in the game.

“What's wrong, baby?” The Blonde trails her hand suggestively down Dean's chest, and Dean manages to muster up a leer. The pain recedes, and he's back in the game.

“Nothin' worth stopping for.” She tastes like vodka and Jäeger with a cigarette chaser. He pulls her to him and backs them up against the wall. And old poster of Sid Vicious watches them, and Dean wonders what kind of stories he could tell. She wraps a leg around his hip and he's sliding his hand over her thigh when the pain hits again, sharper and more unforgiving.

“FUCK!” Dean stumbles back, nausea rolling through his belly, and he gags this time.
“What the hell?” The girl looks pissed, hands on her hips and lips pressed together. And she suddenly looks extremely unattractive. Her make up is caked on, and her clothes don't quite fit her anymore. She has lipstick on her teeth and Dean no longer feels even the stirring of interest.

He does feel a sense of satisfaction that isn't his own. Dean frowns and concentrates; definitely someone else's feelings echoing through him, and it doesn't feel like Sammy.

“Mer?” he wonders, trying to ping her. She's not giving him any confirmation though. But perhaps the icy, impenetrable wall that's usually his very loving daughter is answer enough.

“My name is Allison.” Well, no doubt about it, the hot chick is really pissed off and Dean couldn't get laid now even if he wanted to.

“Uh, right. Ah.” She stares at him expectantly, but Dean is suddenly too tired to think. Really, when he'd suggested the bar he'd just wanted a drink or two. He hadn't been looking for this, but he wasn't the kind of person to turn down a sure thing. Now, his original plan seems like the better option. All he wants to do is collect Sam and grab a few hours of sleep before heading home to his kid. “Nice knowing you.”

“Wha—seriously? You're going to give up THIS? What the fuck? You asshole! How dare you!” Dean escapes her whining with a sigh of relief. What had he been thinking? He shakes his head and moves towards their booth, only Sam's nowhere to be found. Dean wonders if Sam found his own girl (that doesn't make him seethe with an emotion approaching jealousy at all) and dismisses it. Sam's not that kind of guy.

Instead of panicking, Dean closes his eyes and pings Sam. He's in their room.

Dean makes his way to the motel alone, three blocks by foot. Sam is a dark lump in the other bed, and sleep doesn't come easy to anyone that night.

----

So yeah, in the aftermath of two pretty crappy hunts and one failed attempt to get laid, Dean is looking forward to spending some quality time with his couch and his daughter and his...Sam. Oh, and Whit.

That plan lasts about three days, and then Sam's displeasure is too much to bear. He hovers in doorways, stares at Dean until his eyes have bored holes into the back of Dean's head; he bangs pots and pans in the kitchen and snaps at Dean whenever he tries to help. Dean tries to ignore it, but on day four he snaps.

“What bug crawled up your ass and died?” Dean seethes as another pot goes clattering into the cupboard. Sam spins around and pulls out his most infuriating bitchface, the one that Dean thinks makes him look like a horse.

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” Sam avows. Dean stares at him incredulously, and Sam's jaw sets. “What?”

“Nothing.” Dean stomps away and turns the TV up loud. The pots and pans commence their obnoxious symphony. Five minutes later, Dean pulls out the laptop. He can relax when he's dead.

****
FUCK. FUCK!

“Dean! Dean! Come on, stay with me!” Sam coaxes a little more speed out of the Impala. Dean's skin is waxy and pale, frighteningly lifeless. He can see the pulse point in Dean's neck flutter, then stop. “DEAN!” He reaches for his brother; when his fingers slide over Dean's neck, a burst of power surges out of him and Dean's body jerks. Sam can feel a pulse.

“Come on Dean, you can't leave me like this.” And then they're at the hospital, where medical people take Dean away and Sam is left alone in the cold, sterile waiting room.

----

A couple of weeks.

Sam stares at the wall, research spread around him. Two weeks. Fourteen days. At most.

His phone rings, and Sam knows it's home before he even looks at the screen. He sends the call to voicemail, just as he's done the fifty other times it's rung. He blocks Mer from his thoughts as well. He doesn't want to talk to her. For some reason, he can call his absentee father and leave a message about Dean, but he can't talk to Dean's kid. Can't tell her—

A knock at the door startles him out of his morose thoughts.

He's not sure why he's surprised Dean checked himself out of the hospital AMA, smiling and joking, “I refuse to die in a hospital where the nurses aren't even hot.” The smile slides off his lips when Sam's phone rings again, and they both know who it is.

“Sammy—” Dean starts, his tone of voice wavering and serious. No. Sam is NOT going to stand here while Dean dictates his last will and testament. He's not going to listen Dean give him his car or...or his kid. Mer is going to grow up with Dean there beside her, going to her soccer games, threatening to kill the first guy who breaks her heart, walking her down the aisle, even if Sam has to get him there at gun point.

Sam crushes Dean to his chest, just wraps himself around his brother and refuses to let go. Dean is stiff for a moment, then melts into Sam, because he's got so much to live for now.

“I've got a name,” Sam says softly. “One of dad's friends. Told me about a guy in Nebraska. A...a specialist.” Dean pulls back to look at him, lips tinged lightly blue from lack of circulation, and nods once.

The phone rings. This time Sam turns it off completely and crawls into the same bed as Dean. Neither one of them say anything when Dean rolls into Sam, whose arms are already open and waiting.

****

Dean shrugs off all attempts to help him during the trip to Nebraska. If he's going to die, he's going to die on his own steam. He takes in the white sign with the cross on it. Shoots Sam a look, but otherwise keeps silent. Mer is an invisible ghost between them. Not invisible enough; they can both feel her lurking at the periphery of their consciousness, trying to get in where they've shut her.
They're both tense and uncomfortable in the tent. This whole set-up rubs Dean the wrong way, and he'd venture Sammy would feel the same way if he weren't so single-minded and focused on getting Dean better. Dean can't help a muttered comment about charlatans stealing people's money; there are so many desperate people in this tent, people wasting away from cancers, hollow-eyed and scared.

He fights the call to come up to the stage, but he can't not go. He has to do this. For Mer. And because he doesn't want to die. He's not ready.


He doesn't expect to actually be healed.

---

Dean would love to be thankful and go home with Sam. Wrap his arms around Mer and never let her go, promise her and himself that he'll be more careful. Pull Sam down onto the couch with them and watch reruns on TV. But there's something wrong here, and he can't let it go. Especially if that young guy died so he could live.

He elects to talk to the preacher, not just because he's their prime suspect. There's a question that burns in him, and he wants answers.

“Why? Why me?”

“Like I said before,” Preacher Roy tells him without hesitation, “the Lord guides me. I looked into your heart and you just...stood out from all the rest.”

“What did you see in my heart?” Dean can't imagine that if the preacher or his God knew what was really in his heart—all the stuff having to do with Sammy is just the surface—he'd have found him very worthy.

“A young father with an important purpose and a job to do. And it isn't finished.” He cocks his head and his blind eyes look beyond Dean. “Your daughter needs you. You have work to do. God has a plan. Trust in it.”

Dean leaves feeling unbalanced, because Roy meant every word he said with a deep, unwavering faith. He truly thinks Dean is Destined for Great Things. Dean runs into Layla and her mother on the way out, two people they'd met at the revival, on the way out, two people they’d met at the revival, and it doesn't help him find his footing. Layla, who has a brain tumor and six months to live, is beautiful. On the inside. If his psychic stuff were of a visual nature, Dean would bet she'd be bright gold and white and everything pure. Her mother, though, is so torn up about losing her daughter she's turned mean and spiteful. He can feel the impotent rage sliding inside of her, feeding on itself. It cancels out Layla's gentleness and leaves a bad taste in Dean's mouth.

For being newly not-dying, this has turned into a fucking shitty day. Especially when Sam confirms that someone's life was traded for his own.

“GodDAMN it, Sam!”

“Dean.”
“FUCK!” He feels sick because he can't help but be glad he's alive. That they didn't know. That he's not the one who died.

“Dean, I'm sorry, I didn't know.”

“If it's too good to be true, then it is,” Dean bites out. His anger is misplaced; this isn't Sam's fault, they both went into this and Dean had ignored his instincts because survival had won. Most powerful drive in the human psyche, he's been told.

“I'm sorry.”

“We have to stop him,” Dean says, and Sam agrees.

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Sam's sickened by what he finds. Articles about people who fight for a woman's right to chose, for gay rights and against long-standing prejudice. People declared 'immoral' and 'unclean' by someone's twisted interpretation of a religion that claims to love everyone equally in the name of a benevolent God.

Sam feels a bright streak of hate flash through him. Roy is meting out judgments as he sees fit.

*Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment that you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?*

It's convenient how people can believe so rigidly in some parts of the Bible, and gracelessly ignore the parts they'd rather not hear. How would Roy feel knowing his 'pure of heart Chosen One whose heart outshone all the others in the room' had once fucked a night away with his brother?

Sam growls and shoves the memories aside, but not before promising to actually DEAL with them when this is over. He and Dean have put this talk off long enough, and Sam isn't wasting any more time. If nothing else, this brush with death has at least lifted a pretty fuckin' big log out of Sam's eye.

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The world hates him. That's the only explanation for why tonight, of all nights, Layla gets called up to the stage. Layla, who is truly truly one of the good guys. She resonates, bright and shiny. Her disposition seeps into Dean whenever she's around.

“You can't let him heal you.” It hurts him to say, to know he's condemning her. But she wouldn't want this. Wouldn't want someone to die so she can live—not if she's the kind of person he knows her to be. She's confused, of course, because she's been waiting for months, and Dean can't bear to tell her the whole truth. He watches, torn, as she smiles nervously at her mom from the stage.

Dean closes his eyes and feels for Sam; he's hyped up, running from the Reaper with David Wright, the man Roy's trading for Layla's life. Dean can feel David's panic and fear, bitter and sharp. He needs to do something, and now.

“Fire! The tent is on fire! Everybody get out of here!” People scream and mill in confusion, spilling out
of the tent on onto the lawn.

Dean calls Sam to check in, but the Reaper's still coming. Which doesn't make sense unless Roy isn't controlling this thing. Which only leaves—

“Sue Anne!” There is a moment where they understand one another completely. And then Sue Anne screams for help and Dean gets dragged away by the local good ole boys. But at least he saved David.

“I just don't understand. After everything we've done for you, after Roy healed you. I'm disappointed in you, Dean,” Sue Anne says to him. Her words, spoken in her soft Southern cadence, are underscored by malice. “I'm not pressing charges. The Lord will deal with him as he sees fit.”

Dean wrenches his arm away from the policeman, creatively threatening to put the fear of God in him, and turns right into Layla's gently accusing stares. He can't help but ache for her, and a part of him wishes he could save her. But he can't. Before Mer, he'd have done it. If it had come down to it, he wouldn't have fought, would have traded his life for hers. Or at the very least, seriously considered it. But he can't be that selfish anymore. His life is not his own. So he's going to interrupt Layla's second healing, condemn her to waste away slowly. Condemn her mother to watch her daughter slip away day by day.

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Dean distracts the hick cops while Sam goes in search of Sue Anne and the dark altar. Who knew a church basement could be so creepy? Only Sam discovers that Sue Anne's next victim is Dean, and he's back to two weeks all over again. He beats at the cellar door, barricaded by the psycho bitch, his mind chanting *Dean Dean Dean Dean!* He redoubles his efforts when he feels the icy stab of Dean's fear cascade over him. The Reaper's coming for him.

Dean stands, frozen, as the Reaper approaches. He's torn between letting him come, giving Layla what she so richly deserves, and running for his life, hoping Sam will pull a real miracle out of the air. But then he has a vision of Mer, green eyes twinkling with mischief, bouncing for joy, and his feet trip over the ground as he turns to run. It's futile; no one escapes Death. But he's not going to take this lying down.

When the Reaper has him, his touch burning the life out of him, he starts thinking about his regrets. There are a few he can't do anything about. But there's one he had the power to change. For a second he's incredibly pissed at himself for not taking the chance, for shutting Sam down and not letting him talk. One night has dictated and overshadowed almost five years of their lives. It didn't need to be that way...

Sam feels his brother slipping away. It's like someone has dumped ice in his chest and he can't breathe, can't think. His power explodes out, shattering the flimsy wooden door. It rolls through him, hot and out of control, a torrent threatening to pull him under.

He sees Sue Anne, her lips forming ritual words, filled with the deep certainty that she doing *God's work*. He rips the necklace off her with a deep twist of satisfaction and sends the talisman shattering to the ground. He wants to break her, rip into her and watch her bleed out on the ground for daring to touch his family. But he resists, and the darkness fades into the background, and Death comes for her anyways.

...and then Dean can breathe again, the Reaper vanished into the night, and it doesn't need to stay that way.
**Chapter 10**

They don't talk on the way back to the motel. They don't need to, the tension crackling between them is saying quite enough.

Sam turns his phone on just for something to do and winces when it beeps at him. Thirty voicemails, more missed calls than that. Crap, they were going to catch hell for not checking in. Sam doesn't even want to think about what Mer must have felt or gone through. Fuck, dealing with this is not going to be fun or easy.

Dean pulls up in front of  the room and cuts the engine. The sudden silence feels intimate and close; Sam is acutely aware of Dean's breathing and the nervous rub of his hands over his jeans.

“Today sucked,” Dean mutters, scrubbing a hand over his face.

“Yeah.” Sam grins wryly and ducks his head cause...yeah. It really, really did. In fact, he's ready to declare this whole week a wash. He starts when Dean's hand settles on his arm, firm and warm.

“Let's go, Sammy.” Dean squeezes once and climbs out of the car, Sam right behind him. Sam feels...giddy. Nervous. Excited. Scared out of his mind. Things are changing, they're finally ready to talk about this. All it took were a couple brushes with death and a psycho religious chick. The irony was not lost on him.

When he got into the room, Dean is standing between the two beds staring into space.

“Dean?” Sam asks. Dean slowly turns around to face him and his eyes are hot embers in the low light, smoldering. Dean lets his mask slip and Sam can read everything. Arousal snakes though him, makes his breathing hitch and his eyes dilate.

Dean licks his lips. It has no business being as hot as it is. He smirks, then opens his mouth and Sam's phone rings. Wicked blares and Sam sees Dean pull away, the shutters coming down with a bang. Dean holds his hand out for the phone and Sam gives it over without complaint. Better Dean than him.

Dean stares at the screen for a moment, then clears his throat and connects the call.

“Hello?” Dean frowns. “Hello?”

“YOU FUCKERS!” Sam winces, because he can hear Whitney's voice from across the room, angry and strident. Dean yanked the phone away from his ear. “YOU...I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU—” Whit makes a strangled, cat-like sound that conveys more eloquently than anything the depth of her anger.

“Whit, how's--”

“Shut up, Dean,” Whit hisses, and her anger is a tangible force in the room, dark and violent. Dean swallows, and his eyes find Sam's.

“You're okay?” Whit asks, her voice shaking around the edges.

“Yeah Whit. I'm...I'm fine.”
“Is Sam there?” she finally growls.

“Y-yeah, Whit,” Dean hastens to assure her. He puts the phone on speaker.

“I'm here,” Sam says, wincing at how timid his voice comes out. She's silent again, the seconds ticking away. Both of them hold still and breathe lightly, as if that will make her forget they're there. It doesn't work.

“You are both,” she says, words bitten off and tight, “the scummiest scum that has ever existed on the face of this Earth. You do not deserve her you selfish, pathetic, undeserving excuse for a father.” Dean flinches at that, the color draining from his face. Sam reaches out to comfort him, but Dean shies away.

“Is she—?”

“You do not get to talk!” Whit snaps, and Dean's lips press together so tight they almost disappear. Sam bristles; he wants to snatch the phone away and rip into Whitney as effectively as she's ripping into Dean, but he holds himself back.

“Are you listening to me?” Whit demands.

“Yes,” Dean says curtly.

“This is what you are going to do. You are going to get into that death trap you call a car. You are going to break every speed limit and every law to get here as soon as possible. You will not pass Go, you will not collect two hundred dollars, and you will be prepared to grovel at your daughter's feet and be happy she loves you more than anything in this world and will forgive you for what you did! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?” Dean's eyes are glassy, but he doesn't let the tears fall. “Do you—”

“Yes. I understand.” Dean sounds absolutely miserable.

“SAM!” Sam jerks up and stares at the phone.

“Uh, yeah?”

“Do you understand?” Whit's voice tells him he'd better fucking understand or he'll regret it.

“I—I, yes. Yes, I under—”

“Good.” And then she's hung up and the call length flashes up at them. Dean throws the phone at Sam and stalks over to his bags. They haven't actually unpacked, and it's a matter of moments before they're both in the car.

This time, the tension feels stifling and stale.

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“Missouri called. Says they're fine.” John stares blankly at Bobby before swallowing and nodding. Sam's message still plays on a loop in his head; he doesn't think he'll forget the thinly veiled desperation in Sam's voice any time soon.

“You should call 'em,” Bobby tells him. Instead of answering, John gets up and gets the bottle of whisky out of the cupboard. He ignores his friend's darkly muttered, “Idjit must be genetic.”

Bobby lets him be for a while, for which John is thankful. It's not going to last much longer, but John can set about getting blissfully drunk before Bobby calls him on it.

“You plannin' on sharing?” Bobby asks after John's demolished half the bottle of whisky and doesn't look like he plans to stop.

“Depends,” John grunts. The world shifts to the left and John slides with it. He blinks and finds himself staring at Bobby's scuffed shoes. He carefully turns his head and looks up up up at his friend's face, which is way far up there. And kind of blurry. In fact, Bobby looks like a floating beard. That's frowning. Do beards frown?

“What the hell are you translating up there, Winchester?” Bobby asks, shaking his head. He hasn't seen John this intent on obliteration in many a year. He's also never known John to insist on doing his own research and translating, especially the long-dead languages that Bobby and maybe five other people in the world are familiar with. Bobby keeps trying to figure out what's going on, but all he keeps coming up with is Bad.

“I can't protect 'em,” John confesses. “Won't be there.”

****

They don't keep track of the time. Sam spends the trip concentrating on not getting them pulled over, imagining them wrapped in a police-free cocoon. Dean doesn't say a word, doesn't put on any music, just drives.

The sun has just crested the horizon, the sky a gorgeous melding of colors that neither of them can properly appreciate, when they pull into town. Their street is stirring, people leaving for work and school, as they pull into the drive way. Dean leans his forehead against the wheel. Sam takes a leap and brushes his fingers over the back of Dean's neck, lightly kneading the muscles and reminding Dean he's here, they're together, and they'll get through this.

Dean lets Sam touch, just long enough for the world to stop spinning. When he feels up to it, he sits up, takes a deep breath, and pushes out of the car. Time to face the music.

Whit opens the door and if looks could kill they'd be dead many times over. Sam feels about three feet tall. Dean can't meet her eyes. She snorts derisively and turns her back on them, walks into the kitchen and starts making herself something to drink with far more force than is necessary.

Dean stares after her for a long moment, then turns his attention to the stairs. Mer feels muffled and contained, her usually vibrant energy muted. It makes the house feel empty and unwelcoming. Dean starts making his way up the stairs, and Sam's at a loss about what to do.
“Sammy?” Sam turns around and shoots Dean a questioning look. “You comin’?” Sam knows he looks like an idiot, mouth hanging open and eyes wide with shock, but...Dean wants him in on this? He takes too long to respond, Dean's face goes blank and smooth as he turns away. Sam drops his pack with a clatter and crowds close behind Dean as they walk down the hall, making his presence known. He may be imagining it, but it looks like Dean relaxes a fraction.

They pause outside of Mer's door. Dean can't seem to bring himself to knock, so Sam does it for him, three quick raps before he can lose his nerve. No answer.

“Mer?” Dean calls, his voice breaking. He clears his throat. “Mary? Can I come in?” Still nothing. Dean sighs and lets his chin fall against his chest, eyes screwed shut.

“Mer, we'd like...we'd like to talk to you,” Sam tries, and his words sound lame even to him. “To, uh, explain. And apologize.” When she doesn't respond to that, Sam closes his eyes and reaches for her with his mind. He slams up against mental walls that feel insurmountable, and he hadn't even known she could do that. They feel like the coldest cold and the hottest hot, so slippery he can't find a handhold. He yanks himself back with a gasp, and Dean steadies him.

“She, uh. She's pissed,” Sam says, and Dean snorts, but it lacks anything approaching humor. Dean glares at the door, and Sam can tell he's thinking about just breaking it down, which would not be a good idea. “I have an idea.”

He reaches out and settles his hand around Dean's neck. Not because he needs the contact; more because he wants it. Dean stares at him, and for a second everything drifts away and it's just them, together. Sam smiles, concentrates, and pushes his mind lightly into Dean's. Dean's eyes widen in response and he pushes back.

Good.

Sam...he kind of twines them together, looping over Dean and around him. Dean lets him, watching Sam spin them around one another, creating a helix of connection. When Sam is satisfied he turns them towards Mer. They keep their thoughts gentle and contrite, letting their love and apology speak for themselves. Sam wraps them around the tightly shielded ball of emotions that makes up Mer; doesn't try to infringe, just lets the truth of their feelings seep through her shields, asks her to talk to them, forgive them.

They fall into the room when Mer opens the door. Her eyes are red-rimmed, and her nose is shiny. She's wearing one of Dean's sweatshirts and it completely swallows her. She crawls onto her bed, curling into the smallest ball she can.

It fucking breaks their hearts, watching her curl around Mer Bear, fur matted with tears.

Dean crawls into bed and wraps his arms around her, pulling his daughter to his chest. Sam hesitates a moment, long enough for Dean to send him a sharp mental whack. Sam slides into the other side of the bed and runs his fingers through Mer's hair. She lets out a shuddering breath, her entire body shaking.

“Mer,” Dean whispers, his voice thick. She shakes her head and buries her face in Mer Bear's stomach.
“I’m sorry, baby girl. So very, very sorry,” Dean whispers. His eyes are screwed shut, but a tear leaks out. Sam reaches out and tangles his fingers with Dean over Mer’s back. “Didn’t mean it. Couldn’t...sorry. Sorry sorry sorry.” Dean lets some of his fear and worry leak out between them, not enough to overwhelm, just enough that they can both taste the depth of his reactions to almost dying.

Sam adds his own feelings—his determination not to let Dean die, how focused he had to be to make that happen, his anger, fear, love for his family.

He and Dean are pretty far into their pity party when they realize Mer has slowly started to loosen up, is letting them slide in under her shields again. They get flashes from her: the searing pain of Dean’s electrocution; Whitney’s terrified face as Mer screamed on the floor; her attempts to call Dean, then Sam after they realized Dean's cellphone was fried; Dean's subsequent revival, but at a terrible cost; the feeling of Sam, a pillar of her network, suddenly pulling away, Dean doing the same. She was so very, very scared and alone.

Sam feels like a complete ass. He hadn't realized how much Mer relied on him as a grounding point. Dean, yeah, but him? It startles him that he's as much apart of Mer's mental foundation as Dean. And he was more important than Whitney, which didn't make sense because she had always been there. Why...how? Sam gets yanked out of his thoughts when Dean's finger's tightening painfully around his, and he opens his eyes to meet Dean's wet gaze.

“You're blood, you idiot,” Dean says without rancor. Sam is completely dumbfounded, though he shouldn't be because it's always about the blood. Whit doesn't have an iota of supernatural talent in her, so Mer can't connect with her quite the way Sam and Dean can. And Mer puts Sam almost on par with Dean. And Dean is cool with that. Actually, he's kind of relieved and really happy about it. Sam closes his eyes and tries to wrangle his emotions into some kind of discernible order, because right now they're a tangled mess.

Since this is a night of revelations, and he's already had several, the fact that Mer has two dads doesn't pack quite the punch it could. And it's so stupidly true he can't believe he hasn't seen it earlier. When he finally opens his eyes, they're both watching him intently.

And Sam smiles, and lets his acceptance wash over them. Mer's happy contentment blooms between them. They're not naïve enough to assume she's alright—not by a long shot, she's going to make them pay, Sam can feel it in his bones—but she's at least forgiven them for now. And it's enough.

They fall asleep on the bed, the three of them in the early morning light.

****

Dean wakes up because his daughter is staring at him, her emotions sliding over his skin and burrowing under it. Her anger prickles, but her joy at having him back sings just beneath that, soothing the sting.

“Mer-Bear?” he mumbles, voice sleep rough. Mer frowns at him, narrows her eyes dangerously. “What—” Her tiny hand darts out and she grabs his chin and brings their faces close together. Dean has no idea what's going on.

“No leave me again!” Mer commands, each word punctuated by a shake of his head. Dean's trying to get past the bad grammar of that sentence—something that rarely slips out in Mer's speech, but when it does
it's jarring—and her complete seriousness. Her baby-face is schooled into a deep frown, and if she were older she might look harsh and angry but she can't pull it off because her baby-fat makes her features too round and angelic.

She thinks he takes too long to answer because she shakes his head again, and even if her face can't pull off hard anger, her eyes glint with it.

“Yeah,” Dean promises hoarsely. “I promise. Never again.” Mer studies him, and he feels her ping him to test the truth of his words. And that hurts just as much as this whole stupid situation, because she's always trusted him. Her dad could do no wrong, would never lie to her. He's shattered that trust, and he'll never have it so unconditionally again.

Growing up sucks.

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Sam and Dean tread lightly the next day, acutely aware of how much they fucked up. Whit stays out of their way, but whenever she catches sight of them her face darkens and they don't need freaky powers to tell that she is pissed. They cook her favorite foods for lunch, but she stays in her room and ignores the plate they leave by her door.

They take Mer out for ice cream and to the park as a part of their extended apology. She sticks close to them, touches them both a lot, and outdoes Dean with the mental check-ins. Dean returns every single one with patient penitence.

They all try to ignore the gaping hole at the dinner table that night. Dean resigns himself to buying several stores' worth of candy and flowers and signing contracts in blood to appease Whit. Sam must catch his thought because he snorts and shoots Dean an amused look. They both appreciate the irony.

They also don't try to trundle Mer off to bed as soon as the clock hits 8. They let her stay up, snuggled between them on the couch, eyes drooping. Sam's arm is draped along the back, and his fingers brush against the back of Dean's neck. Dean has his hand curved protectively around Mer, but he invariably grazes the edge of Sam's thighs. Those are the only two places they touch, but it feels intimate and Dean is hyper aware of everything Sam. A nervous tension crackles between them.

Dean finally decides it's time to tuck Mer into bed when she slumps forward and he has to catch her before she falls off the couch. Sam helps ease her into his arms and they both make their way to her room. She protests a little when they tuck her in. Dean slides Mer Bear into her arms and kisses her softly on the head, letting his emotions buffet gently against her, and she settles into sleep with a sigh. Sam does the same thing, wondering at how completely this tiny life has changed his world.

Dean watches his daughter sleep, and Sam can feel how hard it is for him to imagine leaving her, of dying and not getting to watch his daughter grow up. He wants to be there for everything, and even though that's not possible with the life they've chosen, Sam will damn well try to make sure Dean at least gets to see the important stuff.
Chapter 11

“She's out,” Dean says, closing the door softly behind him. Sam nods, but doesn't say anything else, so they just stare stupidly at each other in the cramped hallway. If Sam cares to look he can pick out the flutter of Dean's pulse.

“She's an amazing kid,” Sam finally says, because it's true and it deserves to be said. Dean smiles with all the pride of a parent.

“She's gonna be five soon.”

“Comes after four,” Sam teases just to make Dean roll his eyes. “Six is next, by the way.”

“School is next,” Dean counters, and there's an unhappy lilt to his expression, worry and pride and fear. Like it's already the first day of school and Dean has to let his little girl go.

“She'll do great,” Sam assures him. If nothing else, Mer can pick the answers out of the teacher's brain. But she's legitimately smart, without the powers. And Sam may be teaching her to read and speak Latin on the side.

“Right up until she gets in trouble the first time,” Dean snarks.

“She'll be good,” Sam insists. Dean raises an eyebrow.

“She's a Winchester, Sammy.” The nickname rolls off Dean's tongue like warm honey, and heat creeps up Sam's spine. If this is the kind of flirting Dean indulges in now, no wonder he hasn't been picking up people in bars. This is geared only for Sam. “Born trouble.” Sam grins.

“You'll love it. Going down there to deal with anyone who tries to pull her pig-tails and got a psychic smack down. Or breaks someone's arm using one of those moves I know you're teaching her. Or the first time she takes a Bowie knife to class.” Dean grins unrepentantly. Dad had put the fear of John Winchester into Dean after that particular stunt. But man, it had been fun to watch Jessica Landy and Sara Fanshaw's jaws drop.

“Yeah? Well if I have to deal with the trouble, then you get to argue with her teachers at parent-teacher's night,” Dean warns.

“I'm not her parent,” Sam says with a wry shake of his head. Maybe here, in their own protected space, but not in the Real World. He tries to imagine the life Dean's so casually tossed at him: the two of them arguing about what school to send Mer to, whether or not to brandish a shotgun at her first date, The Talk (God save them) and proms...

“You can be. If you want.” Dean's not just talking about raising Mer. He and Whit have been doing that together long before Sam came into the picture. Dean is talking about...everything. He's taken a huge risk here, and Sam knows that if he refuses, it may never come again. So he doesn't.

Sam steps closer to Dean, breathes in the scent of him. Dean lifts his head, arches up towards Sam, silently asking. Sam obliges by bending down and pressing a soft, chaste kiss to Dean's lips.
Dean wants none of that.

A strong hand grips the back of Sam's neck and pulls him close. Dean's lips are insistent and his tongue demanding. Sam gives in with a groan, his body bonelessly falling into Dean, who stumbles back with the weight of his brother. Dean leads Sam by the lips into the bedroom, the two of them tripping on the carpet and falling to the floor.

Neither of them particularly care, too busy pulling at shirts and jeans and everything else that's in the way. This has been almost half a year in the making, the two of them dancing around each other, and for Dean that's a lifetime of patience.

“C'mon, c'mon,” Dean pants, pushing at Sam's jeans and boxers. He can't move, trapped under Sam like he is, and his attempts at getting Sam's clothes off are completely ineffectual. Sam huffs a laugh in Dean's ear. “Don't fucking laugh, Sammy! Help me!” It's been a very long time.

Sam pushes himself up on his elbows and uses one long arm to shimmy his pants down to his ankles, then shakes them off.

“Yessss!” Dean hisses in triumph, and Sam's arms buckle as his brother's hand caresses his cock. Sam thrusts into the touch, his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

“Fuck, Dean!”

“That's the idea, Sammy. Or is it Samantha today?” Sam scowls, because Dean is being insulting AND he's stopped touching.

“Call me Samantha again and see where that gets you,” Sam growls. Dean shudders beneath him, the dark commanding tone going straight to his dick.

“Jesus Christ...Samantha!” Dean laughs when Sam roughly turns him over. He goes limp, offering no resistance—but also no aid—as Sam undresses him. Sam nips the back of Dean's neck in retaliation, but that only encourages him. He lets Sam manipulate his body, Sam's annoyed growls and huffs of effort turning Dean on and making him laugh. Sam stretches over Dean, the weight of him pressing Dean's smaller frame into the floor. Dean doesn't hook up with guys often, but none of the ones he has have ever managed to do this to him. Then again, he wouldn't want to do this with anyone but his Sammy.

Sam jerks Dean's hips up a little, angling them just so. His cock settles in the crack of Dean's ass like it was always meant to be there. He rubs off against Dean, hips snapping forward.

“Sam,” Dean breathes a pleading note entering his voice. “Shit, Sam! Sammy!” Sam's arm is tight around his waist and doesn't let him get any friction or relief. The feel of Sam slipping over him, teasing his entrance, rubbing against his ass is driving Dean crazy.

“What do you want, Dean? What do you need?”

“Fuck, Sammy, touch me! Wrap your goddamned giant Sasquatch hands around my cock and fucking touch me.” Sam laughs and strokes Dean lightly, his rhythm never faltering. Dean shudders and curses at Sam, the fucker caressing him just enough for it to be teasing. Dean thrusts forward into the circle of Sam's fingers, but it doesn't stop the torture. “SAM!”
“Sssshhhh, don't want to wake the girls.” Dean whimpers, and Sam finally gives in, jacking Dean just the way he knows Dean likes it. He thumbs right underneath the sensitive head and flexes each finger one at a time on the down stroke. He plays Dean's cock like an instrument, practicing his scales like the dutiful student Dean teases him about being. Dean trembles beneath him, encouraging Sam with every fiber of his being.

“Jesus, Sam, if you don't fuckin' DO something, I'm going to kill you! With my brain!” Sam bites down against Dean's neck, his teeth leaving bruises on the tender flesh. He adds a twist to the end, and Dean spills hot in his hand within a couple of strokes. He uses Dean's come as lubrication, spreading it along his cock and the cleft of Dean's ass. The now-slippery glide of his dick has Sam moaning, and he pressed the globes of Dean's ass together to increase the friction. Dean grunts and starts thrusting back, urging Sam on. Sam finally comes with a hoarse shout, face buried in Dean's neck, sweat coating his body. He hasn't had an orgasm like that in what feels like years.

Dean shrugs Sam's dead weight off of him and onto the floor. His muscles still tingle, the aftershocks of a rather spectacular orgasm coursing through him. God, he'd missed this. Missed Sam. He cradles his head on his arms, closing his eyes in contentment. He hums tunelessly when Sam starts rubbing his back, slow circles that feel spectacularly good.

“Hey Dean?” Sam murmurs, his voice fuzzy around the edges and tinged with sleep.

“Mmmmm?”

“Bed?” Dean cracks open an eye.

“If you insist, princess.” Sam smacks him on the ass and Dean purrs in encouragement.

****

Sam wakes up to a pair of green eyes staring at him.

“Uh...hey, Mer.” He glances quickly at Dean who's still out for the count, totally oblivious to Sam's predicament. When he looks back, Mary is still giving him a distressingly mature and piercing look.

“What's up?”

“You gonna be m'Daddy?” she asks him seriously. Sam feels panic take him because what the hell?

“Oh, I think you already have a Daddy,” he says, pointing at Dean. A large part of him hopes she'll remember that and jump on Dean.

Mer rolls her eyes. “That's Dada, silly goose!”

“Oh.” Sam searches around for something appropriate to say, but he's completely out of his depth. Despite his conversation with Dean, having Mer call him Dad seems wrong, somehow. “Um...” Mer crawls up and sits on his chest, her eyes solemn. She presses her hands to Sam's temples, just like the first time they met. And like then, a deep warmth brushes against Sam's soul; a feeling of happy gentleness and love, child-like and innocent, suffuses his being. It moves around in him like she's searching for something very specific. He feels it when she finds whatever it is, and her bleed-through emotions flare white-hot
with joy before she withdraws. It leaves him feeling empty in a strange way.

“Attal!” she declares happily, snuggling into his chest.

“What did you say?” Sam realizes he’s naked under the sheets and tries to tuck them more firmly around his body, one hand wrapped around Mer to keep her where she is.

“Attal, my Attal.”

“What are you sayin’ baby girl?” Dean's sleep-rough voice asks. Sam's heart flips a little, and it's so ridiculously chick-flick he's surprised Dean hasn't sensed it from a mile away and recoiled in disgust. Dean does shoot him a weirdly amused look that Sam can't completely interpret as he reaches over to rub Mer's back.

“Attal and Dada!” she says, like that explains everything. She's four, so it might. She rolls off Sam's chest and into the space between them and wriggles under the covers.

“Attal?” Sam mouths to Dean.

“She gives all the cool people a nickname. It's a thing.”

“Dada?” Mer stage-whispers, her expression reflecting her intense earnestness. Dean leans in close, winking conspiratorially at Sam.

“Yeah, Mer Bear?” he stage-whispers back. She gives Dean a scornful look.

“I'm not a BEAR, Dad!” Her scornful tone comes straight out of Dean's playbook. Sam turns his laughter into a cough.

“I dunno. You're kind of bear-like,” Dean says, examining her closely. Mer scowls at him, a perfect little bitchface that did Sam proud. “Okay, okay, not a bear! You're a Mer-person.” She studies Dean like she doesn't quite believe him, like he might be humoring her, and Dean puts on his best look of angelic innocence. Apparently even women who are related to Dean fall for it, because Mer’s expression smooths out almost instantly.

“Is Attal going to stay? With us? Forever?” she asks Dean. Sam swallows, feels a lump in his throat, and meets Dean’s eyes over Mer's head.

“I dunno, Mer. You'll have to ask him.” Sam is totally unprepared for Mer's wet, emerald gaze, and it tears right through him.

“Attal?” she asks tremulously.

“Yeah, Mer?” Sam gasps, feeling light headed. There's not enough air in the room.

“Are you gonna stay? With me and Dada? And Whit and th'real Mer Bear?” Those are all the people she cares about in the whole world. Except for granpa, but he doesn't live with them and she doesn't want Attal to remember that he's around in case Attal wants to go live with him. Oh, and Gamma Mo and Uncle Bobby and Fah-Pat'ick. But they don't get him either. Attal is theirs and he's supposed to stay with them.
It's where he belongs. They're not right without him, and she's been waiting her whole life for him to show up.

When Sam glances up, two pairs of green eyes are watching at him expectantly, waiting for his response. Sam has the feeling this might just be the most important question he ever answers. And he already knows that he never really had a choice.

“For as long as you'll have me,” he vows, not taking his eyes off Dean. Dean has to look away, otherwise he'll have to hand in his guy-card. Mer cheers and throws her arms around Sam's neck.

“That means forever and ever and ever!” she declares happily, snuggling between her Atta and Dada.

Sam realizes that for the first time in months he slept through the night. No nightmares.

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Sam stumbles into the kitchen, following his nose towards coffee.

“Mornin' Sunshine,” a jovial voice greets him. Sam starts and blinks stupidly at Whitney, who offers him a cup of coffee. Sam moans his sincere appreciation.

Whitney takes in the bare chest before her, delicious skin that goes on for miles. She has a tacit agreement with Dean that he lets her catch sight of him shirtless at least twice a week, more in the summer. She'll have to workout something similar with Sam because, “Damn, your family has good genes!”

Sam splutters on his coffee, abruptly aware that he doesn't have a shirt on. Whitney is unabashedly taking in the contours of his chest, which is liberally littered with brand new love-bites. “Uh, I don't...what?” he stutters.

“You and Dean,” she says coyly. He turns bright red and Whit doesn't bother to hide her smirk. “And I've met your Daddy, he's not bad lookin' either. Damn fine. Mark my words, little Mer's going to be a looker when she gets older. Dean's already planning how to keep her locked in her room till she's 50.”

“Uh, yeah.” Sam shifts from side to side looking anywhere but at Whitney. He'd kind of forgotten they'd have to explain...them...to her. She lets him hang for a couple of minutes before starting the conversation up again. One thing living with Dean has taught her is that with the Winchester men, it's always good to remind them where their place is right off the bat. Only way to get their respect.

“You're all flustered and discombobulated. It's cute. But don't think this means either of you is off the hook for that stunt you pulled.” Whit says. Sam flushes and has the good taste to look chagrined and apologetic.

“Yeah, that was...not a good idea,” Sam mumbled into his coffee cup.

“You have no idea what an understatement that is,” Whit says, her words poisoned barbs that sting like a bitch. “But I'll forgive you. Eventually.” Sam has no doubt that Whit will make them work for it. They stand there a little awkwardly, Sam trying to stay out of Whit's way. But this is Whitney, and she's not having any of that.
“So Dean told me about what happened with you two all those years ago.” Sam looks up sharply, defensiveness written in every line of his body. He and Dean hadn't even discussed it, and for Whit to bring it up— “Whoa, down boy! I'm not judging anyone. I've seen enough shit in these past few years to realize I've got bigger problems than worrying about who anyone else is sleeping with.” Sam eyes her warily, trying to figure out her angle.

“You're...okay with this?” He really, really doubts that, because he's pretty sure even he and Dean aren't that okay, no matter how much they want to be.

Whitney's gaze turns sharp and probing. “Darling boy, I'm not really thinking about it, though I'm probably a sight more okay with it than you are.” She puts her cup in the dishwasher before turning back to Sam, who is watching her intently. “Speaking of, you should probably deal with that. Mer will pick up on it, don't think she won't. Besides, she told me you two were destined for one another ages ago.” Sam makes an indistinct sound of severe pain, which makes Whitney smirk devilishly. “Aren't many secrets kept in this house.”

“Whit, would you mind fuckin' the hell off?” Dean growls from the entrance, his half-asleep child cradled to his chest. Sam can't help but stare. Dean with a kid in his arms is not something Sam would've ever imagined before, and every time he sees it he still feels a little bit floored. But in some crazy way, being a father fits his brother perfectly. Dean looks comfortable and relaxed hauling Mer around the kitchen, and Sam imagines the day he'll fit in just as comfortably. They may have accepted him, and he's accepted the position of being Mer's Atta, but he's not quite there in his own mind. Not yet.

“Darlin', if I did that, then no one in this house would be getting any sleep,” Whit says with a look of pure (non)innocence. Dean snorts and sets Mer on the ground. She promptly runs out of the room with a shriek of laughter. “And watch your language around the pipsqueak,” she warns. Whitney lays a kiss on Dean's cheek, which he bears with an annoyed eye roll, and follows Mer out of the room.

Sam tries to gauge Dean's mood. He really, really hates the morning after. Dean just acts like nothing has changed. (Which leads Sam down the 'inevitable' path and thoughts of 'going towards this all their lives' but that's cheesy and he really doesn't want to think about that.)

“So I was thinking,” Sam starts haltingly.

“That's never a good sign,” Dean sighs. He has no idea where Sammy's brain is going; he just hopes it's not towards 'we made a mistake' because he'd hate to have to kill him after Mer's grown so attached. Given him a nickname and everything. Sam glares at Dean and Dean motions for him to continue.

“If we kept doing...this,” he says, motioning between him and Dean, “what would we tell Mer?”

“Do you want to keep up with...this?” Dean asks, mimicking Sam's motion. Sam's told him forever before, so you'll have to forgive Dean for being a little skeptical about post-coital promises. He tries to tell himself he can accept whatever Sam's answer is. But with a kid in the mix, all the rules are different, and as wrong as Dean knows they are, he can't let Sam go. Plus, Mer is a frickin' psychic, it isn't like they can really hide anything from her. Particularly when she gets old enough to actually understand what's going on.

Sam gives Dean's question the weight of thought it deserves. Because yes. Something has changed between them: Sam's grown up. Grown up and discovered that he needs Dean in a way he hadn't before. He has no idea what had changed at Stanford, or why, but it's there. Maybe this is why he'd needed to
leave. To finish growing up, to become who he needed to be in order to get to this point. The only thing
he's certain of—the only thing that isn't part of the jumbled mess of Jess, his clairvoyant dreams, Stanford,
and the demon—is the unflagging anchor that is Dean. Sam will bet money Dean had stopped by
Stanford to check up on him every semester. There were time Sam would swear he could feel Dean's
presence, something that raised the hairs on the back of his neck and sent shivers down his spine.

“I do.” Sam finds himself pressed against the refrigerator, Dean's mouth hot against his. Sam lets Dean
slip a knee between his legs, sliding down so they're the same height. They make out with all the sloppy
enthusiasm of teenagers.

“So what are we gonna tell Mer?” Sam whispers into Dean's lips. Den pulls back a little, pupils wide,
looking annoyed.

“We don't have to tell her anything. She'll work it out on her own.”

“I don't think that's healthy, Dean. Or responsible.”

“I don't think that's healthy, Dean,” Dean mimics in a high pitched voice. “Oh, and if you see my balls, ask
if my dick ran away at the same time.”

“Jerk,” Sam mumbles, and Dean kisses him again.

“Eeeecceewwww, they're kissing! DADDIES SHARIN' BOY COOTIES!” Mer shrieks delightedly from
the den.
Chapter 12

If Mer smiles any wider her face is going to freeze that way. Funny thing is, when Dean tells her that, her smile just grows. She's also got this aura of smugness around her that's totally unbecoming of a four-year-old.

Even Whit's anger at them thaws in the face of Mer's sheer delight in the newest aspect of their relationship. (Sam is absolutely positively NOT CONTEMPLATING what Mer could possibly know about their...situation. He's going to live in ignorant bliss for as long as possible.)

But they're still not back to an even keel when Dean announces their next job and doesn't even question that Mer is going with them.

Dean gets a phone call, frowns, and goes outside to take it, which is odd enough that Sam worries about it. Dean paces around the back yard, head down and focused. Sam pings him once, which startles Dean so badly he fumbles the phone. The distracted smile he throws Sam's way is not reassuring in the least.

“Hey, Miracle Mer,” Sam calls out, drying the dishes and staring at Dean out the window.

“Yeah?” Mer answers, coming up and leaning against Sam's leg.

“Who's your Dad talking to?” Mer looks at him with a decidedly unimpressed look, one she must have borrowed from Missouri. “What?”

“Why're you askin' ME?” she demands.

“Uh. I don't—”

“Dada says people has t'learn things yourself. Cuz it's the only way you...um.” Mer's eyes squinch up as she thinks about what piece of advice Dean had imparted to her. Sam tries to keep his amusement to himself. “Well, you gotta do it. Yourself.”

“Yeah?” Sam laughs, and Mer glares at him for making fun of her. He holds up his hands in supplication. “So how do I do that?”

“Dunno,” Mer says breezily and makes a break for it. Sam darts forward and hauls her up off the ground, giggling the whole time.

“Liar, liar, pants on fire!” Sam sing-songs, finding her ticklish spots.

“ATTA!” she yells, laughing and squirming in his arms. “STOPPIT!”

“Not until you tell me how to do it!” he bargains, poking her ribs.

“I dunno I dunno I dunno!” Mer avows, but she's a lying liar who lies a lot. Sam flips her upside down, and she squeals, clutching his shirt until she's sure he won't drop her. “ATTA!” She swings free, hair tumbling down. She cheers and starts rocking back and forth, swinging in Sam's grip.

“Tell me, Mer-Bear, otherwise the tickle monster comes back!” Sam threatens. He carefully wraps his
power around her to help bolster her, then twists his free hand into a claw. Mer rolls her eyes and, still upside down, folds her arms across her chest.

“Please. I banished the tickle monster when I was three!” Sam has to concentrate on lowering Mer to the floor before he drops her because he's laughing so hard. Only a Winchester.

“Did I miss something?” Dean asks dryly, but his eyes are soft as he takes the two of them in. God, when the fuck did his life turn into this?

“Atta's trying to spy on you,” Mer rats Sam out with a flutter of her eyelashes and a wide smile.

“What! That's not true!” Sam protests, glaring at her. They're supposed to be buddies. He gathers up all his betrayal and projects it out to her. From the way Dean's mouth twitches, he broadcast it pretty wide. Mer's face falls into unimpressed disbelief before her eyes go big, and watery, and her lip trembles. Oh shit.

Mer leans into him, and Sam unconsciously mirrors her movement. He can see big, fat crocodile tears gathering in her eyes.

“Atta?” Mer says.

“Yeah, Mer.” He feels like he's being marched towards a firing squad.

“You thought a bad word!” She raps him over the head and runs away while he's too stunned to react. Dean's got tears coming out of his eyes he's laughing so hard, doubled over and clutching his stomach. Bastard.

“ATTA! SWEARS!” Mer censures from the other room. That just makes Dean laugh harder. Sam glares at him and enacts a plan that involves tackling Dean to the floor and finding HIS ticklish spots. Sam is fairly sure Dean didn't banish the tickle monster when he was three.

“Sam! Stoppit! GET OFF ME!” Dean squirms beneath him, and it has quite the effect on Sam. Dean feels it and smirks, deliberately arching up into Sam to try and distract him. Before it can go too far, Mer comes flying back in the room and parks herself on Dean's chest.

“Tickle Dada!” she crows, and unerringly finds the spot right under Dean's armpits that make him jerk and emit a strangled, desperate laugh. Sam and Mer coordinate their attacks, and soon Dean's reduced to gasping pleas for mercy interspersed by uncontrollable laughter. Mer goes for Dean's feet at some point, but Sam quickly puts a stop to that lest Dean accidentally kick her.

They're so wrapped up in each other that they never notice when Whit gets home, or the pictures she takes until a framed photo appears on their wall the next day.

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Sam would much rather be at home playing tickle monster than...here. Turns out Dean's suspicious call was from and old 'friend.' Of the female variety. Who has Dean's most current number. Yeah, Sam can tell there's something up with this whole situation, something Dean isn't telling him. Plus, Dean won't meet his eyes, which is almost as good as a confession.
There was never any question of Mer not coming with them. They're all still healing from the faith healer incident, and the thought of leaving Mer behind fills them both with distaste. The one time Sam had thought about it, Mer had looked at Sam with wide, wet eyes.

When Dean announces they're going to visit Cassie and Mer claps in delight, Sam's suspicions deepen. But he holds his peace until they get to where they're going. No sense starting unnecessary trouble. This Cassie person could be anyone.

Cassie turns out to be gorgeous (naturally), and has slept with Dean (naturally), and is his ex. Unnaturally. A fact that Dean conveniently forgot to mention and Sam pieced together based on snippy comments and the way Dean and Cassie react to one another. Dean called Sarah Windham his girlfriend once in seventh grade. She summarily dumped him for Chaz Cooper three days later. After that no woman was ever graced with that title, most don't ever get a second date. From the pot shots Dean and Cassie take at one another, they knew each other longer than a first date. Or a second.

Sam would really have no problem with Cassie except Mer LOVES her. Really really loves her. She tells Cassie everything that's happened since the last time they saw each other, which Sam surmises has been about a year. And Mer invites Cassie to her birthday party, which Mer is convinced will feature a pony. (No. There will be no pony. But that's not the point.)

Sam watches Cassie pick Mer up with effortless ease, settling the girl on her hip and talking about getting Mer a haircut and some new clothes. It raises Sam's hackles, which is ridiculous because Whit does this all the time but that's...that's different, somehow. So is the way Dean watches the two of them together, with hooded eyes and pursed lips. Sam can read Dean clearly:

He sees Dean and Cassie setting up house somewhere. Mer calling Cassie Mom. Siblings for Mer, fat little babies with beautiful caramel skin and green eyes. A big dog, gentle with the kids and vicious to any threats. As much as Dean disparages normal, it looks good on him. Easy. Acceptable.

Sam hates Cassie, and she doesn't particularly care for him. By mutual agreement—and after one viciously barbed 'conversation'—they avoid being alone together. Sam feels like crap because Mer gets really quiet when Sam and Cassie get near each other, no doubt picking up on their animosity. Her eyes dart between the two of them like she's watching a tennis match. Sam tries to get her to come to him, but she simply shakes her head and goes to find Dean.

Cassie smirks at Sam, who takes the high road and leaves the room.

One night, Dean drags Sam outside and sits them down on the porch, a six-pack between them. Sam doesn't want to drink, but Dean is an insistent fucker, so he finally accepts the beer.

“I was going to ask her to marry me,” Dean admits later, a half-full bottle of beer dangling between his fingers. Fuck that hurts. It shouldn't. He'd had Jess and had planned to marry her. But even then...Dean's not the kind of person to let someone in easily. Not enough to make them family. In Sam's visions of the future, Dean was always there, lurking in the background in spite of everything else going on in Sam's life. And Sam had almost lost him. And Mer, before he'd even known she existed.
Sam puts his beer down and pulls Dean's head around so they can kiss, harsh and frantic. He wants to remind Dean that Cassie may have left, but Sam's here to stay. No more running, no more uncertainty. Sam has cast his lot with Dean and Mer, and that's the way it's going to be. Forever and ever. Done. Mer got it right, they just weren't listening.

The kiss gets deeper and more involved, Dean moaning low in the back of his throat and tangling his fingers in Sam's hair. They lose themselves, just for a minute, because they both trust Mer to keep Cassie away from them and they need this. For all Sam wants to talk to her about it, Mer seems to have a firmer grasp of their situation than Sam or Dean, which is nice because at least someone understands this. But maybe they don't need to understand; maybe they just need to be.

“Could you stop thinking so loudly?” Dean pulls away to grouse. Sam rolls his eyes and yanks Dean into another kiss, this time letting go of everything. He sinks into Dean, surrounding himself completely, lets his hedonistic side come out to play. Dean laughs against his mouth, warm puffs of air that caress Sam's skin.

Before anything can get too hot and heavy, Mer yells for them to come inside and play Candy Land.

When he sees Mer settled in Cassie's lap explaining why she chose the yellow person over the green and blue, Sam doesn't feel the familiar surge enmity. He feels...indulgent. Mer looks up at him with a wide smile and he wonders if Cassie knows what she lost.

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They try to keep Mer as far away from the action as possible, but it's hard to do when the spirit comes right up to your doorstep. The giant black truck revs its engine and the lights flicker. Dean glances at Sam, the two of them trying to figure out the best way to keep Mer safe, when she breaks free of Cassie's hold and throws the front door open wide.

“Mer!” Dean yells, sprinting after her. He can see her small frame silhouetted against the truck's bright floodlights. He stops right behind her, blinking into the bright light, but something tells him not to yank her away.

“Go away,” Mer yells at the truck. “We don't like you!” The truck growls and jerks forward. Mer steps outside and crosses her arms, Dean right at her back. Sam joins Dean, their shoulder brushing, leaving Cassie and her mom huddled together inside. They both feel Mer's power ghost over their skin, and the smell of roses and lavender seems to permeate the air.

“You are not welcome here.” Mer's voice comes out deep and powerful: not a child's tone at all. Dean blindly reaches for Sam's hand. There's a part of him that clenches every time Mer does something like this, that fears one day she won't come back. The truck spins its tires out, throwing up chunks of sod.

“You are not welcome here.” Mer repeats, sounding almost bored. The truck backs up, tires squealing. For a hopeful second, Sam thinks its going to leave. Instead it spins its tires, gathering momentum until it lurches forward, racing towards them at top speed. Mer takes one more step towards it and holds out one hand. “YOU ARE NOT WELCOME HERE!”

Sam and Dean both reach for Mer, as if they could pull her out of the way before the car crashed into the house or their bodies would serve as enough protection to save her, but...when they look up, the car has
disappeared, the only sign it was ever there tire tracks on the grass.

“He was not a nice man,” Mer grumbles, looking put out. Dean blinks at her.

“No,” he agrees, voice choked. “No, he wasn't.” Mer looks up and smiles brilliantly at him.

“The 'Pala will take him.” And with that cryptic statement, she wiggles away and runs inside to make sure Cassie knows they can play Candy Land some more, because the mean ghost won't be coming back.

“Fuck,” Dean gasps, sitting down heavily on the porch his knees suddenly too weak to support himself. Sam sits down next to him, belatedly realizing they're still holding hands.

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Cassie and her mom act differently around Mer after that. Sam doesn't know how much Cassie knew of Mer's abilities, but Mer spooked her. She still uses all the same words, smiles at Mer's enthusiasm, picks her up and swings her around. But there's a hesitancy there now. The nicknames aren't as light hearted, the smiles are a moment too late in coming, she pauses before reaching out to Mer.

Sam can feel how much it affects Mer. Usually open and free with her own emotions, Mer plays her cards close to the chest. She gradually starts drifting away from Cassie, opting to read on her own instead of playing games, or snuggling with Dean and Sam when they're home. By the time they banish the ghost, Dean pitting the Impala's engine against the supernatural, they're all ready to go home. Dean won't say it out loud, but he really wants to see Whit and give her a huge hug for being so awesome.

When they leave, Dean lets out a long breath and grins. Sam's in the passenger seat and Mer's in the back, waving goodbye to Cassie. They're all together, safe, and relatively unscathed. Going home. Home.

He wouldn't trade what he has now for the world.

****

When they get home, the first thing Mer does is run to tell Whitney everything that happened, and show her all of the clothes and toys Cassie bought her before The Break Up (as Dean calls it in his head without the least bit of irony). Dean ignores the speculative looks Whit throws him. Sam tries to emulate Dean, but he feels himself shifting uncomfortably every time her gaze settles on him. She's damn intense when she wants to be. Sam tries to hide behind the refrigerator door, but it only takes so long to get the orange juice.

“Sammy,” Dean says, and pokes him in the head. Sam swats at his hand and glares. “Sa-ammmy!” Dean pokes him in the chest, the touch turning into a brief caress.

“What, Dean?” Sam sighs, standing up with the orange juice like a shield in front of him. Dean bounces in front of him. Blocking his way to the glasses. Dean grins at him and wiggles his eyebrows. Sam huffs in annoyance. They're at an impasse for the moment, Dean just looking at him expectantly and Sam really wanting a glass. “Can I help you?” Dean seems to deflate a little and stomps off, and Sam can't figure out what's going on. But he doesn't want orange juice anymore. And Whit's still looking at him suspiciously.

The whole incident niggles at Sam because he's obviously missing something. He doesn't realize what's
going on until he's in the shower, loosely fist ing his dick, and realizes they haven't had sex in ages. Okay, more like a week, but for newly reawakened libidos and Dean, that's a long, long time. No wonder Dean's acting like a twelve-year-old.

Luckily, this is a condition easily—and pleasantly—resolved. He rummages in his dop kit and pulls out a travel-size tube of lube. Since he's also regressed to being twelve, Sam snickers at the thought of travel lube—sized for the get-up-and-go man. He stifles his moan as his fingers slide inside; it really has been a while. Dean better appreciate this.

No sooner has the thought crossed his mind than the bathroom door shakes under Dean's fist.

"Sammy! Time's up, I wanna brush my teeth!"

"You were in here longer than me, Dean!" Sam calls back. Dean mumbles something vicious and gruff, which Sam ignores in favor of fitting more fingers in his ass. He briefly considers finishing himself off because that would serve Dean right after the way he's been acting and the whole not saying anything, but that would be kind of like cutting off his nose to spite his face.

Dean's sprawled shirtless on the bed, hands tucked under his head, when Sam steps out of the bathroom. Dean spares a mildly appreciative glance for the well-muscled chest on display before he sighs and stares up at the ceiling. Wow, they really need to have sex immediately because Dean's not actively trying to seduce a nearly-naked Sam which is just wrong and means this whole no-sex thing has hit critical mass without either of them realizing.

Sam walks over to the bed, drops his towel on the floor, and straddles Dean.

"Sammy, what the-" Dean trails off when Sam sticks his hands down Dean's loose pants, wraps one of his gargantuan hands around Dean's cock and tugs. Two pulls and Dean's panting, hips moving in time with the motion of Sam's hand. Sam yanks Dean's pants off and tosses them over his shoulder. Dean pushes up on his arms, watching Sam hungrily. Sam crawls on the bed, intent evident in every move his makes. He straddles Dean, and guides his cock into place, and sinks down with a satisfied sigh.

"Christ," Dean groans reverently. Sam ignores Dean and starts moving, shifting his hips until Dean's cock is brushing his sweet spot. Perfect. He sets a pace that feels good to him, enjoying the feeling of Dean's cock sliding in and out of his ass.

"God, S-Sam!" Dean groans, clutching at Sam's hips. Sam spares a grin in Dean's direction and moves his hands so he's braced against Dean's chest, one hand over his heart. Dean keeps his touch light and encouraging, enjoying Sam being in charge. He grins up at Sam, wide and slightly lascivious. He loves this.

Sam clenches his muscles and Dean's eyes roll in the back of his head, mouth hanging opening. His tongue darts out to wet dry lips and Sam leans down to kiss him. Dean returns the kiss enthusiastically, lets his tongue roam around Sam's mouth until he whimpers, hips jerking arrhythmically.

Dean rolls them over, but Sam's too far gone to care that the rules of his game have changed. As long as the end result is the same, it's all good to him. He arches back, grabs the headboard, and moves his body sinuously against Dean's.

Dean grunts and pulls one of Sam's freakishly long legs over his shoulder. He presses a kiss to the knee
and knows Sam will really feel this in the morning—but it's going to be so good tonight he'll never even notice.

“Fuck, you're tight,” Dean grunts, hips snapping forward. He shifts the angle until he feels Sam quiver and gasp beneath him. And then he drives in again and again and again.

“Dean!” Sam growls, his voice dropping an entire register, and it makes Dean's eyes roll back. Sam surges up and rakes his teeth down the side of Dean's neck. He hooks his free leg around Dean's back and uses it to push him harder, faster. He can feel the burn and stretch in his ass and it feels amazing.

“Come on, Sammy,” Dean challenges, wrapping his hand around Sam's dick. “Bet I can get you off first.” Sam opens his eyes and grins lazily.

“Oh yeah?” He tightens his inner muscles, his entire body focused on trapping Dean's cock inside his body.

“Shiii-aaaaaaahh!” Dean gurgle-moans. His grip on Sam's cock tightens in response to his complete and utter brain freeze, which makes Sam accidentally bite his tongue because he was so close to coming.

“Over,” Sam pants when he can think again. “Over, over, come on, come on!” Dean sits back and helps Sam flip. Almost before Sam gets his hands and knees under him, Dean slams back in. It drives Sam forward, and he has to brace himself against the wall. It's hot, watching the muscles of Sam's back bunch and shift as Dean slides in and out.

Sam tries to move with Dean's rhythm, but it takes too much concentration and what little focus he has is spent staying steady, so Sam just braces himself and holds on for the ride. Dean palms his dick and fondles his balls, and Sam fights to hold on, to hold out.

“Nah-ah, Sammy,” Dean hisses in his ear. Sam can feel the slick slide of Dean's chest against his back. “Don't hold out on me.” Dean brings his hand down on Sam's ass with a resounding crack, and Sam loses it.

He yells into his pillow and comes all over Dean's hand. He barely manages to remain upright for Dean to get himself off. It doesn't take long, just a few rough thrusts. Dean's almost silent when he comes, but Sam can feel it in the way his fingers clench around Sam's hips, the strain of his body against Sam's back. Dean collapses over Sam, twitching with pleasure, and Sam finally lets himself fall. Dean spreads over him like a very heavy blanket.

“Fuck,” Sam pants. He couldn't move right now if you paid him, even with Dean crushing the air out of him.

“Good summary,” Dean mumbles with a laugh. He kisses Sam's shoulder, then bites down on it because he can. Sam grunts and shakes, telling Dean to get off. Dean rolls over onto his side of the bed and sprawls out, grinning like he's just been laid. Sam, ever the boy scout, retrieves a couple of wet wipes from his side table, and cleans Dean up.

“Aw, honey, you're so good to me,” Dean says sleepily. He's just gone enough that he thinks nothing of running his fingers gently through Sam's hair, his thumb sweeping over the swell of Sam's cheekbones.
“You don't deserve it,” Sam mutters, but he doesn't mean it. Sam makes Dean pull his boxers on (a new rule after Mer had had a nightmare and they'd both run out naked and armed to check on her; Whit had been completely worthless for days after) before he climbs under the covers and wraps himself around Dean.

They fall asleep between one breath and the next, more relaxed than they have been in a very long time.

“Dada? Atta?” Dean pulls his eyes open not two hours after they'd fallen asleep and sees his daughter, clutching Mer Bear, standing at the end of the bed.

“Mer? Whass wrong?” he mumbles. Sam moans and tries to hide himself under Dean.

“I don't feel good,” Mer says, then proceeds to throw up all over the floor.

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“Saaaaaaaam,” Dean warns into his pillow. He swats at whatever is tickling the back of his neck.

“Deeeeaaaannnn,” Sam drawls. Oh God. He can hear the leer in Sam's voice. He has created a monster. A sex-crazed, handsy, insatiable monster. Sam's hot, wet tongue traces the knobs of Dean's spine. It feels nice, and Dean would happily fall asleep to this, except one of Sam's hands slips into his sleep pants and cups his ass.

“Sam!” Dean growls, trying to squirm away from Sam's tongue. “Go sleep in your own bed!”

“This IS my bed,” Sam pouts. He rubs his erection against Dean's hip, slinging a leg over Dean's thighs. His hands run restlessly over Dean's half-naked body. Sam laughs and nips at Dean's shoulder. “Come on, Deanie. Wanna fuck!”

Sam thinks he might have won when Dean rolls over on his side to face him. He thinks he's going to get laid right up until the second Dean shoves him off the bed.

“Hey!” Sam protests, sulking. Dean's head appears above him, looking like he's disembodied where the bed hides his nakedness from Sam's eyes.

“I did!” Sam protests, sulking. “Yesterday.” He looks down at the erection tenting his pants with sad eyes.

“Jesus Christ,” Dean groans, collapsing against the bed. Sam lets out a sad, pathetic sigh of capitulation. Dean hates himself for being such a goddamned pushover. He used to be better than this. “Fine. Get your giant ass up here, I'll jerk you off.” Sam grins and bounces to his feet.

“Aw, honey. You're such a good little wifey!” Sam says, pinning Dean to the bed and licking a long stripe
up Dean's neck and to his ear.

“Oh, don't worry, sweetheart,” Dean says with faux innocence. “You and your mouth will be paying me back in the morning.”

Sam has a snarky comeback on the tip of his tongue when a vision rips through him. It's so real he can taste the car exhaust. He's trapped in a car, the locks won't open. The last thing he sees as he dies are headlights through the garage door windows.

“Sam?” Dean yells. Sam's eyes move under his eyelids and his breathing is harsh, like the asthma attack Joey Kanan had at one of Mer's play dates. “Sammy!” Dean tilts Sam's head back to open his airways and tries to get a response out of him. “Come on, Sam, not today.”

Dean's head snaps up when Mer's frightened scream echoes through the house, and he's suddenly torn between Sammy and Mer.

Sam makes the decision for him when he gasps awake, eyes lucid. He rolls over and heaves, and Dean barely has time to grab the trash can from the bedside table before Sam's stomach rebels.

“Sam—”

“I'm okay. Help Mer.” Dean puts the trash can within easy reach before sprinting down the hall to Mer's room.

She looks absolutely miserable. Her nose is red from the flu and she's crying, huddled against her headboard. She looks pale as a ghost.

“Hey, Mer-Bear, you have a bad dream?” Dean asks gently. She crawls into his arms, trembling and scared and sniffing. “It's okay, baby girl. You're okay.” She doesn't talk, just buries her head in his shoulder and clings to him. Dean grabs the stuffed Mer Bear off the bed and carries them both to his room, mentally cursing his luck that Whit's gone for the weekend.

By the time they get back, Sam's cleaned himself up and emptied the trash. He looks shaken, but he's no longer pale.

“She okay?” he asks, rubbing Mer's back as Dean carefully settles them on the bed. Mer anchors herself firmly to Dean's chest, but she turns her head so she can see Sam. “You okay, Seahorse?” Mer lets out a hiccuping laugh at her newest nickname, which makes Dean and Sam crack a smile.

“You had a bad dream, Atta,” Mer whispers. Sam swallows and wipes the tear tracks off her cheeks.

“Yeah, but it's over now,” Sam assures her. Mer frowns.

“I don't think so.” Dean and Sam share an alarmed look.

“What's that mean, Mer?” Dean asks. Mer closes her eyes and buries her face in Dean's chest, shaking her head. Dean shakes her gently to get her attention. “Mary? I need you to talk to me.” Mer trembles, making small, frightened noises. Sam looks guilty and miserable, like he could stop whatever's going on with Mer.
“Issa bad man,” she finally whispers. “I don't like him.” Mer voice comes out hoarse from coughing, and they can hear the rattling sound of every breath she takes.

“What man?” Sam asks, but nothing they say or do can get Mer to talk again.

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“It really was a vision,” Sam reports the next day. He ran the car plate through a police contact and found out the man who owned it had died last night of an apparent suicide. This is the first time he's had a vision of something that didn't directly pertain to him.

“Okay. So what do we do?” Dean wonders aloud. Sam has no idea, because Mer refuses to talk about last night. Neither of them can get any information about the 'bad man.' The only man in Sam's vision had been the one who died, and he's sure that isn't who Mer is talking about.

The next night, Sam has another vision, this time of a man being decapitated via window. This vision is more powerful, more specific, and there's something sinister lurking in the shadows. It's enough for them to call Whit home early and drop Mer off with Finn's parents, pleading a family emergency. They're just crossing the border from Illinois to Indiana when Sam's vision swims and a migraine sets in. The man's decapitation plays on a loop for the last six hours of the drive, and it physically hurts for Sam to open his eyes.

When the pain and the images abruptly stop, Sam knows they're too late. Tuning the police scanner, they eventually pick up a suspected murder, head found on the street. Even though Sam looks like an extra from a zombie movie they head straight to the address.

The way Sam's eyes widen and his lips press together tells Dean this is the place more clearly than words. They listen to the police chatter, enough for Sam to confirm the police report matches what he saw. Dean really doesn't like how this is panning out.

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When the visions start back up the next day, Dean's ready to smite a bitch. Sam hasn't eaten anything in two days—stomach can't keep anything down due to the constant migraines. Luckily, their research into the cursed Miller family has given them all the information they need. Max, the first victim's son and the second victim's nephew, has been using freaky mind powers to kill the people who abused him for years. Or stood by and watched it happen, in the case of the stepmom, soon to be victim number three.

While Dean understands that sentiment—he really, really does—freaky mind powers are only okay when it's Sam or Mer using them. Other people need to stay the hell away from the supernatural mojo. No matter what Sam says, Dean really doubts this Max kid would've turned homicidal without the telekinesis.

“This has got to be an all new low for us,” Sam grumbles, pulling at his cassock. Dean glances over at him and leers; Sam is surprisingly hot in his priest's garb.

“Nah, I think you've definitely been lower,” Dean says in a downright lascivious tone of voice. Sam glares at him—because come on, they're supposed to be priests!—but he can't help the warm flush of arousal that flows through him at the look in Dean's eyes.
“Dean,” Sam warns, but it comes out a little breathless. Dean opens his mouth, but the door swings open, saving him from having to answer.

Sam stares mutely at the kid who opened the door. Max, eyes red-rimmed and defiant, glances between the two of them. Sam doesn't know where to start. 'Hi, I've had dreams about you, don't kill your stepmom' doesn't seem like the best opening line. He glances at his brother, who stares at Max with a wide, indiscernible look on his face.

Dean pales and resists the urge to step back as the boy's anguish and desperation hits him like a 2x4. Christ, this kid's at the end of his rope, filled with turmoil and incredibly angry. Not just at the people who are supposed to be his parents, but at himself for letting it happen.

“What?” Max demands curtly, crossing his arms protectively.

“Ah, I'm— I'm Dean. This is Sam,” Dean babbles. He can feel Sam's incredulous stare, but he couldn't muster up a convincing lie to save his life right now. Max's emotions are too raw, coming through too clearly for him to ignore, deep and dark. Max is one traumatized, angry young man.

“We're new junior priests over at St. Augustine's. May we come in?” Sam picks up with an ingratiating smile.

“Max, who is it?” a woman's voice calls. Max grudgingly steps aside to let them in. Dean can feel how volatile the boy is; he doesn't think their presence is going to stop Sam's vision, not the way Max is primed to explode.

“Mrs. Miller?” Sam asks, taking point since Dean seems to have been rendered mute. Sam has a worrying moment where he wonders if Max may have done that, but decides he's just being paranoid.

“Yes?”

“We're from St. Augustine's. We heard about your recent losses and through you and your son could use a sympathetic ear.”

“Oh, that's very kind of you,” Mrs. Miller said, her eyes tearing up. “I just...it's been difficult. For both of us.”

She lays a hand on Max's arm, but he twists away and sneers at her, “You don't speak for me.”

“Max—”

“You don't speak for me! You've never spoken for me! Every time, you just stood there and let them—”

“Max, please!” Mrs. Miller says frantically, her eyes skittering to Sam and Dean, then turning pleading when she looks back at Max. The furniture in the room starts to shake. Behind them, Dean catches sight of the knife on the chopping block slowly turn and point towards their little group in the hall.

“Uh, Max, maybe we should step outside and talk about this,” Dean offers, trying to appear as sympathetic as possible.
“No!” The house shakes.

“Max—” Mrs. Miller gets thrown into the wall, her head cracking the plaster. Max turns to them, anger turning his face red and his eyes wild.

“You're not priests,” he accuses. Dean jerks as the gun Velcroed to his priest's robe rips free and flies into Max's hand. Max stares at the weapon in surprise, like he hadn't consciously meant to do that, before snapping together and pointing it at Dean. “Who are you?”

“I saw you do it,” Sam says, keeping his voice low and even. Dean twitches when the gun swings towards Sam, but he stays still. “I saw you kill your dad and your uncle before it happened.”

“What?” The gun wavers slightly. Mrs. Miller moans and jerks on the floor.

“I'm having visions, Max. About you.” The gun drops a few inches. Sam is totally getting a blow job when they get home if he can talk the kid down without getting either of them shot.

“You're crazy,” Max says, but his voice trembles and he doesn't sound sure. Dean feels a shift in Max's emotions and nudges Sam, who gives him an almost imperceptible nod.

“So, you weren't gonna launch a knife at your stepmom before we got here?” Sam asks. Max blinks and looks startled; the gun slips down a little lower. A few more inches and they'll be able to safely disarm him.

“No.” And just like that, all the headway they made is gone. Max points the gun right at Sam's heart. “That's impossible!”

“Is it that hard to believe, Max?” Sam says, eyes on the gun. “Look what you can do. Max, I was drawn here, alright? I think I'm here to help you.” Sam is emitting a field of calm and assurance, and even though he knows it's there, even Dean feels himself responding. He watches the panic slip out of Max's stance, his muscles relaxing and his breathing evening out. But the gun stays steady.

“I can't—no one can help me.”

“I can,” Sam says earnestly, and Dean can tell Max wants to believe him. “We can.”

“Do you know what it's like?” Max demands. “He hated me. I could see it, every time he looked at me. Every time he hit me in places where no one could see. He blamed me for everything. For his job, for his life, for my mom's death. How can that be okay?”

“Your mom's death?” Sam asks, and a trill of fear breaks through Sam's enforced calm. Max steps back and Sam controls his emotions, once again laying a blanket of calm over them. Dean watches Mrs. Miller out of the corner of his eye, starting to wake up, and wills her to stay the fuck down.

“Because she died in my nursery. While I was asleep in my crib. As if that makes it my fault! I was six months old!”

“She died in your nursery?” Dean asks, shocked into speech. Max jerks, like he'd forgotten Dean was there, but he doesn't move the gun from Sam's chest.
“Yeah. There was a fire. And he'd get drunk and babble on like she died in some insane way. He said that she burned up. Pinned to the ceiling. Stop asking questions!” Max yells, brandishing the gun at Sam. His finger strays perilously close to the trigger.

“Listen to me, Max. What your dad said about what happened to your mom—it's real. All of it. It happened to my mom, too,” Sam says excitedly, long arms waving everywhere without regard to the twitchy, crazy person with freaky mind powers pointing a gun at him. “Exactly the same—my nursery, my crib. My dad saw her on the ceiling. You and I must be connected in some way.” Dean grits his teeth. All he wants to do is step between Sam and Max, and it takes everything in him to stay put. If Sam would just stop gesturing.

“You're insane,” Max says, but he's shaking and unsure.

“It's true,” Dean says softly, trying to draw Max's attention to him. “I was four. I remember the fire. We're looking for the bastard that killed her. Have been for twenty years. Let us help you.” For a second, he thinks Max is going to go for it. Max lowers the gun and smiles a little; Dean breathes out his relief. Sam grins, dimples showing through.

“I'm sorry.” Sam goes flying into a coat closet, a heavy desk moving of its own volition in front of the door. Dean goes sailing through the window, glass falling all around him. He feels a piece embed itself in his shoulder, burning as it cuts through the muscle.

“Max!” Sam yells, pounding on the door. “Don't do this!” Sam doubles over as a vision assaults him. Max yelling at Mrs. Miller, accusing her, shooting her in the chest moment before Dean bursts through the front door, only to be shot through the head. Reset. This time, he gets shot through the head. Then the chest, where he dies slowly choking on his own blood. Reset. Max and Dean both die. Reset. Reset. Reset. Rage builds in Sam and something in him gives.

Energy bursts forth and the closet door and desk shatter. Sam staggers, exhausted, but it's enough to startle Max into turning around, taking the attention from Mrs. Miller. Dean bursts through the front door, bleeding and bruised. Max spins around, gun cocked, and that same draining burst of energy jerks the gun up. The shot buries itself in the door frame. Sam sags to his knees, feeling dizzy and wrecked.

“Max,” Dean warns, glancing between Max and Sam. “Come on, man. This isn't the answer.”

“You know what?” Max asks, his voice eerily blank. “You're right.”

Max shoots himself in the head before any of them can stop him. Dean stares at the bright splash of red on the walls for a moment before Sam tries to get up and finds he doesn't have the strength to stand. Dean catches him and gently guides Sammy to the ground. He frowns at the small trickle of blood coming out of Sam's nose. Dean uses his shirt to wipe it away and Sam's eyes flutter open.

“When were you gonna tell me about that little trick?” Dean asks, checking Sam's pupils. Despite the lightness of his words, Sam can sense how truly freaked out Dean is, how much he doesn't like Sam's new power.

“Didn't know,” Sam mumbles, his eyes drooping. Dean's worry spikes, and Sam wants to tell Dean that it's okay. He's still Sammy, still Dean's.
“Max? MAX! Oh God!”

Dean and Sam watch Mrs. Miller clutch her stepson's lifeless body, tears spilling down her cheeks. Dean meanly wonders if she feels guilty for standing by while her husband and brother-in-law beat the shit out of a defenseless kid.
Chapter 13

Dean enjoys the feel of the air flowing through the car, ruffling his hair and cooling his skin. Sammy sleeps in the seat beside him, drooling on the window. Dean would wake him up because hello, upholstery, but Sam has been sleeping for the better part of twenty-four hours. His new mind trick really took it out of him. Dean sends the thought skittering away because not dealing with it.

Dean's cellphone rings, and the showtune of the week is 'Foxy Roxy Hart.'

"Winchester airlines, this is your captain speaking," Dean answers. The snort at the other end tells him he's talking to Whit.

"You better be flying your fine ass back home, Captain Winchester," Whit says in lieu of a civilized greeting.

"Mer tell you who she wanted at her party?" Dean asks, trying not to be offended that Whit thinks he'd miss his kid's fifth birthday. Dean frowns. "Whit? Whitney?"

"No one," Whit says with a sigh. Dean imagines she's rubbing her eyebrow like she always does when she's faced with the particularly stubborn qualities of the Winchester clan.

"What do you mean 'no one'? What about Finn? Or Jer? Come on, not even Lissa? What about that weird kid—the one with the moon boots."

"Nope. She wants you, me, Sam, John if you can swing it, Bobby and Missouri if they're willing to come up."

"You can't be serious," Dean says in disbelief.

"Trust me, I couldn't make this up if I tried. Not if it's Mer."

"What's the theme?" Dean asks, trying to wrap his mind around this, because he's half convinced Mer is going to grow up to be a party planner. Her third birthday she'd insisted that everything be X-Men and SpongeBob themed. She wanted a Wolverine cake, SpongeBob plates, Magneto napkins, Patrick balloons, and assorted X-Men invitations. And God help them if they tried to steer her towards one show or the other. Last year, she'd wanted sparkles. Dean shudders just remembering. He'd still been shaking glitter out of his hair two months after the fact; it made him miss the incongruity of Professor X sitting next to a depressed looking squid.

"Whitney!" Dean yells.

"She doesn't have an opinion!" Whit yells back.

"Mother fuck—" Dean hangs up and guns the engine.

"Wha-ha?" Sam mumbles, starting awake. "Dean?"

"Welcome back to the world, Sammy."

"What happened?" Dean feels Sam brush against him, but he's not in the mood. He's had his fill of freak
powers for the week. “Dean?” Sam's concern washes over him, and Dean forces himself to relax.

“Nothin'.” Sam does not believe him. “Mer's birthday is next week.” Sam sits straight up, eyes wide.

“What? Do we have a cake? Decorations? Oh shit, we need presents! What should we get? What does she want? DEAN!”

“Jesus, Sammy, calm the fuck down!” Dean grins in spite of himself, because Sam panics so awesomely. Dean slows down on the deserted high way and pulls Sam into a sloppy kiss.

“That's—yeah. Okay,” Sam agrees, blinking at Dean.

“She's five, Sam. They have entire stores dedicated to making five-year-olds deliriously happy.”

“Our five-year-old has the reading comprehension of a middle schooler,” Sam points out, just to be contrary.

Dean doesn't respond because he's too busy feeling ridiculously warm and fuzzy inside because Sam called Mer ours. He would revoke his own man card, but he likes the world too much right now.

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“Honey, I'm ho-ome,” Dean sings sarcastically. Sam glares when Dean lets the screen door slam closed in his face because his hands are full of carryout boxes.

“Dean!”

“Yeah?”

“A little help here?” Sam says, trying to keep his temper in check. Dean pokes his head down the stairs and smirks.

“You just learned a new trick, Sammy. Why don't you use it?” There's an undercurrent of sharpness to Dean's words, belying the playful way they're delivered. Sam grits his teeth. This is just like every conversation Dean never wants to have—just avoid avoid avoid and then make a sarcastic allusion to it and avoid avoid avoid some more.

“So you'll mock me, but you won't talk about it?” Sam grinds out, trying to hook his little finger around the screen door to get it open.

“I have no idea what you're talking about, Sammy,” Dean says breezily, a wide grin on his face as he watches Sam struggle. Sam glares and sends a sharp burst of irritated anger towards Dean, who jerks back and rubs his head, scowling. Sam hopes he gets a headache from it. “Bitch.”

“Serves you right,” Sam says smugly. Goddamned DOOR. Goddamned DEAN. Sam swears as their wonton soup spills over his shirt and down his sleeve.

“Hold on, Sam, I'll—” They both gape as the door bangs open on its own. “...um.”
“Dean,” Sam says faintly, freaked out. That hadn't taken nearly the same amount of energy as it had the first two times. “I think we should talk about it.” Dean's face sets into stubborn lines, his jaw tight.

“That was SO COOL!” They both look up to see Mer standing on the landing, staring at Sam with wide eyes. Her skin is pink and her hair wet from a shower, and her bathrobe has sea creatures on it. “I wanna do that!”

“Absolutely not,” Dean vetoes. Floating objects is not something he signed up for.

“But Dada—”

“No, Mer. Go tell Whitney it's time for dinner.” Mer glares at him and crosses her arms before turning wide puppy-dog eyes on Sam.

“Attá?” she asks, smiling winsomely. Dean turns around and glares at Sam, daring him to contradict Dean.

“Your Dad said no, Mer,” Sam says, which isn't a no, but more importantly, is not a yes. Dean's expression says Sam isn't getting away with this, but they'll deal with it later.

“But Atta—”

“Mer!” Dean interrupts sharply. Mer pouts and toes the ground. “Go get Whit.” She makes sure they know how displeased she is by stomping away.

“Dean—”

“No, Sam.” Dean snatches the takeout and stalks towards the kitchen.

“Dean! You can't ignore this!” Sam protests, doggedly following Dean.

“You aren't teaching my kid to bend spoons, Sam,” Dean says with finality.

“So what, you're just going to wait for her to figure it out on her own?”

“She's not—” Dean cuts himself off and slams a plate down.

“Not what?” Sam asks dangerously. “Going to experiment? Really? Or is she not like me?”

“I didn't say that.” Sam glares at the back of Dean's head.

“You know, I always thought you were dealing with this a little too well.” Sam watches the way Dean's shoulders tense, the food he's pouring into a serving bowl splashing on his shirt. “Powerful demons, psychic powers, now telekinesis. Not to mention your own—”

“Sam—” Dean turns around and Sam steps up in his space, effectively pinning Dean to the counter.

“No, Dean,” Sam says, pressing close. “You don't get to 'Sam' me. Not tonight. I've given you your space and I've never talked about it, even though that's never worked before and doesn't make it go away, but this is different, Dean. I'm getting stronger. Mer's getting stronger. This isn't going to go away. Not for me,
not for Mer...and not for you. There's something going on here. Something bigger than us.”

“It's a coincidence,” Dean insists stubbornly, a last-ditch effort on his part to keep his world neat and orderly.

“I dreamt about Max. Specifically about Max. We're linked, Dean. Something is connecting us and it's...it's not good.” Sam hates how desperate he sounds, how much this new development has thrown him off center. He's pinwheeling, trying to keep his balance, and he needs Dean to do that.

“I know.” Sam only hears Dean's admission because they're pressed so close together. Dean's hands tangle in Sam's too-long hair. “I know. But we don't have to deal with it now. After.” Dean preempts Sam's reply with a bruising kiss.

“Daaaaaads! Get a room!” Sam breaks the kiss and blushes, hiding his face in Dean's neck.

“Whitney!” Dean exclaims.

“Oh no. You do not get to lay that one on me, Deanie. You can blame that solely on the TV you let her watch,” Whit says, grabbing the plates and a bowl of spicy chicken. She pauses and looks them over, Sam trying to hide how embarrassed he is. “Now, what you can blame me for are the My Two Dads DVDs that'll be showing up sometime in the next week.”

“You're joking,” Dean says, horrified.

“Maybe,” Whit allows. “Maybe not. Guess you'll just have to stick around to intercept them, won't you?” No one ever accused Whitney of being subtle. Sam pushes down the urge to leap to Dean's defense. They have been gone a lot, and it's obviously wearing on Mer, even if she never says anything to them.

“I'm calling Dad and Missouri tonight,” Dean says defensively.

“And Bobby?” Whit asks, smirking.

“Bobby can wait till the morning,” Dean evades, picking up the rest of the dishes.

“Oh yeah,” Whit snorts. “More like he'll tan your hide if you call him this late.”

“Bitch,” Dean throws at her.

“DADA! SWEARS!” Whitney laughs victoriously while Dean alternates between shooting her dark looks and apologizing to Mer. Sam sits back and grins at his family.

****

Sam takes to sneaking away to practice. It's worse than coming back to training after a long injury.

At first, he has to time it for when Dean's gone or when Sam really would be working out. He works up a sweat, hair sticking to his head, breath coming fast and harsh. All that to make a pencil roll. But once he does it, once he's got it, it's like he always knew how. It comes easier and easier, so that instead of getting tired, Sam's rolling pencils and pens and ping pong balls all over the place. One, two, ten at a time.
Then he moves to levitation, and he has to start the whole process over. Days spent sweating to get the object to twitch. From there, to get it to flop on the table like a dead fish. Then to hover in the air, inches off the nearest surface, see-sawing from side to side. He's just managed to keep it steady when he realizes he has an audience. The pencil clatters to the ground.

“Mer,” Sam calls softly. A beat and then Mer slinks out of the shadows, her own pencil in her hand. Sam doesn't say anything, just lays her pencil right next to his. Mer tends to get the general concepts better than Sam, but Sam is more precise. He shows her the value of control, and she shows him how everything they do is fundamentally the same, but different.

Their learning curve starts out steep and doesn't show signs of stopping. They don't mention any of this to Dean.

****

“Mer's making me tired just watching her,” Dean groans, falling down on the couch and swinging his feet into Sam's lap. Without any sort of regard for the book Sam was reading (they're now splayed on the floor) or that he's been happily tuning out the world around him for the past couple of hours (with varying degrees of success).

“Atta! Dada! There's a wrinkle!” Mer wails, dismayed. Mer's wearing a dark blue shirt that brings out her eyes her black 'floaty' skirt that 'makes her feel like a princess.' Said shirt has a small crease in the front of it.

“It looks fine, Mer-Bear,” Dean sighs, one hand thrown over his eyes.

“Dada!” Mer protests, stomping her foot. “You're not even looking!” Dean reaches out, hooks Mer around her waist, and lifts her up onto the couch.

“You're my kid, you always look good. And grandpa isn't going to care about a wrinkle.” Mer struggles against Dean's chest and kicks Sam in the process.

“Dada! Lemme go!” Dean lets Mer slide off the couch. She looks down at how messy her shirt is now and shrieks. Loudly. Dean sighs as she runs off, the door to her room slamming shut behind her.

“WHIT!” Dean bellows.

“SHOVE IT, LOSE-CHESTER!” Whit yells back. They hear the door to Mer's room open seconds later.

“Oh, that was real creative,” Dean grumbles.

“Shut up, Dean,” Sam says tightly, retrieving his book.

“God, not you too,” Dean groans.

“Not me—are you serious?”

“Calm down, Sammy.”
“Calm down? CALM DOWN? Dean. Bobby's coming. Missouri's coming. Dad's...probably coming. That's like, the Trifecta, Dean. How are we going to explain...what are we supposed to tell them?” Dean blinks.

“That's what you're worried about?” Sam gapes at him, and even though he looks like an idiot, Dean kind of loves him anyways.

“ Aren't YOU?”

“No. Sam, why would they ever suspect we're...” Dean makes a rough, twirling gesture that could mean anything from 'let's go on the Ferris wheel' to 'we're gay incestuous lovers.'

“We're sharing a room!”

“We've been sharing a room our entire lives,” Dean points out, surprisingly logical. “But we'll just tell them you sleep on the couch.”

“Long term?” Sam demands incredulously.

“I don't think they'll really ask about it, but there's a fold-up cot in the garage. I think.”

“You think?” Sam asks flatly.

“Well—” The doorbell rings, and both of them stare at the front door. Dean's hand tightens painfully around Sam's arm, so maybe he's not as flippant as he's pretending to be. They hear Mer shriek at Whit, and that pretty much confirms who's at the door.

“He never called to say he was coming,” Dean says to Sam.

“Yeah. He wouldn't,” Sam mutters. They open the door.

“Dean. Sam.”

“Hi. Dad.”
Chapter 14

Mer thinks, “Five is going to be the best age in all of ever.” She thinks, “This is better than X-men and SpongeBob and even Star Wars.” She grins at the people seated around her kitchen table, laughing and joking and happy. Atta and Dada are teasing Whit, who is pretending extra hard today that she can't stand Dada to make sure Granpa doesn’t think they're together. Which is silly, because Dada and Atta glow so hard together they make her eyes hurt sometimes. But she has a hard time explaining that to them, that sometimes she has to look away because it's too pretty.

Granpa glows here too, but that's because of everyone else. Granpa forgot how to glow for himself when Mer's real Gramma died, the one she's named after. Mer sees her sometimes, in her dreams. Her favorite is the one in the diner, where Gramma and Granpa are both younger than Atta. She likes the way they look at each other, sideways and in mirrors and with lots of blushes.

Gamma Mo and UnncaBobby are always laughing around them, even if they keep it on the inside. She thinks Gamma Mo likes her Granpa. Like, likes likes him, but Gamma Mo isn't as loud as anyone else. She keeps to herself, which is nice because sometimes Dada and Atta and Whit are all Mer can hear and it gets loud and confusing and she just doesn't understand. Dada calls them migraines, but that doesn't feel right, but it doesn't matter. Mer's getting better at blocking everyone else, and she understands more and more every day.

But that's not important today. Today, she is five. Practically a grown up. And everyone is together and happy and safe. Mer grins and eats more of her cake. Funfetti, with the good icing that Whit buys. Not the bad stuff that Dada likes better, which Mer doesn't understand because the funfetti chips are so much better in Whit's icing.

She grins wide when they all sing her happy birthday, even UnncaBobby, who sings low. He sings better than Atta, who sucks pretty bad, and Gamma Mo, who kind of speaks the words. She blows out all of her candles and keeps her wish super secret, even from Gamma Mo, because otherwise it won't come true. She frowns for a second, because she's pretty sure it won't come true anyways, but it can't hurt.

“You ready for your presents, Mer-Bear?” Atta asks. Mer rolls her eyes at him because of course she's ready! PRESENTS! But first she has to finish her cake, because Dada keeps trying to steal it, which isn’t cool and doesn't make sense if he doesn't like the icing. After his fork tries to sneak in a third time, Mer glares at him and wraps her free arm protectively around the cake. It's her birthday today. She doesn't have to share on her birthday.

And maybe she can finally convince Dada she's old enough to play Halo on the X-Box.

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“She's down,” Dean announces, accepting the beer Dad holds up for him. Mer's dinner celebration had been filled with laughter and good food. And really good cake. Mer has three converts to the Cult of Funfetti in John, Missouri, and Bobby. Mer had regaled them with stories about the kids in the neighborhood, who seemed to have lives better suited to day time soaps than preschoolers. They let her stay up extra late, until she fell asleep smooshed into John's side.

The six adults spread out through the living room and let the air of contentment seep into them. It's not often they get to sit around and just be, and never together.
“You sure you'll be okay on the couch, John?” Whit asks, her feet propped up on Dean's lap, her head on a pillow in Sam's lap.

“You've slept on worse than that thing, Whitney. Don't worry about me,” John assures her.

“You don't want to know half the places he's bedded down,” Missouri adds, a sharp edge to her words.

“Missouri!” John exclaims, but he can't muster up enough irritation to make it an effective rebuke. He's let his cares go (as much as he ever can) for the day, and has half a beer in him. He hasn't been this mellow in a long time.

“What? You shouldn't do anything you'd be embarrassed to tell your sons about,” Missouri says with a smirk. John waves his hand dismissively.

“Too much information!” Dean yelps, trying to head this off at the pass.

“I dunno. The life and times of John Winchester. Could be an interesting story,” Whit says, because she's completely evil.

“Compared to your life, a vegetable has an interesting life story,” Dean says nastily. Whit retaliates by kicking Dean in the ribs.

“A lot of my life is dedicated to taking care of your kid, Dean-o. You might want to be careful what you say about me.”

“Or you'll what, corrupt her? Tell her traumatizing stories from the ER? Turn her against me? Oh, wait. You've already done all that!” That starts a pillow fight between Whit and Dean of epic proportions. Whit has the bigger pillow, but Dean's is harder. After the second inadvertent smack, Sam pushes them both to the ground, but the change of scenery doesn't even faze them. It's not long before they give up on the pillows and start trading mock blows and vicious insults; Sam's glad to see those self-defense lessons Dean gives her aren't going to waste.

Soon, even Bobby's laughing at their antics, especially when Dean tells Whit she packs a punch like a hippopotamus, oh, and did she know she looks like one too? Whit responds by telling Dean that it's a good thing he's pretty because otherwise everyone would notice what a gigantic ass he is. After that, it's no holds barred and Whit wins by dint of playing up to Dean's fear of actually hurting her.

“You apologize,” Whit commands, her knee digging painfully into Dean's back. Dean laughs and refuses until his spine cracks, and then he collapses loosely on the floor.

“Fuck, that hurt like a bitch but it was worth it,” Dean groans into the carpet. Whit rolls her eyes but runs her hands professionally down his back, checking for any more knots and tension.

“You have the worst posture of anyone I know,” she grumbles. Dean swears when she digs into a knot. Sam winces in sympathy, he's been on the receiving end of those hands. They're less forgiving than steel.

“Fuck, Whit!” Dean yells, trying to wriggle away.
“Oh suck it up,” Whit commands. She glances over at John. “I thought you raised these boys to be badass.”

“Some things just can't be taught,” John says with an exaggerated sigh. He hides his smile behind his bottle of beer.

“Hey!” Dean objects. “I am totally badass.”

“Oh yeah, Dean,” Sam mocks. “That case with the ghost and the hairbrush was totally bad—”

“Shut it, Sammy!” Dean commands desperately. They'd promised never to talk about that stupid, possessed hairbrush again.

“Alright, boys. And Ms. Missouri,” Whit says with a small bow towards the other woman in the room. “That's it for me. I've got an early shift tomorrow, so I'm going to bed. Don't get into too much trouble!” They all bid Whit goodnight and let the silence of her leaving settle over them. Dean's half asleep when Sam breaks the happy little buzz they all had going.

“So how long are you all staying?” Sam asked. Dean snorts at how abysmally unconcerned Sam doesn't sound. Sam blushes when he feels everyone staring at him and ducks his head, hiding behind his hair.

“Why do you ask, Sam?” Missouri asks, just as fake as Sam, who looks up long enough to glare through his blush.

“I, uh. I just...”

“Sam,” John says, his voice deep and authoritative. The change in Sam is immediate. His spine straightens and his jaw locks. He looks like a man with something to prove.

“There's something going on. With my powers, the visions.”

“Well we know that, son,” Bobby says, his eyes slanted towards John. “You got somethin' new to tell us?”

“I think...I think there's someone keeping track of me.”

“What?” Dean yells, sitting up.

“Dean!” Sam hisses, glancing up towards where Mer's fast asleep.

“Sorry, Sam. I just wasn't expecting you to drop something like that into casual conversation. How long? How long have you thought this?” Dean demands. Sam glances around at the people gathered in the room, most of whom he's entrusted his life to. Several times other.

“Since Max. Before Max, but he was the one that made me sure.”

“Sam—this is serious,” John says, leaning towards his sons.

“I know. Which is why I wanted to talk to you all. Because I need your help.”
“All of us?” Bobby asks. Sam can see him mentally tallying up all of their combined skills and areas of expertise and coming up with something stupid.

“I want you to help me induce a vision. But stronger.”

“Why?” Dean asks suspiciously.

“You want to do a vision walk,” Missouri says, her gaze piercing.

“A vision walk? What’s that?” Dean really doesn’t like where this is going.

John shifts in his seat, and all eyes fly to him, waiting. Expecting some sort of protest or a flat-out order not to proceed. John looks at them all, then pointedly looks away; he won’t participate in their discussion, but he won’t stop it either. Dean frowns and Sam’s brow furrows; that’s not the reaction they were expecting.

“It’s...it’s a vision, but more powerful,” Sam says slowly, still watching Dad. Even with the distraction Dean can tell that Sam’s not telling them the whole truth.

“That,” Missouri says stonily, “is saying a nuclear warhead is like a BB gun, only stronger.”

“Sam,” Dean growls, pinning him with a glare he normally reserves for Mer at her most unmanageable.

“Look, there was someone else there in the visions. Another presence, right on the edge of everything. If I can go in and see it, figure out who or what it is...” Sam trails off with a shrug.

“Missouri?” Dean asks. She and Bobby exchange a series of looks and small gestures. Sam finds himself wondering how well they know each other that they can communicate with one another so effectively, what they could have connected over—other than the obvious—to create such a bond.

“Complaining about your family,” Missouri fires at him, and Sam flushes. He forgot about Missouri’s abilities. “But Sam, this is dangerous.” She doesn’t look happy about Sam’s plan, but she isn’t actively protesting it.

“Everything is dangerous,” Sam insists stubbornly. Missouri glances at Bobby again, who sighs and nods.

“Yeah, we can set it up,” Bobby says, resigned.

“Dean, we’ll need to clear this room. I hope you don’t mind chalk on your floors.” Dean rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Good. I think a pentacle for focus. A few other symbols for protection and second sight around the edges and in the spaces. I’ll need to go pick up some herbs—sandalwood and saffron. Thyme too, I think. Oh, and a few candles.”

“I’ve got some protection runes and an old gris-gris with me,” Bobby adds. “And we can mix some Bay leaves and Angelica root in the paint for protection.”

“We can do it tomorrow,” Missouri concludes. Between her skills and Bobby’s knowledge, they’re going to make this the safest vision walk in the history of vision walks. Dean swallows his protests. He has a bad feeling about this, but Sam’s determined and nothing Dean says will change his mind.

“So we have a plan,” Dean says softly. “We go searching for this thing tomorrow.”
“Lord help us,” Missouri sighs, shaking her head.

The silence stretches between them, intense and awkward, until Bobby pulls a couple of tightly rolled jays out of his vest.

“Bobby, have I ever told you how much I love you?” Dean asks sincerely, taking a long hit off the blunt. His chest burns; it's been a long time since he's smoked pot. It only takes a couple of drags for the familiar sensation of lassitude and fuzziness to settle through him.

“No. And keep it that way,” Bobby grunts. Maybe it's the weed, but Dean swears he hears affection in Bobby's tone.

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Dean sees Missouri and Bobby out while Sam makes sure their father has everything he needs to spend a blissful night on the couch.

“You, uh, sure you don't want the cot?” Sam asks awkwardly. Their father has been unusually quiet and subdued all night. He hasn't said anything that made Sam want to bristle or fight. He's been almost...conscientious of the things he says and the subjects he broaches.

John glances between his boys and shakes his head.

“I'll be fine,” he tells them, and they subside into awkward silence. There's so much he wants to tell them. So much they need to know, but he has no idea where to start. He's truly glad that they have each other—in whatever way that means—because they're going to need each other.

John thinks of the Book he left in a specially-rented storage unit and the secrets he's spent the better part of four months deciphering. He'd long figured out that there were only a few things he was allowed to know, and to venture into certain pages was an effort in futility. The Book gives up its secrets in its own time, to people of its own choosing.

“You sure you want to do this tomorrow?” he asks Sam. He knows the answer doesn't matter, not really. This is the catalyst, what starts it all as Him touched by Primrose Se’irim who seeks truth purblind. John doesn't know how that will manifest, but he knows Sam will go through with the vision walk. And while he may have been a crap father, he loves his sons. He wouldn't see them go through what's ahead, but he's come to realize he won't be able to stop it. And he won't be around to help. He has to play his part.

“I...” Sam stops and considers his father. They've had their differences. He's railed against the man and said things that made him flush with shame. He's not a good father, but he was the best he could be. And that counts for something, even if Sam isn't sure what. “I have to,” Sam can't explain it any other way. There's just a bone-deep certitude within him that he has to do this.

“Yeah. I know you do,” John says, sounding utterly exhausted. Sam frowns, unsure of what to make of that. He tentatively reaches out to his father, but his mind recoils at the vortex of his father's emotions. John Winchester overflows with emotions. Dark anger, discord, guilt, and revenge mixes with loyalty, faith, honor, and love. Sam can't bear the chaos and pulls back with a wince.
“Dad, I—” Sam shakes his head. He's afraid to say anything else lest he break this weird truce between them. No one is more surprised than Sam when his father pulls him into a tight hug. His father is, as always, a knot of emotions that Sam can't unravel or fully feel, but he knows that no matter what his faults, Dad loves him. Sam returns the hug with equal strength.

“Dad?” Dean's voice breaks through their little haze and they break apart slowly. Sam takes a moment to find his center; he feels frayed and raw, and his eyes are suspiciously wet.

“You're doing good, Dean,” John tells his son. He can't make up for the years that have passed, but he can give them this. “Mer's...you're doing a great job.”

“What's going on?” Dean sounds troubled and scared, and he's got that little furrow between his eyes that means he's pinging someone. His frown deepens. “Dad?”

“I love you both.” Now Sam's really alarmed.

“Dad, if there's something wrong,” Sam starts desperately.

“No. No, it's...I saw something. Before I got here. Dealt with some things that made me...they made me realize that I have a lot to account for.”

“You don't—” Dean starts, but John cuts him off with a sad, humorless smile. He touches Dean gently, almost reverently.

“I do.” Dean watches him, looking so vulnerable it makes Sam ache.

“I'll...see you boys in the morning.”

John turns to the couch and starts arranging his blankets and pillow.

The dismissal, at least, is familiar.

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Sam stares at himself in the mirror, his mind buzzing with possibilities, fears, ideas. He starts when Dean comes up behind him, wraps his arms around Sam and trails his fingers over the contours of Sam's stomach and chest. Sam sinks into Dean's strength, lets him hold them both up.

He watches Dean in the mirror, the way Dean closes his eyes and turns his face into Sam's neck. It's an awesome sight, in the most fundamental meaning of the word, to watch the way Dean's face smoothes out and relax, how the tension ebbs out of him caress by caress.

Dean opens his eyes and catches Sam looking. They study each other for a moment, complete honesty between them. Dean's eyes narrow and that's all the warning Sam has before a cold hand slips into his sweats and cups him.

“Dean!” Sam pulls away, looking scandalized. “Dad is in the living room!”

“Exactly,” Dean says, hunger in his eyes. “The living room. As in, not here.” Sam dances away, keeping his voice to a low hiss.

“No, Dean. We are not—with Dad in the house, and the walls—Dean!” Sam holds his breath while Dean
pins him to the wall, using his whole body to rub against Sam.

“Sammy,” Dean pants lightly into his ear. Sam’s eyes roll upwards when Dean catches the delicate shell with his teeth. “Sammy.” Sam gives in and grabs Dean’s head, guiding their mouths together. Silently. They can do quiet.

Dean grins at his victory and yanks Sam's t-shirt off. In retaliation, Sam cups Dean's ass, bends his legs, and picks Dean up off the ground, muscles bulging. Dean muffles a protest while Sam staggers the two steps to their bed. They both bounce off the mattress when Sam drops them.

“Fuckin’ Sasquatch,” Dean growls, not amused, and starts wrestling for control. Sam smirks and pins him down easily.

“You been slacking off, Dean?” Sam taunts. He presses the heel of his hand to Dean's bulge. “Taking the housewife mentality to heart?” Dean, unsurprisingly, plays dirty and twists one of Sam's nipples. It's too much to concentrate on being quiet and keeping Dean pinned, so Dean manages to get the upper hand and pin Sam's arms to the bed.

“Sammy,” Dean says seriously, pulling away for a moment. Sam blinks up at him. “You die or turn into a vegetable tomorrow and I'm going to kick your ass.” Sam thinks about that for a second. Instead of answering, he pulls Dean down to him and kisses him, slow and thorough.

“Yeah,” Dean whispers when Sam lets him go. “Yeah, okay.”

****

Mer glances suspiciously at all of them when they tell her she and Whit are going to see a movie of her choice. She picks Watchmen, which Dean instantly vetoes and gives her the choice between Monsters vs Aliens and Race to Witch Mountain.

Mer glares at him and says, archly, “Well then it's not my choice, is it?” Sam covers his face with his hands to avoid Dean's ire, but Missouri has no such compunction. She laughs from the moment Mer crosses her arms to the moment she marches out the door, head held high and letting the world know, in no uncertain terms, that she's aware that they're just trying to get rid of her. Dean sighs and wonders aloud what he did to deserve this.

“Oh, you've done enough. Trust me,” Missouri says with a grin.

“So, we gonna do this?” Dean asks, just to change the subject, then blanches when he remembers just what it is they're doing.

“Yeah,” Bobby says with a sigh. “I guess we are.”

****

They all troop into the living room. The furniture has been moved into the kitchen and the carpet peeled away. On the hardwood floor is a chalk pentacle with various symbols and runes carved into it. At each of the five points burns a candle and some dried herbs. The cot Sam supposedly sleeps on during the week is in the center of the circle.
“Alright,” Bobby says, wiping his hands on his pants. He surveys his work critically and nods when Missouri makes a few changes to his glyphs. “You sure you want to do this?” he asks Sam.

“Yeah. I'm sure.” Sam's mouth sets in a hard line and he squares his shoulder.

“Alright then, lie down.” The second Sam lays down he knows no one has been fooled by the cot story; it smells musty and unused and like basement.

“Sam,” Missouri calls.

“Yeah?”

“We're going to start. Bobby and I are going to ground the spell; John and Dean are going to be your anchors. You need to come back, you concentrate on them. You should be able to find them no matter where you are and follow them home. Alright?”

“Yeah. I got it.” Missouri and Bobby start chanting in tandem, their voices flowing over and around him. Sam closes his eyes and thinks about his visions, about what he wants to do. The smoke from the herbs thickens and tickles his nose. The voices fade into the background and Sam feels dizzy.

He opens his eyes and he's in Max Miller's garage. He touches the lawn mower in the corner and it feels real. He can even detect the faint scent of cut grass. Sam glances in the car and sees Mr. Miller, looking normal and unharmed. This must be the few seconds before Max's attack.

Sam straightens and glances around. He catches a shadow of a person out of the corner of his eye and thinks about moving towards it. He blinks and finds himself outside, right next to the person. It's Max, hidden in the shadows, face twisted in rage and fear and determination. Sam squints; are Max's eyes faintly yellow? He leans in to get a closer look, but whirls around when he senses another presence. The same one he's felt watching him for weeks.

Sam's heart starts racing because there's something here, but he can't figure out where. He spins in a circle, eyes darting around wildly. The feeling of being watched doesn't diminish. The atmosphere around him seems thick and oppressive.

“Hello?” he calls out. Might as well get this over with. “Hello! Who's out there?”

“Hello, Sammy.”
“Hello, Sammy.” The man's older than him, maybe his father's age, but no one Sam recognizes.

“Who are you?” Sam asks. The man's smile makes his skin crawl.

“Oh, I think we're beyond that, don't you, Sammy?” Sam takes a step back when the man's eyes flash yellow. “Besides, those aren't the questions you want to be asking.”

“It's you, isn't it?” The man grins wolfishly, and the darkness Sam has been feeling for weeks comes back, stronger and more stifling.

“You found me!” it cackles, like this is all a game.

“We've been looking for you for a long time.”

“Yes, and I can't tell you what a pain in the ass that's been. Your father is one of the most annoyingly persistent humans I've ever met. But you already know that, don't you, Sammy?” There's a flash, and Sam's vividly remembers standing in front of John, 18 years old and yelling about college and his future. Anger, contempt, and teenage hatred wells up fresh within in him.

“NO!” Sam yells, and stumbles back. The feelings fade, but his heart still races and Sam can feel the residual anger within him, hanging on around the edges and affecting his concentration. The demon chuckles.

“You're strong. Good. Learn what you can from Dean's spawn.”

“Leave her alone!” Sam shouts, suddenly afraid for Mer. All the women in his life have died by this creature's hands—Mom, Jess. The bastard can't have Mer.

“So much fear and anger.” The demon shivers in a parody of pleasure. “But don't you worry. Or maybe you should. Because Mer's your only real competition, and she's got youth on her side.” Mer shimmers into existence beside the demon, a still-life 3-D image of the real thing. The demon runs his fingers through her hair in a mockery of paternalistic affection.

“You son of a—”

“Ah-ah.” Sam goes flying through the air and hits the side of the garage. “Language, Sammy. And do try to be play nice, I'd hate to have to hurt you. I have plans for you, after all. And all the children like you.”

Sam calms himself; the objective here is information. “What plans?”

“Tell me, Sammy. Could you take orders from your niece? Or is there going to be friction between the two of you?” He tilts imaginary Mer's head up. The empty, soulless look in the figure's green eyes cause a chill to race down Sam's spine.

“What?”

“Well, as good as you're turning out, there's nothing that compares to getting to them early.” The demon
grins, like he's waiting for Sam to say something, to connect the dots, and Sam...he can't...

“You didn't,” Sam gasps. His vision spots and he can't get enough air.

“Really. Dean spent so much time demon-proofing his house, only to send the reason out into the big, bad world with a nanny for protection? Tsk tsk. That's down right negligent parenting.”

“No!” Sam strains with everything in him and breaks free of the demon's hold. He rushes forward, intent on getting rid of the bastard once and for all. He registers a moment of surprise on the demon's face, but it disappears before Sam can wrap his hands around its gloating neck.

“Huh.” Sam spins around and the demon's standing behind him, looking thoughtfully. “You're ahead of schedule. Oh well, can't be helped.”

“You let her go, or I swear to God—”

“God?” the demon snorts a laugh. “He doesn't factor in this.”

“Where is she, you bastard!”

“Oh, look at the time!” the demon says in surprise, looking down at his bare wrist. “Sorry to cut this short, Sambo, but I've got places to be, people to possess, little girls to sacrifice. You know how busy it gets. But...we should do this against sometime! Toodles!”

“No! You fucker, come back! MER!”

Sam jerks up and he's back at home, sitting up on the cot.

“Sam?” Dean asks.

“He's got Mer. The demon that killed Mom has Mer.”

****

“God DAMN IT!” Dean slams the phone closed when Whit's cell goes straight to voicemail for the thirtieth time. The Impala's speedometer inches up another mile. A quick glance in the rearview mirror shows that Dad's right on their tail with Bobby and Missouri in his truck. Sam hangs on as Dean takes a hair-pin curve.

“Do you smell that?” Sam asks, voice low and tight. The scent of something burning filters through the car's vents. Around the next corner the movie theater is on fire, police cars, ambulances and fire trucks surrounding the area. Dean's out of the car so fast he forgets to put it in park.

“Mer! MARY!” Sam pulls the parking break and gets out after Dean.

“Sir!” Dean struggles against the policeman trying to restrain him. All he can see is the theater, charred and smoking “Sir you can't—” Sam catches a flash of dark skin near the ambulances.

“Whit!” Sam yells, and takes off towards the ambulances where he can see Whit, buckled into a stretcher,
EMS personnel surrounding her. She has an oxygen mask over her mouth and nose, and a bandage over her abdomen. Sam is vaguely aware of Dean right beside him, both of them concentrating on getting to her.

Sam wants to scream in frustration when they're intercepted by another uniform.

“Sirs. I need you to—”

“Whitney! I know her, we know her,” Sam says frantically. A paramedic pulls the bandage from Whit's side and there's an angry burn underneath it, blistered and oozing. Soot makes patches of her skin darker than it already is.

“Who? Which one?” the officer asks.

“Her, the woman in the blue shirt! She's our—my sister-in-law,” Sam says.

“Please, she was here with my daughter,” Dean interjects, seconds away from decking the guy and doing his own thing. The officer pales, and Sam's grateful Dean isn't looking at him right now.

“Alright, come with me.”

They approach the ambulance. A paramedic calls out readings and tries to get a coherent response out of Whit.

“Ma'am, can you tell me your name? Ma'am? Heart rate is still erratic.”

“Her name is Whitney Steton, she's a nurse at St. Christopher's,” Sam tells them while Dean climbs into the ambulance beside her.


“Sir, she shouldn't—” Whit's gaze fixates on Dean's and she tries to take the mask off. Dean reaches over and pulls it away. Sam can hear how hard it is for her to breathe.

“There were...too many,” she wheezes, eyes full of unshed tears. “Sorry. S-sorry.”

“I know,” Dean chokes out. He smoothes her hair back, like he would for Mer, and rubs some soot off Whit's cheek. “I know you are.”

“Y-yellow,” Whit gasps out. “His eyes...”

“That's enough,” the paramedic snaps, and puts the mask back over Whit's nose and mouth. “You're her husband?”

Dean gapes at the man, so Sam answers for him, “Yes. He is.”

“Alright, you can ride with us. We're taking her to West Plains.”

“But I need to—”
“Dean,” Sam says, injecting as much authority into his voice as he can. Dean freezes and stares up at him, looking lost. Sam wants to hold him, kiss him, rip the fucking demon to shreds all at once. He settles for grabbing Dean's hand. “Go with Whit. She needs you.”

“Mer—”

“I will take care of it,” Sam promises. Dean nods, once, and squeezes Sam's hand. Sam swallows and makes himself let go. The ambulance speeds away, and when Sam turns around, Bobby, Missouri, and Dad are watching him. Without Dean, all Sam can think is I should have done better.

“I...” Sam has no idea what he should do, only that he made Dean a promise.

“Bobby and I are going to stay here,” John announces. “We’ll get in and look around as soon as the emergency crews take off. Sam, you and Missouri go to the hospital and get what you can out of Whit.” Sam loves his father with all his heart for being in charge, staying strong. Sam steps forward and John opens his arms, accepts Sam's hug without question. Sam sucks in a shuddering breath, gasping for air like he hasn't managed to breathe since he realized Mer was gone.

“Thank you,” Sam breathes. John nods and then pushes Sam gently away.

“Go. Be there for Dean. We'll call you if we learn anything.”

****

Sam finds Dean sitting in the waiting room, looking small in the uncomfortable chairs.

“Dean.” Dean jerks up and his eyes are red rimmed. “How is she?”

“Uh.” Dean scrubs at his eyes. “She's got...a bad burn on her side. Cuts. Some smoke inhalation. A bruised jaw.” Dean looks at him, eyes lost. “The bastard punched her. She tried to stop him and he—”

“Dean,” Sam says softly, rubbing soothing circles along Dean's back.

“I should've been there!” Dean yells. He gets up and starts pacing. “I should have been there, I was supposed to protect her, it's my fault—”

“Dean.”

“I should've—” Sam pushed off the chair and grabbed the back of Dean's head, forcing him to look into Sam's eyes.

“Blame me.”

“What?” Dean asks, his self-reckoning fading into confusion.

“I should have known what that bastard had planned. I was the distraction that got Mer out of the house. I bought him all the time he needed. It's my fault, blame me.” Even though Sam's making a point and logic said he couldn't have known, he meant every word.
“That's stupid, Sam,” Dean growls.

“Yeah, it is, Dean,” Sam agrees. Dean swallows and looks down. Sam's hand turns into a caress.

“You can...you feel her, right?” Dean asks. Sam closes his eyes and concentrates. The place where Mer's taken up residence is muted and empty, but not broken and gone. There's something shielding her from him, from them both, but even a spell can't sever their connection. He knows she's alive, even if he can't tell anything else.

“Yeah,” Sam says hoarsely. “I can feel her.”

“Mr. Winchester?” The break apart and turn towards the doctor, who glances between the two of them skeptically.

“Yeah. That's me. I'm...Mr. Winchester,” Dean says uncomfortably.

“You're here with Whitney Steton?”

“Yes. How is she?”

“She's doing well. Vitals are stable. We're most concerned about the burn on her side. It's deep and seeping, so we're giving her a lot of fluid through the IV and keeping the room as sterile as possible to prevent infection. She was intubated to take some of the pressure off of her lungs. I'm optimistic that we'll be able to take out the tube tomorrow.”

“So she's okay?” Sam asks.

“She'll have scarring over part of her abdomen, and some muscle weakness as a result. She'll need to go through physical therapy, but again, I'm optimistic.”

“Thank you,” Dean says, voice thick with emotion. “Can we see her?”

“In a few minutes, and it's a clean room, so you'll have to change first. We don't want her burn getting infected. I'll come get you when it's time.”

“Thanks,” Sam says, but his attention is already back on Dean. “Hey, she's going to be fine.” Sam hooks an arm over Dean's shoulder and pulls him close, ignoring Dean's weak protests. Dean gives in for a moment, then half-heartedly starts pushing at Sam.

“Stop it,” Sam says sharply. “You can just say I need it.” A small smile ghosts over Dean's lips, and he gives up. He's in a hospital and Sam's a giant girl so everything... Dean fights back the wave of emotion because Mer is gone. His little girl has been kidnapped by the same fucker that killed his mom and he has no idea how to find her. Or if she's okay, or what the demon plans to do with her.

“Ow!” Dean's hand flies to his head, but not fast enough to ward off another blow. “Ow! Missouri!”

“Oh, are we done with our pity party now?” Missouri asks sarcastically.
“What the hell, Missouri?” Dean demands angrily. Christ, he's like a pregnant chick with his mood swings, but he's too pissed to care.

“I could ask you the same thing!” Missouri returns, hands on her hip. “Now cut that out. You don't have time to feel sorry for yourself. And it's not going to make Whit better or get Mer back. So pull yourself together. You're going to need to use your head to get that little girl back, and you don't have enough brains to spare any feeling sorry for yourself.”

Dean glares at Missouri, anger bubbling in him. Then, as abruptly as it came, it leaves him. Dean slams into Sam, exhausted and drained, and nods. Missouri presses her lips together, tears gathering in her eyes, and pats Dean on the cheek.

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Whit's tube gets removed the next morning. The doctor reports that she's breathing on her own and expected to recover well. She requests to see Dean alone. When he comes out of his room, his eyes are red and haunted. Everyone looks the other way when he drags Sam into the men's bathroom and locks them inside for twenty minutes. When they come back out, they both look wrecked, but there's a pervading sense of calm to them.

“Whit says to kill the bastard as painfully as possible,” Dean reports, the barest hint of a tremor in his voice.

“Good,” John says darkly. “Because we are. And I know someone who can help us.”
Chapter 16

By mutual agreement, Missouri heads back to her house to gather supplies and keep an ear out for anything that might be helpful. She's not a fighter, she'll just get in their way, but she can make preparations. They head due west, towards the setting sun, a caravan of three cars and four very determined men.

Sam and Dean don't talk as they follow John's truck over the miles, Bobby right behind them. After about fifty miles, Dean stretches across the seat, his hand resting lightly against Sam's headrest. Another 50 miles and it casually slips down to rest on Sam's neck.

Sam glances at Dean, who carefully ignores him. Rolling his eyes, Sam scoots closer and settles his hand on Dean's knee, gratified at the way Dean relaxes minutely in response.

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“What the—” Sam jerks awake when Dean cuts the wheel hard to one side. He swears and throws the car into park. “What the hell, Bobby?” Sam notices that Bobby's now in front of them, his car cutting off John's truck a little further up the highway. The two men are at the side of the road in a standoff.

Sam and Dean scramble out of the car and run towards the two other men, who look like they're about to get into a fight.

“You idjit!”

“You have any better ideas?”

“Yeah! Not getting shot on account of you!”

“Ellen is—”

“Ellen's got the word out she'll skin you alive 'afore she'll look at ye, much less help you!”

“What the hell is going on here?” Dean yells over Dad and Bobby. They stop talking and face off, glaring at one another. “Well?”

“Your father's gone and had a damn fool idea and he's committed to it,” Bobby grumbles.

“And Bobby doesn't have an alternate suggestion,” John growls.

“Um,” Sam says eloquently. It's like watching your parents fight and having no idea who to side with.

“Get back in the car,” John orders. With that they're back on familiar ground.

“Dad—” Dean starts, but John cuts him off.

“Sam, Dean. We're going to the Roadhouse,” John declares. Dean turns and starts back to the car almost before John's finished issuing his command. Sam's first instinct is to rebel, but there's no reason to and every second they waste is one more second Mer doesn't have.
While he's striding away, he hears Bobby say, “I'm not digging buckshot outta yer ass again, Winchester?” Sam stumbles, because that's surely a story he wants to hear, even if the image it conveys is less that palatable.

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They roll up to a rundown, deserted bar in the middle of nowhere, “Roadhouse Saloon” painted on a faded sign. The place looks like it could be a set on a slasher movie.

“We're not here on a job, are we?” Sam whispers to Dean. Dean elbows him in the stomach, but the ghost of a smile lightens his drawn features momentarily. They follow Dad and Bobby into the bar. It's dark, all the lights are off. There's something ominous in the air.

“Spread out,” John commands softly. He pulls out and checks his handgun, the slide clicking metallically in the silence. The rest of them do the same. They pair off, Sam and Dean, Bobby and John.

The main room is empty. Dean finds a set of steps that lead downstairs. Sam flags Dad and Bobby, who nod in acknowledgement. When Sam turns around, Dean's already disappeared down the steps.

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Dean slowly eases down the steps, wishing he'd thought to bring a flashlight. The basement is empty and kind of creepy...but apparently not as empty as he thought, judging by the hardness pressing into the middle of his back.

“Oh God, let that be a rifle,” Dean mutters.

“No. I'm just real happy to see you,” a female voice says. Dean starts to turn around but the gun stabs into his back. “Don't move!”

“Not moving, copy that,” Dean says amicably. He subtly tests the press of the gun to his back, calculates how she's holding the it, what it would take to disarm her. “But you should know something, miss. When you put a rifle on someone, you don't want to put it right against their back. Because it makes it real easy to do—” Dean swings his arm behind him and spins away, wrenching the gun out of the girl's hands, flipping it around and cocking it “—this.” He aims at her, but she steps into his space and punches him square in the face. To add insult to injury, she takes the rifle back from him too.

“Fuck. Was not expecting that.” The girl, who's blonde and pretty hot, smirks at him. “Sam! I could use some help in here! Sam!”

“You can let him go, Jo,” another female voice says from above, this one ringing with the authority of age. “He's about as harmless as a puppy.”

“Hey!” Dean protests.

“Yeah, I can tell,” the girl—Jo, apparently, and what kind of name is that for a girl?—says. She expertly breaks the gun and flicks the safety on. She spins around and heads up the steps. Dean follows her, disgruntled. And his nose is bleeding. And his kid is fucking missing.
When he gets upstairs, Sam and Bobby are sitting on the patron side of the bar. A woman behind the bar is pouring shots of whisky into four glasses. There's no sign of Dad anywhere. Dean forces himself to walk over to Sam and not demand to know what they're doing here, how this is going to help them find Mer. He takes a deep breath and lets it out. Sam yanks him down on a stool, watches Dean with concerned eyes and it doesn't help Dean's mental state. He spins around so his back's to the bar and scans the rundown interior. It's dark, filled with shadows; Dean can see how a hunter would feel at home here.

“Where's...” Dean pauses as he catches movement from the corner of his eye. His dad rises up from behind the bar, a cloth full of ice pressed to his face. He pulls it away to reveal a swollen eye and a deep cut on the bridge of his nose. Dean's own injury twinges in sympathy.

“I see you met Jo,” Dad grunts dryly, and hands Dean a double whisky.

“John,” Jo greets, a hint of teenage insolence in her voice, like she's not quite used to calling adults by their given names.

“Josephine,” John greets back, ignoring her dig.

“That's not—” Jo breaks off and scowls at him.

“Stop baiting my daughter, Winchester,” the older woman behind the bar growls. She holds herself with poise, and Dean would definitely think twice before crossing her. She's dangerous. “And you give me one good reason why I shouldn't shoot you where you stand.”

“I can think of two,” Jo mutters, glancing between Sam and Dean. Sam splutters on his liquor and Dean rolls his eyes. Smooth, Sammy. He makes a show of slapping Sam on the back with excessive force, just as he's about to take another sip of his drink. Which naturally makes him spill half of it down his shirt.

“We need your help, Ellen,” John says, ignoring his sons' antics.

“John Winchester, actually asking for help? I never thought I'd see the day,” Ellen says, though it's not as mean as it could be. She starts popping the caps off some beer bottles for round two; she's not dealing with drop-drunk hunters tonight.

“That bastard kidnapped my granddaughter,” John confesses, his voice tight with anger. Dean glares down at the bar and tries to keep his emotions in their cage. Ellen gasps softly. “So yeah, I'm asking for your help.”

“What do you need?” Ellen asks somberly, all business now. Dean can feel Jo's eyes on him, watching him, and he resists the urge to get the hell out. Dad says these people can help, they can help.

“Well. I was hoping Ash was around.”

“No, we're hoping Ash is awake,” Bobby corrects.

“Good luck with that,” Ellen mutters. “Jo? Go get Ash.”

“Sure,” Jo says amicably. “ASH! GET DOWN HERE!” They all wince and cover their ears.
“Joanna Harvelle!” Ellen yells and chucks a dishrag at her head. Dean remembers Mer doing the same thing, yelling up the steps for Whit and Sam making her walk all the way to Whit's room and knock like a polite human being. Fuck, he feels guilty about leaving Whit all alone in the hospital. He should never have sent them out alone to begin with. He knows better. He fucking knows better.

“What?” Jo asks innocently. They hear what sounds like a herd of elephants thundering down the stairs. “I got Ash.”

A young man who looks like a Lynyrd Skynyrd roadie tumbles down the steps. He's got the longest mullet Dean's ever seen and his clothes are torn and ragged.

“S'it closin' time?” the man mumbles. He sees the open beers sweating on the counter and his eyes light up. He makes a beeline for the alcohol, but Ellen raps his knuckles before he can snatch one.

“After you talk to John,” she reprimands. Ash grunts, right before John grabs his elbow and steers him to the other side of the room, a thick manila folder tucked under his arm.

“We came for that? He's got a mullet!” Dean hisses at Sam. Bobby snorts a laugh and then ignores them.

“He's a genius,” Jo says. She's behind the bar now, rifling through the bottles. She grabs one and leans over to pour them each another shot, because if any situation called for more liquor, this is it.

Dean appreciates the view her tank top affords for a moment, before he glances away because he can feel Sam's irritated disapproval.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Dean mutters, taking the opportunity to look away from Jo and at the other side of the room where Ash and Dad are bent over a folder, talking in low tones.

“Give him a chance,” Jo argues and takes her shot right out of the bottle. “He may surprise you.” Dean's mildly impressed. He and Sam don't bother to toast before they down theirs; there's nothing to cheer about. Jo's eyes wander up the length of Sam's chest and Dean resists the urge to tell her to back the fuck off, he's taken. That's not something they need to deal with now of all times. Her attention switches to Dean, open and assessing. It's enough to make Sam give Dean the Evil Eye, as if it's Dean's fault she's hitting on him.

“Come on. This crap ain't real! There ain't nobody can track a demon like this!” Ash's voice carries to them. John's response is nothing more than a deep background rumble.

“Yeah. I'm real surprised,” Dean snarks. He downs the rest of his whisky, enjoying the way it burns. It doesn't do anything to diminish the anguish of knowing Mer's gone. He clenches his jaw against the onslaught of rage and fear. Fuck, he's barely hanging on here, and Dad's talking to some mullet-head freak about statistics, correlations, and other words that hold no meaning for Dean. He feels Sam's fingers lightly brush the small of his back, and it grounds him. Instead of throwing his glass across the room, he sets it down on the bar.

Jo continues to watch them, occasionally taking a swig out of her bottle.

“So. You're the infamous Winchester brothers,” Jo says, and someone should really teach her the art of subtlety.
“Oh, hell,” Bobby grumbles. “I'm going to play with the grownups.” He gets up and ambles towards John and Ash, picking up Ellen along the way. Sam hides his smile at Bobby's antics.

“You know, I've heard of you two,” Jo continues, pouring them all another round.

“Oh yeah?” Sam asks, unimpressed. Dean wonders if he's going to get in a cat fight with Jo. That...could be amusing, under different circumstances. Right now it's just an unwelcome annoyance.

“I thought you were gonna toss me some cheap pick-up line. Most hunters come through that door and think they can get in my pants with some...pizza, a six pack, and side one of Zeppelin IV.” Dean focuses on finishing his beer.

“Dean forgoes the pizza. And the six pack,” Sam says snippily. “And he doesn't call the next morning, either.” Jo's mouth presses together in annoyance and she glares at Sam. Dean suddenly remembers why he loves Sam so freakin' much it hurts sometimes.

“But you can't go wrong with Zeppelin,” Dean agrees, but it sounds hollow.

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Fifty-one hours. Fifty-one hours for Mullet Head to do some voodoo on a computer and...hopefully they'll have a location. Something to go on, something they can act upon. But until then, all they can do is sit on their asses and wait.

“Dean,” Sam groans from the bed. He pulls the pillow off his face and squints at the harsh lights. It's...almost three in the morning, and Dean's cleaning the guns for the second time. “Dean!” Dean pauses in his mania and glances at Sam, eyebrow cocked.

“Come to bed?” Sam asks, wincing even as he says it. Oh God, he really does sound like a '50s housewife. Dean turns back to his guns and Sam huffs into his pillow. This situation is completely fucked. Mer's absence is a gaping, raw wound in Sam's psyche; he can't even imagine what it feels like to Dean, who has felt her constantly for five years. Never not been able to find her, pinpoint her location and how she's feeling.

Sam starts when the bed behind him dips and Dean presses himself close.

“Dean—”

“Don't.” Sam squeezes his eyes shut at how wrecked Dean sounds. Something hot and wet soaks into his t-shirt. Dean hangs onto Sam like a lifeline, his body shaking silently. Sam takes it for as long as he can, gives Dean what he wants until Sam has to turn around and give him what he needs. Sam wraps Dean up tight, arms and legs twined together until neither of them can tell where one starts and the other begins.

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They wake up to a loud pounding on the door. Dean pushes himself off the bed and stalks into the bathroom without a word. Sam sighs, runs his fingers through his hair, and winces at the tangles.
“Sam! Dean!” John yells through the door, pounding getting louder. Sam blearily opens the door and doesn’t realize until too late that only one of the beds has been slept in. It’s a quick jump from there to *I don’t care*, because really, they all have bigger things to worry about today.

“Morning,” Sam greets and slumps in a chair.

“Missouri called.” From the flat tone, not with any good news.

“What’d she say?” They both turn to look at Dean. He’s got bruises under his eyes and stubble on his face. Sam thinks he looks dangerous in the psychotic kind of way.

Dad must think the same because he studies Dean for a moment then says, “We’re going to get Mer back. Ash says he’s closing in.”

“What. Did. She. Say.” When John doesn’t speak up, they both know it’s going to be bad. Very bad.

“He's going to use her—” John chokes off, disguising it under the pretext of clearing his throat. This bastard has already taken so much from him, from his children. And now he wants to use Mer to...to... “He's trying to raise the Devil Himself. And he wants to use Mer to do it. Missouri's not sure of the specifics.” What he means is he's not sure if Mer has to die for it or become it. Dean picks up the nearest chair and throws it against the far wall where it cracks and splinters. There's a louder crack over it, like rocks splitting apart.

“Sam. Sam! SAM!” Sam starts out of his haze of anger. Dean's crouched in front of him, looking worried.

“What?”

“You back with me?” Dean asks, touching Sam's face lightly. Sam frowns, not understanding until his eyes drift past Dean and he gapes. There's a large crack in the floor, a couple inches wide. It goes all the way up the wall and into the ceiling.

“I did that,” Sam says, shocked. Dean stares at the crack, and he has to know that Sam's been practicing. Sam holds his breath, waiting for Dean's reaction.

“Save it for the demon,” Dean says fiercely, and Sam nods numbly.

They start when John's cell phone rings shrilly, cutting through the silence.

“Yeah?” he answers. Sam and Dean watch their father as his expression tightens into a grimace. “We'll be right there.” He hangs up and looks at them, ignoring—for the moment—the crack in the wall. “Ash has a location.”
“This is, like, revolutionary, man,” Ash breathes, staring at the map on his computer. “This could change hunting, make it—”

“Where is she?” Dean interrupts, his voice a dark growl. Ash frowns and hits a button. The map on the screen pulls out.

“Ladysmith?” Sam says dubiously.

Ash’s program tracks the demon to the geographic center of Ladysmith, Wisconsin. And not just the Yellow Eyed son of a bitch. A web crawl of news sites had shown there was more demonic activity going on in the city than just YED's signatures.

As they roll into the outskirts of the city, it looks like even the lay people are making themselves scarce. Houses are shut tight at nightfall and there are barely any cars on the roads.

They set up base a mile from the epicenter in a newly abandoned motel. They get a suite, Bobby and John in one room, Sam and Dean in the other. Missouri gives them three days at the far end to get Mer out before all Hell breaks loose. In a scarily literal way.

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“That’s it?” John asks, nodding towards the building in front of them. Dean twitches, everything in him screaming at him because he can feel the darkness coming out of the building. It hurts to know Mer’s there and just...leave. They’re only here to case the place, to gather as much information as possible before they stage their rescue.

They all quiet as three people approach the building. Bobby pulls his high-tech binoculars out of a bag.

“Demons,” Bobby says grimly, handing them to John. The binoculars pass down the line, each of them making their own notes of the demons: the way they move, the way they react to one another.

“Sunnuvabitch!” Sam thumb the focus, just to make sure.

“What?” Dean asks, his tension a stabbing pain in the front of Sam's head. “What is it?”

“It's him.” For a second it seems like the YED is looking straight at them, like he knows they're there. Then the goggles are ripped out of his hand, and Sam's anger at the entire situation boils over. He is not a kid and his father does not have the right to treat him like one. Sam feels something dangerous rising in his chest.

Dean touches him lightly on the arm and it all fades into the background. Icy calm floods through him, crystalline and clear. A cold, deliberate kind of rage, and Sam turns to look at Dean because that's his rage, deep down. Oh, his anger still burns, but the fire has faded and left behind something much scarier and far, far more deadly. Sam grins, sharp and feral. Dean's eyes glitter like ice and they turn their attention back to the building.

“I counted six,” John reports, but it doesn't mean anything. There are probably more than that, and when
going against Demons, numbers don't mean much. They need a plan and they need one now. Not being able to see the inside of the building is going to put them at a disadvantage.

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“I don't trust these blueprints,” John mutters for the fifth time. According to city records tacked up on the wall of their suite, the inside of the building should be one vast, empty space. They'd gotten one fleeting glimpse of the inside through the binoculars, and it hadn't felt empty at all.

“There's at least one other room in there,” Bobby agrees. “Question is, who built it? And why.”

Dean gets up and slams out of the room, Sam right on his footsteps. Sam makes sure to lock the suite door behind him.

Sam sits on the edge of 'his' bed, the one they're only pretending to use. He tracks Dean as he paces the room, there and back, there and back, thirteen steps wall-to-wall. Sam concentrates on blocking out Dean's volatile emotions without blocking off himself; it's not easy maintaining a one-way connection like that, and if Sam allowed his anger to mix with Dean's the resulting mix could be catastrophic.

“They fucking built that place to kill her,” Dean finally growls. On his next lap, Sam steps right into his path. Dean runs into him, body stiff with tension. Sam doesn't try to touch Dean any other way, just stands there like a wall until Dean stops pushing.

“It doesn't matter what they plan to do,” Sam tells him with all the conviction he possesses, “because we are going to save her.”

“She shouldn't need saving,” Dean rasps. He's trying too hard to keep it together, like he forgot they're connected, that Sam can sense the depth of his pain and how much Dean still blames himself.

“True,” Sam agrees, his heart breaking for Dean. With Dean. “But that's not on us.” Dean stares resolutely over Sam's shoulder, eyes fixed somewhere on the far wall. They're pressed together, chest to chest, leg to leg. Neither one of them believe Sam's words.

Sam half expects it when Dean kisses him like he's starting a fight, fast and brutal. His teeth scrape along Sam's lips and he doesn't wait for Sam to get with the program, just takes what he wants.

Sam grunts and grabs the front of Dean's shirt, ignoring the seams that rip. The flat of Dean's hand drives into his solar plexus, making Sam huff and double over, tears stinging his eyes. Dean spins him around and rubs against Sam's ass, hands pinning Sam's shoulders to the bed. Nothing about this is for Sam's pleasure; Dean's not concerned with that. Sam grunts and thrusts his hips against the bed, but it's not enough. If Sam wants to get off, he's going to have to take it.

Sam holds still, picks up on Dean's rhythm and at the upthrust snaps his head back, catching Dean unaware. Dean curses, distracted long enough for Sam to turn around and face Dean. There’s a thin trail of blood from a cut on Dean’s lip, right where Sam’s head must have caught him. Sam lunges forward and licks it off, tastes the dull metallic tang of the cut.

They push aside enough clothes to get themselves off. Sam's cock nestles in the groove of Dean's hip. He sometimes brushes against Dean's erection and it sends a trill of pleasure through him. He gasps and
pushes harder into Dean's skin. He can feel his release, hovering on the horizon, just where he can't reach it.

“Fuck, Sammy!” Dean growls. His teeth close possessively around Sam's ear. Sam reaches between them and squeezes their erections together. He brushes his thumb on the underside of Dean's cockhead. He squeezes until it hurts. Dean gasps and thrusts into his hand, panting and making mewling, animal noises as Sam handles him.

Sam stiffens and comes, his back arching back. His mouth falls open and his eyes squeeze shut. Dean frantically pistons upwards, seeking his own release. He finds it moments later, warm wetness splashing against Sam's stomach, both of them panting in the aftermath.

There's no afterglow here, no lingering feelings of closeness and satisfaction. Just a sudden rush of emptiness and loss. And even though they can feel one another's emotions, share every nuance of their being, they both feel impossibly alone.

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This time, Sam joins Dean in the gun cleaning. Neither one of them is going to be able to sleep tonight, mutual orgasms notwithstanding.

There's a perfunctory knock on the door before John comes in. He glances between them, and this is one of those times Sam's sure Dad knows what they're doing.

“We've got a plan, of sorts.” He watches them cleaning their guns, hands moving with competence. “How strong are you, Sam?” Dean's falters so slightly Sam would have missed it had he not be so completely in tune with Dean.

“What do you mean?” he asks, keeping his voice as neutral as possible.

“We don't have times for games, Sammy—”

“It's SAM,” Sam interrupts, slamming his gun on the table with unnecessary force. They glare at each other and he's eighteen and leaving for college all over again. Filled with righteous fury and glittering rage. The silence stretches thick between them. Sam feels like brittle glass, one touch and he'll shatter into a thousand shards, all of them flying out with deadly force.

The metallic snick-click of an automatic slide, loaded and primed, sounds in the silent room. It's enough to remind the two combatants that this isn't a fight they need to be having right now.

“What's the plan,” Dean asks, voice flat. He doesn't look at either of them, just breaks down his favorite Glock and starts cleaning it all over again.

“That depends on Sam,” John says, “and what he's capable of.”

“I'm capable of a lot of things,” Sam says through clenched teeth.

“We're going in blind. Bobby's got some new shell packing that should burn Demons like holy water. The weaker ones, might make the host's body unbearable to be in. We can tape a barrier spell, play it on repeat
through a boom box.”

“Sounds like a shitty plan,” Dean says neutrally.

“We only have to get one person in to interrupt the spell.” John looks right at his youngest son, assessing. “Are you strong enough?” Sam glowers at him, lips pursed together. He looks so much like his mother it hurts.

“Does it matter what I say?” Sam says bitterly, unable to just let shit go. “Because I'm pretty sure you've already made up your mind.”

“If you want me to stop treating you like a child, you need to stop acting like one,” John says, trying to keep his temper in check. The heavy thump of Dean's gun on the table sounds like a censure.

John winces as Sam stomps off into the bathroom, door slamming shut and rattling the walls. He spins the other way, going outside and into the night, away from the stifling atmosphere. He's angry. Angry at Sam, at himself, at the YED, at a lot of things.

With a weary sigh, John sits down on the ground, wishing he had a bottle of whisky and a manual on how to talk to his son.

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Dean throws the gun in his hands across the room, watching it clatter to the floor with dispassionate eyes. FUCK. His kid is missing and Sam and Dad can't put their issues behind them for five minutes to get her the fuck back. He's so fucking tired of being the buffer between them. Encouraging Sam to just fall in line; telling Dad to give Sam his space. Snarling at both of them because they're both so goddamn stubborn.

But that's his job, his role. That's how he fits in here. What makes him necessary. He glances between the bathroom and the door, torn between his father and his—his Sam. With a glance at the silent bathroom, Dean slips outside.

His father is sitting on the curb beside the Impala, staring into the distance. He looks old and tired in this light. A chill creeps up Dean's spine. Something discourteous and unsettling takes up residence in his chest.

Dean sits beside his father and stares out into the night. When he feels like he can handle it, he opens himself to his father's emotions. It sets Dean's teeth on edge, the amount of guilt and anger. The kind of anger that's been with a person for years, that's settled into their very being, old and fetid. But above all that, his father is troubled about a good many things—things that don't have anything to do with Mer directly. John keeping secrets is nothing new, but something about these raise goosebumps on Dean's skin.

“I always knew you'd make a good father.” It's so unexpected Dean jerks, his foot sliding along the pavement before he finds traction. “Even when I could never get through to you after...well, Sam always could. One smile and you'd be on top of the world for a week. He still can.”

“Dad, I...” Dean pauses, unsure of what he wants to say. “You're really freakin' me out.” It's the truth, on many levels.
“Yeah,” John says with a half-smile. “You...you're a good son, Dean. You and Sam both—more than I deserved. And—” John swallows and forces himself to continue; he'll only get one chance at this. “Do what makes you happy.” The last sentence comes out in a crush of words, each one chasing the other. He tries not to put too much knowing behind them.

“Is there something you aren't telling us?” Dean asks seriously. John stares out at the parking lot unseeing. There's a lot he's not telling them. Mostly because there's nothing he can do to stop it and they deserve what happiness they can find. “Dad?”

“You should try to get some sleep.” John claps a hand on Dean's shoulder and squeezes, but it's not reassuring. He turns to leave but hesitates. Dean doesn't move a muscle from where he's hunched uncomfortably on cracked pavement. “Take care of each other.”

Dean spins around, but John's already disappeared into his room.

“Fuck,” Dean swears softly.

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“You talk to those boys?” Bobby asks, arms crossed around his chest. He's staring at the TV, but John can feel the weight of his attention. “I mean really talk to them? They deserve to know.”

John grunts and pulls out his cell. Bobby gives up the pretense of staring at the TV, fixing his gaze squarely on John who turns away from him. The call connects. “Shadow. I'm calling in that favor.”

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Dean scrubs his face and climbs to his feet. He feels completely drained. The only thing keeping him awake is the knot of anticipatory tension in his chest. Tomorrow. Tomorrow tomorrow tomorrow. He'll piece his family back together tomorrow.

When he gets back in the room, Sam is sprawled on their bed, one arm flung across his eyes. He doesn't flinch or move when Dean closes the door. Dean rolls his eyes and flops down, making Sam his bed.

Dean enjoys being sprawled on top of Sam. It's nice, feeling Sam beneath him, solid and there. Close. The way Sam runs his hands up and down Dean's back is a nice bonus. Dean tucks his face right in the curve where Sam's neck meets his body. Neither one of them is relaxed, but the touch helps.

Dean closes his eyes and concentrates on breathing, in and out, in and out. They're going in tomorrow at noon, when the sun is high in the sky and whatever power demons get from the cover of darkness is gone. And they're going to win, and Mer's going to be back with them, where she belongs. Safe and unharmed. In his head, she sleeps through the whole thing and comes out as innocent as she went in.

His fingers dig into Sam's sides with the thought. He starts tensing, breath coming faster, and Sam tries to calm him down through touch. He cups the back of Dean's head, fingers spreading over his skull, gently and knowing.

“We're going to get her back. She's going to be okay,” Sam whispers fiercely. It's been his litany since she...
disappeared, since the Demon used him to get to Mer. If he says it enough, it will be true.

“I know,” Dean says to Sam's neck, pushing in closer, trying to fill his senses with Sam.

“It's going to—” Sam cuts off, body going stiff.

“Sam?” Dean gasps as Sam's fingers dig into his shoulder and hold his head down. Sam's nails slice into the flesh of his shoulder and Dean can smell blood on the air. “Sam!”

“NO!” Sam screams. Dean feels the air leave him as Sam flips them off the bed and the full force of his weight comes down on Dean. He struggles to breathe when Sam grabs his shoulders and slams him against the ground. “You can't have her!”

“Sam! SAMMY!” Sam's eyes are glassy and unseeing, like when he's having a vision. But he's never had one this powerful. Sam starts struggling, as if fighting off enemies. He wraps his hands around Dean's throat and squeezes. Dean gasps and strikes ineffectively at Sam's wrist, but he's rapidly losing oxygen. He tries to tuck in a knee, find some way to unseat or get through to Sam, but nothing works. He lands a few blows on Sam's rib cage before his vision starts to spot.

“Dean!” Dean's vision swims as air floods his lungs, a ragged sound escaping from him. Bobby helps him sit up; John has Sam pinned against the bed, trying to avoid sharp elbows and fists. Sam's screaming denials, eyes wild. He yells 'Mer' in a desperate, angry voice and Dean's blood runs cold.

“You okay?” Bobby asks, and Dean nods, distracted by whatever horror Sam must be seeing. Bobby grunts, gets up, and slaps Sam hard across the face. Shockingly, it's enough to snap him out of whatever vision he was having. Sam frowns, looking from Bobby to Dad and then, finally, to Dean, sprawled on the floor.

“You back with us?” Bobby asks Sam, who stares numbly up at him.

Dean pushes himself to his feet and gets a look at Sam. His eyes are wide and there's color in his cheeks; he's panting with exertion. Sam blinks, then pales.

“We have to go,” Sam gasps. He takes in the bruises forming around Dean's throat and winces, but doesn't stop. He twists out of his father's grip and goes over to the weapons, stumbling slightly.

“Son,” Bobby says, “should you—”

“No, we have to go. NOW.” For a moment, Dean's frozen by the sheer fear and desperation in Sam's voice. The possibilities, the images—

“FUCK.” Dean vaults over to the table and starts arming himself.

“They're starting it,” Sam says, words tripping over each other as he struggles to get them out. He grabs a sharpie and starts sketching a map right on the wall. “We have to go, get her out. There's a center room, it's guarded, only one door to get in.”

“I've got something for that,” Bobby says gruffly, studying Sam's map.
“The building goes right over a lay line. There are five upper-level demons in there, one for each point of a pentagram, including Yellow Eyes. Mer'll be in the center. She's...she's the focus.” Sam turns to Dean, eyes troubled. “You need—they've written things on her. I think they're doing a vessel spell. I don't think they're going to try and kill her. But we need to get to them before they close the circle.”

“Oh?” The bleak look in Sam's eyes tells Dean everything he needed to know. “Right. No closing the circle.”

****

Most hunters go their entire careers without ever encountering a demon. They're four people going against one of the nastiest this world has ever heard of. It's a suicide mission, and they all know that, but none of them entertain the thought of not going.

The building looks innocuous and silent from the outside, but Dean swears he can feel an aura of malevolence crawling over his skin. In his head, the silent place where Mer resides twinges. It strengthens Dean's resolve. Judging by the way Sam's lips press close together and his short, jerky movements, Sam feels the same way.

Bobby hands them all special shotgun shells, filled with some sort of salt and herb mixture that's supposed to make demons uncomfortable staying in their hosts. They all have heavy hex bags hanging around their necks, from their belts, tucked into their pockets.

“We clear on the plan?” John asks.

“We callin' that a plan now?” Bobby grunts grimly, testing the pump action of his shotgun. Their 'plan,' sketchy though it is, is to get at least one of them to the center room before the circle closes. By one of them, they mean Sam, whose freaky mind powers give him the best chance to save Mer.

They're armed with Bobby's new, untested shotgun ammo, a barrier spell on repeat via portable speakers, chalk, and Sam's brain. That Dean doesn't make a quip about that last point is proof of how deadly serious he is.

“Our objective is to get in that room. We'll figure the rest out as we go,” John says, priming his gun. Dean's done talking. He checks his weapons: two sawed-off shotguns across his back, one hanging off his right arm, the fourth one ready in his hands. He strides boldly towards the building, Sam hot on his heels. With every step his awareness of Mer grows. Not like it was; she's still blocked in some way. But he knows where she is, just like he knows Sam is right beside him.

They burst through the door in a defensive formation, Sam low to the right, Dean low to the left, John and Bobby covering them. It's dark and sinisterly silent. Across the empty space they can see the curve of a wall. The space they're currently in is just too wide to be a hall. They can tell the second room within the building is curved, but they can't see the rest of the building.

“Left,” Dean orders, and none of them question him. Sam takes point, trying to see in the murky darkness. They move as silently as possible, trying to get to the door before alerting anyone.

“Down!” Bobby yells in the darkness, and the roar of his gun is almost deafening. His spray hits the demon square on the chest. The creature looks down in shock, then lets out an unearthly scream. Black
smoke pours out of the host's mouth.

“Well. Guess that works,” Bobby says smugly. From there, it's a full out firefight. The shotgun spray makes the demons scream and writhe on the ground, steam coming from their skin where the salt concoction digs in. Some of the demons vacate their hosts, expelling a dark black cloud into the air. Others lay on the ground, gasping, only to stand up again and rejoin the fight.

They're moving, incrementally, towards the door. Sam's almost done with his second gun, Dean's already on his third, when a demon breaks through the line. It launches itself at Dean, a wicked-looking knife in hand.

Sam's first reaction isn't to shoot. Instead, he throws his hand up and thinks stop with everything in him. The world slows around him; he can see the way the demon's borrowed muscles work, the sweat dripping down Dean's neck, the widening of his irises as he prepares for the fight. The demon freezes in mid air, then goes sailing back into its brethren. The world speeds up again.

Sam sags for a step, stumbling at the drain but not exhausted. When Dean drops his third gun and reaches for his last, Sam presses his gun into Dean's hands.

“Sammy, what?” Sam raises his hand and stops another demon, then flings it backwards. He does it again, and again, until his shirt is soaked with sweat and his hands are shaking. He keeps all the demons back, erecting a closed circle around them as they slowly make their way to the door. Sam can see it now, glistening dully in the low light.

He stops a knife from burying itself in his father's heart. John keeps on fighting.

They're close to the door when Sam starts to falter. His vision is blurry and he can barely make out the enemy. Sweat stings his eyes, but he marches doggedly on. Dean needs him to do this.

Sam doesn't realize he's fallen to his knees until Dean's hand closes around his neck and hauls him to his feet.

“Come on, Sammy!” Dean yells, eyes alight with fire. Sam loops his arm around Dean's shoulders. He looks up and sees a demon coming straight at them, a wicked knife in each hand.

Something in Sam snaps. Power floods through him, bringing with it a cold kind of stillness. He sees a demon rushing them, eyes black and venomous. Sam blinks. He can see the demon inhabiting the body, a dark ichor filling in the man's veins like stuffing. It's so tenuous, the connection the demon has with its stolen host. It's unnatural and damned, the very Earth protests its presence here.

Sam raises his hand and...he's not sure what he does. It's a combination of willing the demon gone and taking away its permission to exist in this world. He can see the strands that bind it to the world, and he pulls. He unravels it thread by thread. The demon screams as it dies, little bursts of energy lighting its stolen body's skull from the inside out.

Sam staggers to one side when it's over, the energy that took leaving him dizzy.

“Sam, we don't have time for this! Sammy!” A blast from Dean's shotgun, right by his ear, partially deafens him. He pulls himself upright and stands on his own two feet. And the demons keep on coming.
One of them breaks through and gets close enough to claw at Dean while Sam's out of it, his nails leaving vicious red scratches over Dean's face. Dean uses his gun like a club, fighting the demon back long enough to shoot him in the chest and drive them back. Dad's holding his line on his own, Bobby concentrating on his Devil's Trap, when the demons surge and he can't keep them back. One of the demons strikes Bobby on the side of the head and he collapses in a heap.

“Bobby!” Dean yells, but it's from far away. Sam can hear the sound of the air rushing through his lungs. Can feel the pulse of his blood beneath his skin. A tingling itch starts in his feet and works its way up. Sam blinks, and when he opens his eyes again, the world is tinged yellow, everything fuzzy around the edges, the people around him moving slowly, like they're trapped in molasses.

And he feels fucking powerful. Energy crawls along his spine, curls in his belly until he feels like he's about to explode. Sam looks to his right where Dean's trying to keep tabs on everyone and reload his shotgun. To his left, Dad's trying to check on Bobby and keep the legions of Hell at bay.

Sam tilts his head back, up towards a Heaven he's not sure he believes in any more, and lets the power thrumming through his body loose on the world, raw and uncontrolled. The onslaught of demons stumble and flinch, bodies collapsing lifelessly mid-stride.

Dean fires off his last few rounds and scrambles for more ammunition until he realizes that none of the demons are moving. Sam expands his senses and coldly takes out the last of the demons, the ones who are now trying to run away. When all the threats are neutralized, Sam has nothing to concentrate on, so he turns to Dean.

“Aren’t—Sam. Sammy.” Dean steps back from him, looking nervous. He raises a hand as if to touch, but resists. Sam frowns. “Your eyes....”

A sudden blast of heat, like the backdraft from an explosion, sends Dean crashing into Sam. Sam catches him, holds firm against the onslaught.

“No,” Dean gasps, righting himself. They both know, without a shadow of a doubt, that the circle has been closed, the ritual started. “NO!”
Chapter 18

Dean splits his knuckles pounding futilely on the door, leaves a smear of dark red blood on its burnished surface. The door is ornate and delicately wrought, esoteric symbols carved deep into its surface. It looks beautiful if you don't know what they mean or you can't sense the intent behind them.

“MER!” Dean yells, raising his hand again. John comes up behind him and drags him away, Dean struggling to get out of his grasp.

“Dean!” John grunts, folding over when Dean's elbow jabs into his sternum. “Goddamnit, Dean, STOP!”

“Dean,” Sam hears himself say, but it's not his voice. This voice hums with power. It makes the walls tremble and the very air dance. Sam raises his hand and narrows his eyes. The door creaks, as if under a great weight, then buckles inwards like tinfoil.

“Jesus, Sammy,” John breathes, sadness weighing down his words. Sam's eyes are glowing yellow, bright spots in the darkness. John's read this, been warned of this, but to see it... His children stride into the room, shoulders brushing, and John can only follow.

The room is dark and filled with shadows. Five fires burn at each point of a giant pentagram. A demon anchors each point, each one with a different, unnatural eye color: black, white, red, orange and yellow. At the tip of the pentagram, the lifeless eyes of a young boy with blonde hair stare up at the ceiling. His throat has been slit, his life given to empower the circle. At the center of it all, on a raised altar, lays Mer.

“Mer,” Dean hisses. His heart skips in angry horror. She lies motionless on the altar, looking small and fragile; it looks like she's glowing, a soft white halo of light surrounding her. They've shaved her head, and Dean notes in a ludicrously absurd way that the newly revealed skin is paler than the rest of her. The demons have written strange words on her flesh, painted malevolent symbols all over her body. Dean wants nothing more than to scrub the vile markings off of her.

“They've closed the circle,” Dean says, monotone. He can't think of anything else. Both of them can feel the buzz of the invoked circle like an electric current sending shocks up the bottom of their feet.

“Yes,” Sam says, still feeling strangely removed. “I know.” He turns slightly so he can watch John drag Bobby's limp body into the room. Bobby's not dead, simply stunned. He's not a part of this, though. Sam knows that with an unquestionable surety. Bobby has his part to play, but not right now. He turns his gaze back to Dean and finds himself staring. Dean glows bright gold, lines of fate radiating outwards in thick, binding lines. They wrap around Sam and Mer and even the Yellow Eyed Demon.

Glancing at the demons in the circle, anchoring the watchtowers, Sam finds he knows their names, their ranks and proclivities, but that's not important. Things need to play out in a very specific order. Information must be revealed and discovered. For a moment, Sam transcends himself and sees the whole scope and breadth of their world, understands how everything connects. Knows what's going to happen before it does.

Knowing doesn't prepare him for the sight of his father sprinting full-tilt for the pentagram. A life to call it, a life to break it. He wants to stop him, has the power to stop him, but he's frozen in the moment, watching with wide-eyed horror.
“DAD!” Dean screams. The barrier flares with incandescent brightness as John's body hits it. There's a flash of light and a loud crack when the spell breaks. John's body twists as it falls. His eyes are closed when he hits the ground. He looks as if he's sleeping.

Dean's knees crack against the floor and he falls beside his father's body. He's still warm to the touch. Dean can imagine the rhythmic rise and fall of his chest. Dad twitching back to life, ha ha, joke's on you. But it's not a joke. His father is dead.

Sam can only stand and stare, shocked. He hadn't thought...

An angry howl snaps Sam's attention away from Dean and Dad. The demons are screaming, backlash from the interrupted spell. The red-eyed demon froths in rage and leaps towards Dean, intent to kill. Sam throws him across the room with barely any effort. He's not disconnected anymore, not humming with so much power he can't think of anything else. He's fucking pissed and his rage wants to lash out.

Another demon flies at him, and Sam knows its name: Cresil, demon of impurity and laziness. It snarls and throws its stolen body at Sam. Sam wills it gone; he can't kill these strong ones, not yet. But he can send them back to Hell where they belong. Cresil leaves a dark stain on the ground and Sam feels alive. His nerves sing with power and every time he releases his energy, lashes out at the swirling mass of darkness, he feels it returned to him two-fold.

He does the same with the others, called Haures, Kasdeya, and Mastema. They scream as he banishes them to hell, forces them down into the deepest, darkest pit he can find. Which leaves only one.

Sam turns his gaze to the Yellow Eyed Demon, the one who started his family on this path. Sam has a name now. Azazel.

“Hello, Sammy,” the demon greets, a wide smile on his face. “Look at you, all grown up.”

“Azazel.” A brief expression of surprise flits over the demon's face, like Sam shouldn't know his name. Sam smiles thinly. “You're going to die tonight.” The demon's eyes drift over to the still form of their father.

“Ah, well. We always have to sacrifice for the things we want most.” It sounds almost sage, like it's one of the great secrets of life. Sam grits his teeth and glares. “Very scary, Sam. But you forgot something.” The demon throws a hand out to one side. Dean goes flying across the room from where he'd been trying to free Mer and hits the wall hard. Instead of sliding down to the floor, he stays there, spread eagle and defenseless.

“Now, Dean,” Azazel says, mockingly paternal, “it's not time to free the damsel yet. I've got plans for Miss Mary.”

“Let her go, you sick fuck!” Dean snarls, thrashing where he's trapped. It feels like there's a suffocating band of steel around his chest, holding him in place. He struggles ineffectively, fear making his heart race. He can only watch, helpless, as Sam and the demon lock gazes, neither one of them paying much attention to Dean; he's a pawn in a greater battle of wills.

“Let them go,” Sam says softly, and his voice sounds strange to Dean's ear.
“Make me,” the demon hisses, and brings the force of his power to bear on Sam. Sam staggers back under the onslaught of the demon's abilities, his power digging underneath Sam's defenses. Distantly, Sam hears Dean scream in agony. He feels something press down against him, forcing him to his knees. The tendons in his shoulder give and Sam screams, pain ripping through him. The demon laughs triumphantly, and Sam grits his teeth. His father is dead. Dean and Mer are next if he can't pull it together. He cannot fail.

Sam rallies against the pain and pushes back. At first, just enough to stop the torment. Then, slowly, he starts gaining ground, pushing back, causing his own damage. Azazel's smirk fades away as Sam gains the upper hand, one inch at a time. At first slowly, then gaining speed and momentum until Azazel stumbles, arms pinwheeling as he tries to remain upright. Sam hears the thud of Dean's feet hitting the ground.

Go get Mer, Sam orders, feels Dean's surprise and his assent.

“You've impressed me, Sam. Surpassed everything I expected of you.” Sam turns his attention back to Azazel. He looks like a proud papa, gazing at Sam with bared teeth and a calculating expression.

“You die tonight,” Sam says, sounding almost bored.

“Ah,” Azazel says, his smile widening even as his eyes grow harder. “We always have to sacrifice to get what we most want.”

Sam braces for attack, but instead Azazel directs his powers at Dean and the altar, where Mer is bound. The thin wires that tie her down tighten and bite into her skin. Dean screams as Azazel's power hooks into him like claws.

“Dean!” Sam roars as dark blood spills down his brother's chest. Sam breaks Azazel's arm, but the demon just laughs and rips another hole in Dean's skin. Sam burrows in further, hits the places he instinctively knows will cause Azazel the most amount of pain, but none of it makes him stop. He punches Azazel in the mouth, again and again, but the demon breaks free of Sam's grip and backhands him.

“Come on, little Samael,” Azazel laughs, blood spilling out of his mouth. “You can do better than that!” Dean screams, and this time blood appears on Mer's chest, deep gouges that make her moan through whatever drugs they've given her.

Sam throws back his head and screams, an inhuman sound that makes Azazel laugh in delight. Sam snaps straight and reaches into Azazel. Into the essence of the demon itself. Azazel loses his hold on Mer, then Dean, as Sam pushes in deeper, searches for the part of the demon that will be its undoing. He touches something so dark and putrid it makes his gorge rise. His entire being demands he withdraw, but he ignores it and digs in further.

“That's my boy!” Azazel cackles gleefully, and Sam doesn't understand it until darkness explodes around him. Azazel vacates his former host and surges into Sam, wraps himself around Sam's mind and soul and laughs.

Well, this is cozy, Azazel says in his head. His voice is a mesh of all the evil things Sam has encountered in his life. You and I are going to be roomies for a while, Sammy. It's going to be just swell! Look what I have planned for you!

Vivid images of Dean, beaten and bloody, eviscerated by Sam's own hand stream through his head. He
sees Mer, sacrificed for power. To raise more demons. To raise Hell. To give Azazel form. She's powerful and pure, and with that comes a long list of rituals she could be used for. Azazel goes through them one by one, complete with resulting fallout. But worse are the images of her growing up, enslaved to demons, brainwashed and—God, if Sam was in control of his body he'd be throwing up.

_How about it, Sammy? Ready to take over the world?_

_Fuck you,_ Sam thinks, and ignores Azazel's laugh, desperately trying to find a way out of his prison. He tries to wrest control from Azazel, but only succeeds in locking them in a stalemate, his body falling stiffly to the ground.

_So dramatic,_ Azazel sighs and does something that makes Sam's nerve-ending light up in pain. He screams silently, trapped in his own mind. _Oh, that tickles! How long can you keep this up, Samael?_ The name sparks a flash of recognition in Sam, knowledge that's there for a microsecond before it's lost again.

_Don't call me that,_ Sam snaps; the name feels vile and foreboding. He pulls out every trick he's learned from Mer when he's tried to hide from her, playing the psychic equivalent of hide-and-seek, tag, and can't-touch-me. Something should work, but Azazel's there at every turn, anticipating and interrupting Sam's plans. Sam can't shake him, can't get away no matter how hard he tries.

_We'll have to work on this, Samael. You're all raw power—no technique. Watch and learn._ Sam gasps as his world swims. He's suddenly in a house, and it feels completely real. He looks around and realizes it's Missouri's, but the welcoming warmth is missing. He hears something behind him, and there's a long dagger in his hand. He spins around and stares, helpless, as warm blood rushes over his hand. Missouri looks at him in shocked accusation. One of her hands clutches his where it wraps around the knife's hilt. Her eyes go glassy and her insides make a ripping, tearing sound as she slides off the knife.

_NO!_ Sam screams. He tries to reach for her, but she's already dead by the time her body hits the ground. Another sound, and he knows it's Dean before he even turns around. _No, please no,_ Sam thinks to himself, and the vision fades out just as the knife encounters resistance.

_You plead so pretty, Samael,_ the demon says with a satiated sigh. _But you see, I can be kind._

_Why are you doing this? Why us?_ Sam asks, feeling unbalanced. He needs to pull it together. He's a Hunter. He's better than these mind games. He's prevented the demon from using his body, he's strong enough to defeat it. He has to be, there's no one else.

_Oh, Sammy, here's the thing. All this? It's not about your family. This is all about you!_ Sam stops struggling for a moment, horrified at the images Azazel keeps sending him. Not just images, Azazel's memories: of his plan to bring Sam here, get him to this point, where Azazel could own him completely. The extent of Sam's powers, which not even Azazel knows, but he certainly knows more than Sam. The other kids, like Max, ripe for the taking. _The fire, the powers, the spell, the kidnapping—everything was done for you._ _Though really, I thought Dean would be the one to rush the circle. But I figured, either way, the world would be down a Winchester at the very least. Your father, though...that was deliciously unexpected._ _How did that feel, I wonder?_

Sam screams in his head as Azazel rifles through his memories and pulls out Dad's death, so fresh Sam hasn't even begun to process it yet. It feels like an eternity, tormented with every graphic moment of Dad rushing forward, the crackle of energy as his body hit the circle, the jerk of his limbs. The faint smell of charred meat, something Sam hadn't even registered but the demon amps it up and makes sure Sam smells
A Haven in a Heartless World by Xela

it over and over. It's too much, too soon, and Sam feels himself getting numb to it all, so the demon moves on—to Sam's most personal thoughts and experiences. The ones Sam can't hide, even from himself.

*Oh you naughty, naughty boy,* the demon laughs as it starts sorting through his memories of Dean. Sam watches a home movie of their relationship: from this morning, rushed and frantic in the hotel room; his awkward teenage years, wanting so desperately he burned; the way they danced around each other after graduation; their very first time, the one pre-Stanford, that still makes Sam hate himself just a little even if all has been forgiven.

*Sammy Sammy Sammy. Let's see what kind of person you really are.* The scene unfolds in Technicolor surround sound, and Sam can't ignore it. Can't not feel every detail. The demon has effectively taped Sam's eyes open and is forcing him to watch the most depraved, painful moment of his life.

Dean stumbled into their home for the week at four in the morning smelling like stale smoke and old beer. His pupils were blown wide and his words flowed into one another like syrup. Sam sighed and dragged himself out of bed to help Dean get into his.

Sam swallowed thickly when Dean drunkenly draped himself over Sam's shoulders. They were almost the same height, something Dean pouted about when he thought Sam wasn't looking. Dean looked up at Sam and slurried something incomprehensible. But it ended with a wide smile that made Sam's heart jump.

"Come on, Dean," Sam said thickly. He propelled them towards the beds. Dean looked down at his feet, trying to find some kind of coordination. "Time for you to sleep it off."

"Sam," Dean mumbled, swinging his head up so he could see Sam. "Sammy. My Sammy." Oh fuck. Sam closed his eyes and tried to convince himself that this wasn't happening. Dean didn't mean anything by it. He was just going to dump Dean in bed and go take a cold bath in De Nile.

Of course, nothing ever went right for Sam. Dean tripped and sent them both crashing down on the nearest bed, tangled together. Dean giggled drunkenly and wiggled around, trying to get comfortable. His hip rubbed against Sam's crotch, a sliding, grinding motion that made Sam gasp. Sam squeezed his eyes closed and bit his lip, trying to control his reaction.

It was a losing battle.

Sam knows this, has lived through this before, but it still hurts to watch the whole mess happen all over again. It would be easier to think the demon edited something, made things seem worse than they were. But he doesn't have to, and Sam watches it all.

The way he kissed Dean, desperate and unthinking. How Dean pulled away at first, couldn't quite slur out a no but the intent was there, in his eyes and his slow, drunken attempts to pull away. How Sam ignored it, chased Dean across the bed, twined them
together until Dean couldn't leave. Kissed Dean until he gasped and moaned.

Sam can still taste the liquor he kissed from Dean's tongue, bitter and sharp.

Stop it! Sam yells in his head, but the images don't falter. There's the morning after, when Dean looked at him with such devastation Sam felt it in his very bones; he realizes now he probably WAS feeling Dean's emotions, which doesn't make it any better.

After the morning there were days of stilted conversation, avoidance, self-recrimination. The nights of Dean coming home reeking of sexual dissatisfaction, times Sam could feel the weight of Dean's gaze on his back. Then Sam's decision to leave—in large part galvanized by that night, but also spurned by a need Sam can't even identify today—that degenerated into a screaming fit with Dad and four years of silence from Dean.

Oh, the angst, Azazel mocks. You fucked your brother in more ways than one, Samael.

Get. OUT! Sam roars in his head. He struggles frantically for control, but the demon is everywhere. It takes all Sam's concentration to make his fingers move, and Azazel takes even that from him.

No, I think I like it here, Azazel says gleefully. Sam feels his entire body shudder, trying to expel the demon. He bows up, spine stiff and unyielding. It's his fucking body. HIS.

You know you're not doing this for her, the demon says, a seemingly random change of conversation. Sam has quickly learned there's no such thing with Azazel. Oh no, if it were up to you, you'd leave little Mary here and take Dean away so you could have him all to yourself. Selfish, Sammy. So selfish. Sam tries to deny it. He loves Mer. Loves Mer so much it hurts. She's a part of Dean, and he loves everything Dean is, so even if he tried not to, he'd still love her. Except for the part of him that believes the demon. That thinks maybe it's true. The part that sometimes wishes it was just him, Dean and the Impala on the open road, nowhere to be, no one to report to. He hates himself for it.

The demon laughs as it finds the memory of Jess's death. Another one of Sam's failures. It freezes the moment where Sam realized what was happening, when he looked up and saw her pinned to the ceiling, blood dripping from the hole in her middle. Her expression, frozen in death, accuses Sam of all the things he didn't do to protect her.

This looks eerily familiar, Azazel muses, and suddenly it's not Jess on the ceiling any more, it's Mom. And it's not just a still image; he gets the demon's feelings and thoughts too, so powerful Sam starts to lose the definition of himself. He knows what it is to be Azazel.

He sees the baby, the one he likes best, and gazes down on it. Strong kid, he'll survive the quickening, and grow up to be a strong man. Tall. Powerful.

Azazel cuts his hand and watches as three drops of blood fall into the baby's mouth. He's satisfied and content in ways Hell had ripped out of him eons ago. This is it, the culmination of years of work, decades of planning. This child will grow up and change the world in devastating ways.

A soft gasp sounds behind him and he doesn't think twice about throwing Mary Winchester against the wall. She's served her purpose here, and this game will be far
more interesting if she's gone.

_Sammy?_ A voice cuts through the pain, deep and familiar. It sounds tinny and weak, like it's fighting its way to get to him. _Sam!_

_Atta_. Another mind touches his, raw and shaken, but lined with steel. Behind that, another, someone Sam knows as he knows himself, blazing with fury and protective love. _Dean_. They rip him away from the cloying darkness he hadn't known was there. They place themselves between him and the darkness, whisper words that he can't understand but sound soft and encouraging. Awareness crashes back in. He is not the demon Azazel, and he is not the person Azazel wants him to be. He is _Sam_. _Atta_. _Dean's_ and _Mer's_. _Sam_ fights his way up through the darkness.

Azazel snarls as he forces _Dean_ and _Mer_ away, irritated at their interference, but those few moments are all _Sam_ needs to figure out the trick to the demon. Out and out rebellion, struggling and fighting—it doesn't work. It's expected, and _he'll_ never overpower Azazel in that way. What was it Jess always said? Sometimes, you had to effectuate change from inside the system.

_Sam_ takes the images the demon keeps throwing at him, all of the emotions they evoke and...absorbs them. He stops fighting them, stops denying them, just takes the hatred, anger, fear, revenge, jealousy, all of it, and accepts it. Acknowledges it, wraps his mental arms around them, and pulls it all close to him. _Sam_ imagines a coal set underneath kindling. The whirling mass around him is the air; too much, it'll extinguish what he's built. Too little and the coal will suffocate. Controlled, guided, it will blossom into an inferno.

The maelstrom around him seethes, then quiets. Every new feeling and image, every atrocity Azazel forces him to experience, _Sam_ feeds it into his flame. He takes charge of himself and everything falls away, leaving a blazing wall of fire licking all around the core of what comprises the unique entity called _Sam Winchester_. It blossoms dark blue and white, the hottest parts of a flame.

_Sam_ feels the demon's confusion, then its fear.

_Get out of my head_, _Sam_ says darkly, and then pulls the demon towards him. At first it tries to fight. Azazel thrashes and battles with everything it has; _Sam_ understands the drive to survive, but he hangs gamely on and won't let go, just keeps dragging Azazel down, through the flames.

As Azazel gets subsumed by _Sam's_ defenses he throws every despicable, horrendous thought he can come up with at _Sam_. Images of _Hell_, the torture of souls, _Dean_ turned over to the _Demonic Hordes_. The best moments of _Sam's_ life rise like guardian angels: memories of riding in the Impala, the only home he knew growing up: fighting over the radio with _Dean_, slipping Kenny G and Yanni in between his AC/DC and Kiss tapes as a joke; Jess's kindness and her sunny smile; _Dean's_ touch, intimate and gentle against his skin; _Mer's_ laugh, ablaze with a love that makes Azazel scream. _Sam_ starts to glow, brilliant iridescent light that burns the demon at the most basic level.

He feels Azazel start to burn away, the darkness no match for _Sam's_ light.

_Even in this, Samael_, Azazel hisses in his final moments, using _Sam's_ method against him, digging in as deep as he can to find safe harbor, _even in this we will have you!_ _Sam_ feel a disconcerting flash of triumph that turns into despair as the world goes brilliant white around them and his power erupts outwards.

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Dean is caught up in the battle of wills between Sam and the demon, invisible claws tearing deep grooves into his chest when, abruptly, the force holding him against the wall disappears. His legs threaten to buckle under his sudden weight, and blood loss makes his head swim.

Go get Mer, Sam's voice echoes in his head, strong and commanding. Dean nods because that makes sense. Sam can take care of himself; Mer needs help. Dean hopes Sam can feel his agreement because it takes all of Dean's concentration to ignore the pain in his chest and stagger over to his daughter.

She looks dead. That's his first thought. Her skin is pallid and waxy; her eyes look sunken and dark. Her lips are bloodless, almost as pale as the rest of her. Blood oozes from three parallel gouges in Mer's chest, mirror images of the ones on his body. Dean numbly strips off his shirt; the front of it is tattered and soaked with his blood, so he rips it down the seams and presses the unsullied portion against her chest to stem the bleeding. Mer moans and her brow wrinkles.

“Mer? Mary?” Dean calls, trying to keep his voice steady. “Come on, baby girl, I need you to open your eyes for me. Can you do that, Mer?” Dean holds his breath as her eyes slide open, just a sliver.

“There you are, Mer-Bear, come on, you can do it.” Dean grasps Mer's hand to give her something tangible to latch on to but he ends up trying to rub warmth into it. She's so cold.

“Hurts,” Mer croaks through cracked lips. Her face crumples and tears start leaking out of her eyes. Dean swallows, trying to find words that don't shake and crack, but it's hard. He slides his fingers along her skull, feeling the sharp prickle of new growth, thinking about how people lose most of their heat through their head.

“I know, baby girl, I know.” The wires that bind her to the altar—bastards couldn't just use rope, could they—have bitten deep into her skin. If she starts struggling against them they'll cut into her more, maybe do serious damage. “Be still, Dada's going to get you out of these, okay?” Mer nods and closes her eyes, tears still escaping, but she's trying so hard to be brave. He swears softly, picking at the first tie. There are three separate wires around her wrists, tangled and melded together to make it difficult for someone to release her.

Dean starts the grim task of unwinding them, wincing as they pull away from Mer's raw skin. She does what he asks and stays still, but Dean thinks most of that is because she's still drugged. She's slow to respond, and doesn't seem to be tracking well, though Dean keeps up a soothing litany of mindless chatter. He reaches out with his mind and lets her know he's here. After so many days of silence it's almost a crippling relief to be able to feel her again. Mer responds to him, calming down just enough until she tries to find the other members of her family.

“Granpa!” Mer gasps, her eyes snapping open. She starts crying in earnest, her body shaking with the force of her sobs. Dean tries to hold her still, but she's thrashing wildly on the altar. “Granpa! GRANPA!” She pulls against the wires around her wrists and they start bleeding freely. Dean worries about the tendons in her wrists and ankles.

“Mer! Mary! Look at me!” Dean cups her face, wiping away the tears on her cheeks, his own falling unchecked. Mer's eyes are wide and full of pain. She looks at him, pleading with him to make it okay, asking for answers Dean doesn't have. “I know, baby girl. I know it hurts, but you gotta stay still, okay? I need to get you out of this, alright? You're—you're hurting yourself, and I can't have that, alright?” Mer
swallows and Dean watches her push the pain away, determined to be strong for him. He's so proud of her, his strong, brave girl.

He's just freed her left hand when nausea and pain stabs through him. He clutches the side of the altar and sways, struggling to keep his feet. It's not something that's happened to him, he knows that, but it feels so strong he can't imagine what caused it. Or what it would feel like to experience it firsthand.

“Atta,” Mer gasps, reaching out towards Sam. Dean looks up and watches in horror as the smoky incorporeal form of the Yellow Eyed Demon disappears into his brother's body.

“Sam! NO!” Dean yells. He's torn between freeing Mer and rushing to Sam to do...something, anything when Sam's body collapses on the ground. He's never seen anyone freshly possessed, but Dean thinks this is different. Sam is completely motionless, but even from here Dean can see the way his eyes rapidly shift from green to yellow and back. He twitches occasionally, limbs jerking one way then another, as if two entities are fighting for control.

“Dada! Help!” Dean's attention snaps back to Mer. She's picking at her other wrist, trying to free herself. She's almost untangled her right arm, so Dean moves down to her legs. These ties are less complicated and come off quicker. It's a matter of moments before he's got his arms around Mer, crushing her to his chest. She wraps her arms around his neck and holds on just as tight.

He holds Mer until Sam moves, his body curving up as every muscle tenses and locks. Sam's mouth is open in a silent scream, his head pressed into the concrete—the only point of contact his entire upper body has with the floor. His eyes are still disturbingly vacant, only the occasional flash of life to show that anybody's home. And sometimes those flashes are disturbingly yellow.

“Need to help Atta,” Mer mumbles. She blinks and shakes her head, still feeling the effects of the drugs. They haven't quite worn off yet, the world is still twisted and gray.

“How?” Dean asks, a little frantic. Mer's head lolls limply onto his shoulder. Swearing, Dean repositions them, sitting on the altar and cradling Mer in his lap. He pats her face gently, trying to wake her up.

“Come on Mer, come on. We have to save Atta. Atta's gotten himself in trouble and it's our job to get him out of it, remember, we had this talk. He's completely hopeless without us, so I need you to wake up.”

Dean closes his eyes, fear bubbling up inside him. Right, no time for this. Dean grits his teeth and reaches. It feels like stretching, his mind unfolding. It's weird and disconcerting and he doesn't like it, but he can't think of anything else. He touches Mer—the place where Mer should be, but she's not there. Just emptiness.

“Mer! Mer, baby girl, where—” The world swims out of focus abruptly and when he comes to, it's like seeing but not seeing. He's perceiving a vast empty world with a dark storm on the horizon, angry and bruised. He feels something tug on his hand and when he looks down Mer is there, looking like she did before the kidnapping, hair framing her face.

“It's Atta,” Mer says, pointing towards the storm. “He needs help.”

“Okay,” Dean agrees weakly. He's new to this whole out-of-body psychic stuff, but that storm...he doesn't think that's all the demon's doing. He thinks, maybe, it's part of Sam. “What are we going to do?”

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“Like with the bugs,” Mer says. Dean nods like he knows how to do that. Dean starts when Mer touches his face because she's three feet tall, he's pushing six, and her hand is on his face. It's freaky enough that Dean's brain tries to shut down, does not compute.

Then Mer's mind slides into place, right where she belongs, and Dean's entire body heaves a huge sigh of relief, even as he rails in frustration that now Sam's gone and hied off somewhere with a demon. He wants his family back and in his head where they belong.

“Where are we?” Dean asks, squinting at the boiling squall. He thinks it's moving towards them, but it's too far away to tell. He sees bright flashes of lightening in the darkness.

“Atta,” Mer explains. “Dada, like this.” Dean watches as, right before his eyes, Mer's body melts away.

“Mer!” Dean yells, trying to grab her. The formless blob of swirling colors coalesces into Mer again.

“Jesus, don't do that!”

“You gotta let go,” Mer says impatiently, looking towards Sam and the storm on the horizon. “You're too stiff.” Mer demonstrates letting go by turning into a blob, to herself, and back to the blob of light again. Dean hates it, has a small panic attack every time she disappears, but there's not much he can do but push it aside and try to emulate her.

Letting go of his physical form is harder than Mer makes it seem. The world looks the way it does for a reason. Dean huffs in frustration when he opens his eyes and still has eyes.

“Dada, you gotta—” Mer spins around, eyes pinned to the storm, and it seems to swell before them, angry and raging. “Dada, gotta go now.” The storm explodes outwards, the force of it shaking the ground. Sam's pain slams into them like something physical, and Mer screams.

SAMMY! Dean yells and throws himself towards Sam as fast as he can. He's aware of Mer right beside him, the two of them hurtling forward. Sam! He feels shaky and uncoordinated, feels himself tiring quickly. In this plane, wherever they are, Dean's emotions and feelings have weight and form. They spill out of him in a complicated knot; he's as eloquent here as in the real world.

Atta, Mer breathes, and sends the word spinning towards Sam. She untangles everything Dean's trying to say and shapes it into a spear, sharp and directed. She controls the flood of energy and directs it towards what must be the heart of Sam.

Dean gasps when he feels them connect with Sam. Sam clings to them like a lifeline. Dean closes his eyes and imagines himself as a shield, protecting Sam from whatever tries to hurt him. Something strong and evil slams into him, and Dean flags, only to be bolstered by Mer. They support one another, shore up their weak spots and give Sam a place to hide a recoup. They suffer the torrent together, curled in on one another, until Sam...Sam goes supernova, the world around them shining with incandescent light.

Don't look, Mer whispers in his mind. Dean thinks Mer might be protecting him but consciousness disappears in a bright flash of excruciating pain.
Chapter 19

Bobby comes to with an agonized groan. Dizziness, splitting headache, deep fatigue, ringing in his ears...Christ, he's too old to be getting concussions. Brain doesn't snap back like it used to.

Bobby sits up and blinks to clear his vision, trying to remember if hallucinations are part of having a concussion. Because he's sitting in a crater. A deep, charred hole with bits of wood and concrete strewn around him. Well, hell.

Bobby struggles to his feet. God, his head hurts. He touches his forehead and his hand comes away bloody. Starting to clot, not new. Isn't going to kill him immediately. He tries to remember what happened but comes up blank. He thinks he may have gotten taken out early in the game—ain't that a bitch—but he distinctly remembers an actual building existing right where he's standin'. He carefully turns his head, looking around and trying to track down the people he came with. Fuck, he hopes Mer didn't get caught up in this.

"John? Dean? Sam?" Bobby calls. The yelling makes him wince and his head throb with great vengeance. Bobby stumbles and swears; this place is a minefield of debris and detritus. His balance must be off or—

Bobby stares at the calloused hand peeking out from behind a block of concrete, still and pale. He knows that hand. Bobby scrambles towards it, panic making his heart beat faster. He ignores the nausea and pain in his head. Bobby pushes a piece of wood off John's chest, knows instantly there's no hope.

"Goddamn it, John," Bobby growls at him. A lot of things click into place: John's dark mutterings and his pensive looks; the unexpected confessions after hours of drinking; that damn Book John was so secretive about. Bobby's pissed, but that ain't nothing new when it comes to John Winchester.

A muted sound has Bobby on guard and suspicious. It comes again, the low thrum of a voice, and Bobby wishes he had something bigger than the serrated hunting knife stashed in his boot. He cautiously moves towards the sound, speeding up when he recognizes the low cadence of Dean's voice.

"Mer, Mer, Mer, Mer," Dean chants over and over, rocking her against him. He's completely oblivious to the rest of the world; Bobby doesn't try to disguise his approach, but Dean doesn't show any signs of having heard him, just rocks his kid and pets her head.

Mer looks small and pale in Dean's arms. Some of the markings have smeared, turning her skin a sickly red color. Bobby shudders to think what was mixed into the paint adorning her body. Her bald head makes her look extra vulnerable and not a little surreal. Dean has shifted to rubbing his hand over her cheekbones, trying to wake her.

"Dean," Bobby says softly, moving with careful slowness so as not to startle Dean. His eyes look wild and dangerous. "Dean." Bobby touches his shoulder lightly. Dean jumps at his touch, his entire body seizing. He clutches Mer closer to him and stares at Bobby with wide, uncertain eyes. He's wary but not defensive, which Bobby counts as a blessing.
“I'm going to touch Mary, Dean,” Bobby tells him, reaching out towards her. Dean frowns and bares his teeth in warning. Bobby freezes, watching Dean watch him. After a moment, he reaches forward again, stopping when Dean growls at him. They continue on this pattern until Dean allows him to touch, eyes trained on his hand. His fingers settle on Mer's neck and find a strong, steady pulse. He heaves a sigh of relief. “She's just sleeping. S'all.” Dean doesn't react, just stares at Bobby with that strangely empty expression. Bobby frowns and hopes to God that whatever happened here didn't burn out Dean's brain in the process. He's not up to raising a little girl, 'specially not one as precocious as Mer.

“Let's get you two to the car, alright?” Bobby suggests softly, his voice softening into a tone he hasn't used since his own girls died. He keeps talking soothingly to Dean and reaches to take Mer from his arms so Dean can stand up. But Dean makes a deep, guttural sound and pulls Mer close to him, the distrust and wariness back in his eyes. Bobby holds up his arms in a non-threatening manner. “Okay, okay. You keep the girl. Just...you gotta get up. We need to get out of here.”

He can tell Dean doesn't understand him. Bobby tries pantomime, demonstration. Tries touching Dean, which doesn't go over well. Bobby throws his hands up in irritation and walks a few steps away to cool off. He's about five second away from braining Dean with a two by four and dragging his ass the car when he hears the ground crunch behind him. He turns around to find Dean a few steps behind him, Mer curled against his chest. He blinks at Bobby, as if waiting for him to do something.

“You are infuriating,” Bobby says, and starts walking towards where he thinks they left the car. The edge of the crater is steep but not unnavigable, though Bobby thinks Dean may have trouble balancing Mer. They'll cross that bridge when they get to it.

Bobby carefully picks his way over the debris, eyes scanning the ground in front of them, but his ears are attuned to Dean's steps. Dean sticks with him the whole way, a few steps behind, until he suddenly veers to the left.

“Dean! Where are—aw, hell.” Bobby scrambles to catch up with Dean, who looks like he's concentrating on something. Bobby swears when he sees what.

Sticking up from the charred earth is a pale, gun-calloused hand, peeking out from under what looks like the remains of the altar. Dean stares at it, a mix of emotions flashing over his face. He needs to help Sam, but he can't let go of Mer, which makes it impossible for him to dig Sam out. Which leaves Bobby. Dean turns wet green eyes, filled with pleading, towards Bobby. Shit, the things he does for this family.

Bobby holds his breath as he searches for a pulse. At first he thinks it's all for naught, but he finds one, slower than he likes but it's better than nothing. Bobby grunts as he pushes crumbled bits of granite off of Sam. He has a long gash on his head and various deep lacerations that soak his torn clothing.

“Sam,” Bobby calls, shaking Sam slightly. He used his luck getting Dean to walk; he's not expecting Sam to wake up, but it never hurts to try. Bobby taps him on the face. Yep, no luck. Bobby resigns himself to at least two more trips out this way. “Well fuck.”

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Both cars are right where they left them, a thin layer of dust coating their exteriors. Bobby coaxes Dean into the back of the Impala with relative ease; something in Dean recognizes the car and he settles happily
in the back seat, Mer cradled in his lap. Bobby watches for a moment as Dean strokes Mer's bald head, a raw look of loss and mourning on his face. Bobby avoids looking at Dean's eyes after that.

Next on Bobby's list is emptying John's truck of all weapons and hunting paraphernalia. He dumps it all in the Impala's trunk save for a few lengths of rope and a tarp. On his way back to Sam he snags a couple of long poles and makes himself a crude travois. It's not nearly long enough to fit Sam comfortably, but unconscious people can't be choosers.

By the time Bobby gets back to the Impala, he's bruised and sore and soaked in sweat. His hands are raw and he almost loses Sam several times getting up the crater's sides. He hasn't had a workout this strenuous in years; one of the many reasons he quit field work. He heaves and slides Sam into the front seat of the car and buckles him in; his head lolls forward loosely. That, the sight of Sam's head hanging like a rag doll's, is what shatters all of Bobby's defenses.

He slides down the side of the Impala and concentrates on his breathing. He shoves his emotions back in their box with an ease born of years of denial and evasion. He's the only one in their right mind here. He has to take care of Dean and Sam and Mer. Has to get them to safety. Has to keep it together until then. He has to go get John's body.

With a weary sigh Bobby grabs the travois and heads back down into Hell.

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Bobby sets the truck on fire, pops three No Doze, fires off a quick text to a buddy who will rescue his car from the motel and hold it till he can come get it, and wipes his mind clear of anything but driving home.

He's not sure how long he's been on the road, the only sound in the car is breathing, when the shrill ringing of a phone shatters the silence. Dean starts in the back, making angry sounds as he looks around for danger. A car honks as the Impala swerves into the other lane, Bobby's attention split between finding the phone and calming Dean. He finds the phone just as it stops ringing, but it starts again almost immediately.

"Bobby, are you okay?" Bobby pulls over to the side of the road at Missouri's question. He can't talk, can't say anything, or he's not going to make it home. Home. He needs to go home, doesn't question the instinct. Instinct has kept him alive this long. "Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. Forget I said anything. You just start that car back up and head down the highway, okay? Just drive." Bobby nods and does as she says, clinging to the phone. He can feel the exhaustion of the day weighing against him, barely held at bay. He's buried under a carefully constructed shield; everything is balanced perfectly to keep him from spilling over the edges, but if anything should change—like Missouri hanging up—Bobby doesn't know what will happen.

"Don't you worry, I'm going to stay on the line. I'm headed to you, Bobby Singer, so you just hold on to yourself and those boys until you get home, y'hear?" Bobby nods again, even though Missouri can't see him. She'll know. He drives a few more miles in silence, the soft sound of Missouri's breathing in his ear. He can't say when the thoughts started, but once he's aware of them he can't make them stop.

He doesn't know what's going to happen with Dean, Sam and Mer. What if they never wake up? What if Dean's that mindless, animalistic thing in the backseat for the rest of his life? If Sam's trapped in a coma for the rest of time? If Mer has to grow up without her family, only an old, worn out hunter to show her
“Bobby Singer, stop that line of thought immediately! They're going to be fine. They're all just wiped out—you wouldn't believe the power those three unleashed on the world. If you were them you'd sleep for a month!” Bobby will take her word for it, he already did his sleeping. Missouri laughs. “Your sense of humor's something else, Mr. Singer.”

Missouri stays on the phone with him the whole way from Ladysmith to Sioux Falls, six hours in which his phone threatens to die twice. He pulls up his drive by rote, turns off the car, and stares at his house without really seeing it.

“Bobby?” He blinks and Missouri is standing right outside the window, looking at him with concern. She opens the door and pulls him out of the car. “Oh, you poor, poor man.” She brushes her fingers across his temples and a warm feeling of fuzziness settles over him, like a really good buzz.

He carries Sam out of the car fireman-style and puts him in one of the spare rooms. According to Missouri, Sam is so far gone mentally she can't even feel the possibility of him, but he's physically fine. Won't nothing cure him right now, and they shouldn't waste time worrying today. All they can do is tuck him in bed and keep him alive.

When he gets downstairs Missouri has coaxed Dean out of the car. Her eyes are glued to Mer, tears formed but not allowed to fall. Bobby glances outside at the not quite empty Impala.

“He's fine,” Missouri says softly, touching Bobby's shoulder. Dean skirts them as he goes through the door, careful not to brush against them. They both stare out at the car, gleaming in the inappropriately cheery sunlight. “I'll take care of him. You should go to bed. Get some sleep.” Another touch against his head and Bobby knows he'll sleep well and soundly tonight. No nightmares. Perhaps for the last time in a long while.

He leaves the boys to Missouri and walks to his room, asleep before his head hits the pillow.

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Missouri watches Bobby go with trouble in her heart, but there's nothing she can do for him now. He'll get more out of a good night's sleep than anything else anyways. She turns to Dean and her troubles increase. His mind is hiding from the world. He's in there, somewhere, but damned if Missouri can find him. He'd seen or experienced something that had overloaded his brain and it's taking a quick break from reality. The only question is how permanent a break.

“Dean,” Missouri calls even as she sends him a mental nudge. He looks at her blankly. “Let's get you and Mer cleaned up.” He responds to Mer's name, looking down at her and stroking his hands over her head. He frowns and rubs at some of the dark ichor marring her skin.

“Yes, let's get that off of her. You want that, right? Come on, follow me.” She gently guides Dean to another of Bobby's guest rooms, close to where they'd put Sam. She sits Dean on the bed and goes into the bathroom to get a warm washcloth. Sadness and loss bubbles up inside her and threatens to spill over but she shrugs it back.

John had known what he was getting into today. It's cold comfort, but it's comfort all the same.
fills a bowl with warm water and avoids looking at her reflection again.

“Dean? You ready?” Missouri sits on the side of the bed and watches Dean cradle his daughter. She carefully begins the process of washing the words and symbols off Mer's skin. She keeps her movements gentle and predictable, not wanting to startle Dean, who watches her hands with sharp eyes. He's on the razor edge of insanity, his mind filled with thoughts of protecting his child because it blocks out everything else.

She starts at the crown of Mer's head, her washcloth quickly turning dark and filthy. Dean relaxes as each mark disappears. When she finishes with Mer's head and face, Dean makes a low sound in his throat and nuzzles against her.

“I know, baby,” Missouri says. “I know.” She starts on Mer's arm, ignoring the way her hands tremble.

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Dean snaps awake, alert and searching out what woke him. He turns his senses outward, looking for a sign. He misses the first quiet whimper beside him. The second is louder and Dean quickly turns Mer over and checks on her. No serious cuts or bruises, no fever. He can't quite remember why he's so tense.

“Mer,” Dean says urgently. He draws his finger lightly along her lips, the way he sometimes wakes her up when she's being unusually recalcitrant in the morning. She twitches, then swats at him. He frowns; what happened to her hair? What's that dark smudge under her ear? Panic rips through Dean and he needs his daughter awake, now. “Come on Mer-Bear, wake up. Wake up!”

“Hot,” Mer complains sleepily, turning her face into Dean's side. The flood of relief makes Dean light headed and he sags against the bed. Mer moans and looks up at Dean, disgruntled. It's so normal and so Mer that Dean laughs, a wrenching sobbing sound, and yanks her to him. Mer squeaks against Dean's chest. He shakes as he rocks her, fighting back tears he doesn't know why he's crying. She wraps her arms around his neck and sighs.

“You're okay,” Dean says, mostly to himself. “Okay, it's okay, you're safe, Daddy's here, it's okay.” Mer pulls back and looks solemnly at Dean, who looks right back. She very precisely puts her hands on either side of his head, right at his temples. The warm wash of emotions doesn't come. He feels a twinge and a luke-warm surge, but it lacks the power and vitality that usually accompanies Mer's mental touch.

“I'm fuzzy,” Mer says, frowning. She blinks slowly, her eyelids sliding shut. Dean figures she's still got some of whatever drug they put in her system, so it's probably affecting her mental acuity, not to mention the extreme release of power. What drugs? Dean wonders, frowning. And who are they? What happened?

“Tired,” Mer mumbles.

“It can wait,” Dean agrees past the lump in his throat. He doesn't think he wants to know the answers to his questions. “In the morning,” Mer murmurs something that sounds like an affirmative and settles on Dean's chest. She kicks away the covers off first, though, which makes Dean smile absurdly wide. He puts a hand on her back, savoring the steady rise and fall of her chest.

“Granpa's gone,” Mer suddenly says in the silence. Dean stiffens. His first reaction is flat out refusal. No.
Never. But underneath that is an anguished acceptance; he already knows this. Mer's hot tears scald his chest and he feels a hollow knot of sadness deep in his chest.

“Yeah,” Dean says hoarsely. It all comes back in fits and starts then, a disjointed puzzle creating an unhappy picture. Dad's gone, damned himself to the Pit. Dean's not stupid, he knows enough semiotics and rituals to determine the consequences of breaking that circle. This one guaranteed a one-way ticket straight to Hell, a life given to seal the circle and a life given to break it. Dean feels himself sliding back to the empty grayness he'd been in, the place that promised nothing in exchange for everything. He's tempted, so tempted, to go back there, but Mer jerks him back.

“The pretty man will help him,” Mer reassures him, her voice thick with sleep. She curls into Dean's side, her head resting on his shoulder. She sniffs, still mourning her grandfather.


“Mmm-hmm.”

“Mer,” Dean says urgently, shaking Mer to wake her. Mer blinks at him, then scowls. Her eyes keep sliding closed, and he can tell it's an effort to keep them open. “What pretty man?”

“The one in the light,” Mer mumbles, her head falling forward onto Dean's shoulder. “The one who took Granpa.” Mer falls asleep from one breath to the next, leaving Dean wide awake with her words.

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Missouri gives Dean a relieved hug and a sincere smile, even though her eyes are filled with pain, when he stumbles out for food. Bobby wakes up a six that night. He looks like Dean feels, and they nod at one another in understanding and avoid the alcohol. Sam doesn't wake up.

Dean sits by Sam's bedside the whole next day, but he doesn't move. Mer comes in once and stares hard at Sam, worrying her bottom lip and frowning at him. She shakes her head and steps out of the room, hovering at the threshold.

“Mer?” Dean calls, but she looks at him with wide, scared eyes and flees. Dean would go after her, but he can feel that she's alright and wants to be alone. She hums in the back of his mind, ever present, so Dean sits back and waits.

It's like Missouri warned him. Sam's body is fine and active, but Sam isn't home. He doesn't ping or ding, not even a little bit. But that doesn't mean he's gone forever. He can't be. Dean needs him.

****

Bobby disappears for two days. When he comes back, it's obvious he tried to drink his weight in alcohol and almost succeeded. He glances at Dean, nods as Missouri fills him in on Sam's unchanging condition and stares blearily at Mer when she approaches him. Mer touches his hand and Bobby grunts in surprise, his eyes clearing and the pain-lines around his eyes easing.

He crawls into the shower, trims his beard, and comes down looking like himself. He builds a pyre a couple of miles from the house. Call him sentimental or superstitious, but he threads in different herbs
and charms between the slats of wood. Some for protection, some for peace, some that are supposed to carry the prayers for the dead with them. He also hides tokens of John Winchester's life in the midst of the wood. His favorite knife, an old gun scored with use, a damn good bottle of whisky they'd saved for a rainy day. To be fair, Bobby'd drunk half in memory of the bastard.

When he's done, Bobby feels drained but his eyes are dry. He's said his goodbyes. The best they can do for the dead is get on with the living.

Four days after their fucked-up rescue mission they send John Winchester off into the Great Whatever. Dean had hoped Sam would be here so he didn't have to face this alone, but Sam has shown no sign of waking any time soon. Dean tries to stay strong but seeing his father's body on top of all that wood, wrapped in brown canvass cloth...

Dean refuses the torch and watches stoically as Bobby touches the flame to the pyre, eyes glassy in the firelight. Dean can't move, his muscles all locked where they are, because if he so much as twitches he's either going to pull a Sam and run as far away as his feet can carry him or start bawling like a baby.

Mer's hand slips into his, small and warm. Dean has to take several deep breaths before he can look down at her. She's completely open with her grief, not trying to hide it from anyone. Tears spill down her cheeks unchecked, but she looks strong standing in the firelight with her head held high. The sight breaks something deep inside him. He can't hold it together in the face of his child's heartbreak. He kneels down and wraps her in a hug. She cries into his shoulder, deep sobs that make him hurt for her. He's not even aware he's crying too until much, much later.

When they get back from the funeral Sam has an IV in his arm and various other tubes coming out of his body. Bobby says something about a nurse friend who came by to do him a favor, but it's all background noise to Dean. He can see a dark red stain in the crease of Sam's elbow where the needle went in.

Mer actually comes in the room to check on Sam, her forehead creased in a frown. She reaches out and to touch Sam's arm almost apologetically, but snatches her hand back before it connects with his skin.

“Mer?” Dean asks softly, sending her a mental query through their link. Mer shakes her head, looking miserable, and backs out of the room. When her back hits the wall outside the room she slides down, eyes fixed on Sam. She puts her head on her knees and wraps her arms around her legs and stares at Sam. Dean settles back into his chair to wait.

Every time Dean pings Sam, it comes back empty and hollow. Sam isn't dead—his body is healing fine, all systems go—but he's not there. Sometimes Dean gets a sense of taint, an aftertaste of evil, but it's always just an echo and he chalks it up to what they just went through. In his darker moments Dean thinks that taint may be why Mer avoids Sam.

Most of the time Dean stays...not positive, as that would be a blatant lie. Determined. Constant. Certain. Sam will wake up, because Sam will not leave him. He promised them forever, him and Mer, and Sam
keeps his promises.

So Dean keeps his vigil. He eats the food Missouri pushes on him but doesn't taste it. He needs to be strong when Sam wakes up. He can't be sure of Sam's mental state when he wakes up, so Dean has to be at his best.

Mer watches over them both from the hall. She reminds Dean to drink, eat, and shower. She watches over Sam when Dean stumbles out of the room because he has to pee or Bobby hauls him outside for ten minutes of sunlight. When she falls asleep against the wall Bobby tucks her into bed. Every night, despite the fact that as soon as she wakes up the next day she goes right back to her spot leaning against the wall. She refuses to use the pillows and cushions they leave for her.

Sometimes, when he feels like he's going to go out of his mind, Dean joins her in the hall. The two of them lean against one another and watch the rise and fall of Sam's chest.

Bobby's nurse friend comes by every couple of days to check the IV, catheter and various other medical tubes and implements. Dean hates her touching Sam; he hates her sympathetic looks and down-turned lips even more. She doesn't think Sam will ever wake up.

She tries to talk to Mer once when Dean makes the mistake of going to the bathroom so he doesn't have to see her manhandle Sam. Mer's fury staggers him, leaves him with a splitting headache. Dean has no idea what she said to Mer, but whatever Mer says back makes the woman jerk away and gape. She leaves in a hurry without another word.

Mer is literally shaking with anger in the aftermath, her eyes narrow and lips pressed together in a thin line. Dean pulls her into his lap and holds her. He doesn't try to soothe her because she knows how he's feeling and anything he tried would fall utterly flat. Sometimes it sucks having a super psychic kid.

The next time the nurse shows up the pitying looks are masked by brusque professionalism. She glances at Dean in greeting but avoids Mer as much as possible and keeps her stupid opinions to herself.

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Sam wakes up without any fanfare or warning. Dean's busy staring at the paisley bedspread he knows way too well and utterly loathes, keeping half a psychic eye on Sam and the other half on Mer, when the background hum changes. It's subtle at first. The hollow thrum of Sam's psyche shifts into a buzzing, staticy sound. Dean glances up to a pair of hazel eyes watching him. He smiles and starts to let his mind wander when realization hits him like a punch to the gut. Dean sits up so fast he slides off the front of the chair and onto the floor.

“Sammy?” Dean whispers. His voice comes out hoarse and he realizes he hasn't spoken a word to anyone in almost a week. Sam's eyes are glazed, but he's awake. Dean slides his hand into Sam's, dry and warm. Sam blinks and squeezes Dean's hand. Dean feels his eyes sting and squeezes back.

Mer comes flying into the room, stuttering to a stop just inside the door. She stares at Sam intently, unblinking, and Dean finds himself holding his breath. She inspects him from head to toe, brow furrowed in concentration. She steps closer, closer, until she's hovering beside them.

“Is it gone?” she asks, her voice a tremulous whisper. Dean has no idea what she's talking about, but Sam
does. His eyes clear and he tries to smile.

“Yeah,” Sam croaks. His voice is cracked and dry. His bottom lip splits, a bright spot of blood on pale, chapped lips. “It's gone.” Mer looks unconvinced, but when Sam beckons her over she only hesitates a moment before crawling towards him on the bed. She pulls the covers down and presses her hands against Sam's chest. He's lost weight, and Mer touches him like he might break. Dean puts his hands over hers and after a minute she looks up, face creased in a brilliant smile.

Sam smiles back and tugs her onto him. She settles in with a small sniff and presses her face into Sam's chest. Sam looks up at Dean, hazel eyes luminous.

The past eleven days hit Dean all at once. He almost lost Sam. Almost lost Mer. Lost Dad, gave him a warrior's send off. Sam makes a desperate animal sound in the back of his throat, perhaps responding to Dean's distress, and arches up towards Dean. Dean leans down and kisses Sam frantically, a dry press of lips.

“I'm safe,” Sam gasps. Dean rests his forehead against Sam's and licks his lips; he tastes the salt of Sam's blood on his tongue.

They've weathered the storm and come out the other side. They're tired and broken and they've lost so much to get here, but they're together and safe.

The Family is a haven in a heartless world. -Christopher Lasch
Epilogue

“Attal!  Attal, look!”

“Yes, yes, I see, Mer,” Sam says distractedly, tasting the spaghetti sauce to see if it's ready.

“You're not LOOKING!” Mer censures petulantly. Sam sighs and obediently turns around. Mer looks... Sam chokes up and swallows heavily. Mer looks grown up. She's wearing a striped shirt, a brand new pair of jeans, and shiny black shoes. She has a bright red lunch box with her name written in sharpie and a backpack almost bigger than she is.

A stinging slap jerks Sam out of his reverie.

“None of that,” Dean orders brusquely. Sam glares and rubs his head, but he knows just how affected Dean is by the first day of school.

“You look great, Mer,” Sam says sincerely, and she grins and bounces with excitement.

“You ready Mer-Bear?” Whit calls.

“YEAH!” Mer yells and starts checking off all the things she has. Dean looks murderous, his jaw clenched so hard Sam's surprised he hasn't broken a tooth. Sam slides behind Dean, wraps his arms around him and props his chin on Dean's shoulder.

“Well, come on then. Don't want to be late, do you?” Whit chides. She still moves a little jerkily on one side. Sam's seen the burn on her stomach, the skin scarred and pink. Physical therapy is difficult and painful, but Whit has met another nurse during her treatment and it makes everything more bearable, even if they're 'taking things slow.'

“Don't forget your knife!” Dean yells at Mer's retreating back. Sam's sure that if he weren't physically holding Dean back he'd be following after Mer like a mother hen.

“Got it!” Mer yells back, waving over her shoulder.

“And if anyone tries to—” Sam claps a hand over Dean's mouth.

“She'll be fine,” Sam whispers in his ear. Dean shivers and Sam lets his hand slide down Dean's chin, to his chest and bites down lightly on the shell of Dean's ear. Dean nods mutely and tilts his head to one side in invitation. Sam presses a kiss beneath Dean's ear, starts working his way down Dean's neck. He's just hit Dean's pulse point when Mer comes hurtling back into the room and attaches herself to Dean's legs.

“I love you, Dada,” she says. Dean gapes down in surprise. “And you too, Attal!” Mer looks up at them and grins, then sprints out of the room as quickly as she came.

Dean's a fucking wreck after that, alternating between proud of his girl, scared someone (something) is going to hurt her, and terrified Mer's going to have some sort of psychic episode, a reenactment of the Chuck-E-Cheese incident. It takes everything Sam has to keep Dean sane. It's cute and adorable to see Dean so worked up, but also a little annoying. Especially since Sam has been banking on sex sometime today.
Deep down in Sam's chest, in the parts of himself not even he knows about, something dark and small picks up on Sam's frustrations and flares to life. It wiggles and grows, gathers Sam's anger and feeds.

Sam shivers, a powerful rush of dark emotions welling in him, but he shakes it off. Dean's currently running through what they'll do if Mer breaks someone's nose the first day of school, and Sam can't help but laugh as Dean bounces between buying Mer whatever she wants in hypothetical congratulations and grounding her as soon as she walks in the door.

Sam smirks and kisses Dean quiet. They have the house to themselves, after all.