

Legend In My Time By AmandaK

"Dammit." Bobby stuffed his watch back in his pocket and looked out the window again. Across the street, demons using the bodies of the hapless citizens of New Harmony blocked access to the house. There was no way Bobby could get to Sam and Dean and do... well, *anything*.

He hated being helpless.

Somewhere across town, a bell was striking midnight. Bobby hardly dared move while he waited for what was to happen. A minute passed. Another. He was about to sigh with relief when a scream disturbed the still, quiet night.

Christ, no...

Outside the house, the demons stirred. Another agony-filled cry reverberated through the air, and Bobby wanted to put his hands over his ears to block out the sound, but he found he couldn't move, horror keeping him pinned.

They'd failed. Sam had failed. *He* had failed.

"God, have mercy," Bobby murmured, knowing there wasn't much God could do for Dean Winchester. Not after the deal he'd made.

At least the screaming didn't last long and the sudden silence that followed was so thick it was almost tangible. Bobby knew those screams would haunt him for the rest of his life.

He was about to go down the stairs and find a way to reach the house regardless of the demonic vigil outside, when the building started to glow in an eerie, otherworldly white light that rapidly grew too bright to look at. Bobby squeezed his eyes close to shut out the glare, but it still hurt, and he brought his hands up, pressing his palms over his eyeballs, cringing beneath the window sill and waiting for the blast that would wipe New Harmony off the map.

But the expected explosion never came. Instead, the light petered out, leaving him with a painful blind spot of afterglow. He blinked, his eyes watering, and gradually his vision returned more or less intact. He peeked out the window again. People milled about in the street, dazed and confused about how they came to be out in the cold night in their pajamas or house coats.

The demons were gone.

Bobby picked himself up and raced down the stairs and across the street as fast as his legs would carry him. But on the doorstep of the Fremonts' house, he hesitated, suddenly afraid to go in, scared of what he would find.

A soft noise drifted out, a heart-wrenching sob.

"Dean... No."

Sam.

The naked anguish in Sam's voice made up Bobby's mind, and he pushed the door wider. The smell of fresh blood was heavy in the air, and he had but follow his nose to find Sam cradling Dean's mangled body in his arms, tears dripping down his nose and mingling with his brother's drying blood.

"Sam..." Bobby reached out a hand, hesitating a moment before lightly resting it on Sam's shoulder.

Sam tilted his tear-streaked face up to look at him. "I tried, Bobby."

Bobby swallowed down the lump stuck in his throat. "I know, son. You did the best you could."

"No." Sam was shaking his head. "No, I didn't. I shouldn't have... I should have..." His voice trailed off as he glanced at Ruby's body lying next to Dean's, seemingly undamaged.

In the distance, sirens began to howl. Someone had come to their senses and called 911.

"We gotta get out of here," Bobby said, nudging Sam's shoulder. For a moment, Bobby feared Sam would refuse to go but then he clambered to his feet. He lifted Dean in his arms and Bobby reached to help, but Sam shook his head no. He cradled Dean's body against his chest, not caring about the blood that seeped into his shirt. One limp arm fell away and dangled loose. Bobby took it and angled it gently back across Dean's chest. Sam gave him a look of gratitude.

"Yeah. I gotta... gotta get Dean patched up. Make sure he's ready." He suddenly caught Bobby's gaze, and Bobby almost flinched at the steely determination in those eyes where moments ago there had been nothing but bottomless grief. "I'm gonna get him back, Bobby."

Bobby didn't reply; this was neither the place nor the time to have that particular conversation. He merely nodded, and made a mental note to keep a close eye on Sam for the next few days. A grief-stricken Winchester was like a trapped animal: bound to try something desperately idiotic.

A few minutes later the Impala roared out of town, leaving the approaching red-and-blue lights to fade in the rear view mirror. Sam crouched in the back seat, still holding Dean in his arms while Bobby drove. It felt kinda sacrilegious, him driving, Bobby thought, hands resting lightly on the leather of the wheel worn smooth beneath Dean's palms. But at the same time, it seemed just so right that Dean's last journey should happen in his own car.

Besides, Sam was in no condition to drive, so Bobby's Chevelle would have to wait until he had a chance to pick it up.

The journey back to South Dakota took the rest of the night and most of the following morning. Bobby hadn't known where else to take the boys; his place seemed the closest thing they had to a home. And Sam didn't seem to particularly care where Bobby brought them.

Once they reached the house, and Bobby switched off the engine, Sam stirred for the first time in hours, carefully sliding from the back seat and struggling to get Dean's body out. Without a word, he carried it inside and padded down the hallway to the guest room that the boys used whenever they stayed at Bobby's. Bobby followed him wearily, feeling every one of his fifty-odd years in his bones. He didn't offer to help, convinced that Sam neither wanted nor needed his assistance.

In the guest room, Sam laid Dean on top of the nearest bed. Without looking at Bobby, he said, "I need hot water and a wash cloth. And the first aid kit that's in the trunk." Murmuring to himself, prodding with a light finger at torn arteries that were coated with black, dried blood, he added, "Don't worry, Dean. I'm gonna fix you right up. Done it so many times; this is no different."

Bobby didn't move. He feared to leave Sam alone, worried that the kid was losing it. Not that he could blame him; no one who suffered the losses Sam had could be expected to stay sane. First his girlfriend, then his father, and now his brother, all killed by goddamn demons... It'd be enough to drive anyone insane. Bobby recalled how he'd been a little crazed himself after he lost his wife, bless her soul.

Sam shot him a look over his shoulder and said, "Bobby, please."

Bobby sighed and shrugged. What could it hurt to let Sam patch his brother up a little? If it made the boy feel better...?

Deciding, at least for now, to give in to Sam's wishes, he went into the kitchen to put the kettle on. While the water was heating up, Bobby headed down to the bathroom for his own first aid supplies. His kit was probably better stocked than what those boys carried around in their car.

After Bobby had returned to the guest room, Sam gently cleaned Dean's injuries and sewed him up with neat little stitches before covering his brother's body with a blanket, tucking it beneath his chin as if he were merely sleeping. Finally, Sam seemed satisfied with his handiwork. He pushed to his feet, holding a bloody wash cloth and a bowl of pink-tinted water. He put both on a nearby cabinet and turned to Bobby.

"Watch over him for a while?" he asked. "There're a few things I need to get." The look he gave Bobby was calm, if a little coldly determined. Bobby wasn't sure what frightened him more: the idea that Sam might be losing his mind, or that he might hide it so well.

He planted himself in the doorway, blocking Sam's path.

"No," he said. "You're not going anywhere. I'm not lettin' you go do something harebrained too." He folded his arms before his chest. He'd listened to Dean when he told him to go and leave him, a year ago. And see how that ended up. He wasn't about to be fooled twice.

Sam blinked, appearing more startled than anything. "What?"

"Didn't you hear a thing your brother said?" Bobby asked. "Sam, he's dead. And I'm not gonna let you make the same mistake Dean made, that your daddy made. I'm not gonna let you make another deal."

"What?" Sam said again, peering down at him. "Oh. You think I want to offer up my own soul to that bitch." He shook his head. "Don't worry, Bobby. I won't. But I *am* going to bring Dean back."

"How?" Bobby demanded. "Dean's in hell."

A hint of a knowing smile made Sam's lips twitch, and a shiver ran along Bobby's spine.

"I know. But I've done some thinking," he said. "We got Dad out. I can get Dean out too."

"How?" Bobby repeated. He was certain now that Sam had gone crazy. "You gonna open

the devil's gate? Again?"

Sam nodded, almost eagerly. "He'd do no less for me."

Bobby gave a wry snort. "Don't mean to piss on your parade, boy, but I think you need the Colt for that, don'cha?" He winced mentally at the harshness of his words, but perhaps that was what Sam needed: a grim reality check.

Much to Bobby's surprise, Sam merely nodded again and smirked. "I know where to get it." He lowered his voice. "When I was looking for a way to save Dean, I found something. A ritual. I couldn't get it to work, before, but I think I can now. Please, Bobby, just let me pass."

Bobby stared at him, unsure. There'd been a certain undercurrent of a threat in Sam's soft plea to let him by. And he seemed so coherent, as if he knew exactly what he was talking about.

"What ritual?" Bobby asked. "And what makes you think you can make it work *now* if you couldn't before?"

The smirk on Sam's face grew a little wider, but Bobby saw no humor in it. "Because I flipped a switch."

And that, Bobby decided, was the weirdest thing Sam had said since they'd begun their race against time to save Dean.

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It didn't take Sam long to pick up the items he needed from the nearby town, and when he slammed the car door shut and trudged back up the steps to the porch, Bobby's house was awash in the golden glow of a slowly sinking sun. Dean had been dead less than twenty-four hours: there was still time.

Once inside, he emptied his duffel on the floor of the guest room, ignoring Bobby's anxious inventory of the things he'd brought with him. None of the herbs were unusual; they could be bought in any decent grocery store, which was exactly where he'd gotten them. Neither was there anything particularly remarkable about the candles. But the small, leather-bound book amidst the clutter was rare, and had been hidden in the car for the last couple of weeks. As far as Sam knew, he might hold the only copy still in existence. And as carelessly as he treated the packages of herbs, just as reverently did he handle the book, putting it cautiously on the nearby dresser.

"What's—"

Sam slapped Bobby's hand away, and the older man looked at him, unease and wounded pride warring in his eyes.

"Bobby, trust me..."

Bobby cocked his head, and Sam could almost see wheels spinning in his brain. The obvious concern in Bobby's expression was enough to bring another, grateful smile to his face.

"I'm not crazy," Sam said. "And I promise I won't be making any deals. It's ..." He gestured at the little book. "I'll explain in a little while." He was going to need Bobby's help anyway, so he might as well tell him what the plan was.

He had come across the little book in a dusty antique store down in Louisiana while he was searching for a way to help Dean. At first glance, the ritual it described sounded absurd, impossible, even in their crackpot world of madness. But he'd bought the book just the same, thinking that it'd be worth to give it a shot, at least.

Except the ritual hadn't worked. Not before. But Sam thought he just might get it to work now. He recalled the stunned look on Lilith's face when he'd stopped her, when he resisted her command to stay back. And he remembered the panic in her eyes, the instant before she left Ruby's body. Ruby had tried to tell him, too, but he hadn't listened to her, hadn't understood. Not until it was too late.

Bobby was still staring at him, as if trying to bore into his brain and thus discover the truth about Sam's sanity.

"All right!" Sam flung up his hands, knowing Bobby wasn't about to let it go until he'd told him everything. "It's a time travel ritual."

Bobby blinked. "Time tra—Sam! There's no such thing as time travel."

Sam thought about their run-in with the trickster down in Florida. Dean hadn't remembered a thing, but Sam could recall every awful minute of every awful Tuesday as well as the six months of hunting alone that followed it. If a trickster could manipulate time, who was to say he couldn't?

"There could be," he said stubbornly. "Lots of people say demons aren't real either."

Bobby's mouth opened, closed, opened again. "You said you tried it?"

"Yeah," Sam said. "The other day, while you were gone to get that pendulum, and Dean was hitting the books."

"And it didn't work."

"No," Sam admitted. "But things are different now."

"Because of your psychic powers." Bobby heaved a sigh. "Sam, I don't care what those demons think you can do, what you think. You can't change the past. It simply don't work that way."

Sam leaned forward. "See, Bobby, that's just it. I don't want to change the past. I want to change the future."

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"So...." Bobby paused. "Lemme see if I got this straight: you want go back to find Samuel Colt?"

Sam traced the outline of the old book with a finger. "Yeah. If I can find him, maybe I can get the gun, bring it back here."

"Hm." Bobby gave a soft grunt. "I smell a heap of if comin' off this plan."

"I know the odds are long," Sam said with a sigh. He turned around and looked at the other man intently. "Bobby, it's the best I got." It sure beat trying to find Lilith again and take the gun from her, which was the only alternative Sam could think of.

"It's insane, is what it is," Bobby muttered as he looked over at Dean's body, lying so still and quiet on the bed. "You Winchesters..." He let out a breath.

Sam waited for Bobby's decision. If he didn't want to help him... Sam tried to come up with a list of others he could ask for help, but it was frighteningly short. Only a handful of names were on it. And if any of them got wind of the fact that Bobby Singer had turned him down, it'd grow even shorter.

"How long you think you'll be gone?"

Those weren't the words Sam had expected and for a long second he could only stare, not quite comprehending.

"I don't really know," he admitted. He hadn't thought that far yet. "A few days?" He knew

where he had to go but he had no idea how long it'd take him to find the gunsmith or convince him to give up the gun once he got there.

"Will you look after Dean?" He didn't like leaving his brother behind but he had no choice; even if he could get the ritual contained in the little book to work, there was no way he could take Dean's body with him.

"A few days..." Bobby shot another glance at Dean before looking up to meet Sam's eyes. "Dean doesn't have that much time," he said carefully, as if weighing his words. "Weather's warmin' up, and that ancient AC barely cranks out enough cold air to make it bearable in here."

Sam looked at Dean, his heart sinking. Bobby was right. Dean's skin was sallow, pale, with that waxen quality of dead flesh. It wouldn't be long before putrefaction set in. But what could Sam do except hurry?

"I'm sorry, Sam, I'm not equipped for cold-storing a..."

Bobby's voice trailed off without finishing what he was going to say. Curious, Sam turned back to the old hunter. A small crease appeared between Bobby's eyebrows. "Hang on a sec," he muttered before turning on his heel.

Sam hurried after him to the living room. Bobby cast a good look around at the room, and started raking through the tottering heaps of musty old books.

"Where's that damned spell?" He leaned down and bumped a hip against a towering pillar of leather-bound tomes. It swayed and threatened to crumble and spill books all over the floor. Sam jumped to steady it.

"What spell?" he asked.

"Oh," Bobby said absently, browsing through a book that was even bigger than the copy of *The Key Of Solomon* he'd lent Sam, "something I read once... Something that'll keep Dean... Ah hah!" He held up a thin booklet triumphantly. Its brown leather cover was nearly black with age, the yellowed pages coming loose from their binding. Sam glanced at the symbols on the cover.

"Necromancy?" he asked, surprised Bobby would even consider such a thing. "Are you sure?"

"No," Bobby said. "I think I'm gonna regret this." He started to carefully make his way out of the forest of book stacks. "But since y'already plan on messin' with laws of nature

anyway, I figure what the hell."

Sam found his eyes suddenly filled with tears at the lengths the old hunter was willing to go to to help. "Thank you, Bobby."

Bobby gave him an aw-shucks shrug and pressed the book in Sam's hands. "Draw the symbols around Dean's bed," he said gruffly. "There's some chalk on the shelf over there. I'll get the rest of what we need."

Sam glanced at the symbols in the thin volume, recognizing the hieroglyphs as those of ancient Egypt. Old Kingdom, if he wasn't mistaken, third or fourth dynasty probably.

"What's the spell do?" he asked.

"Slows decomposition," Bobby said. "Buys you time to free Dean's soul from hell while he still has a body to return to. What?" He'd caught Sam's look. "You think embalming's all what kept those mummies fresh?"

Sam went back to studying the symbols. "It's what the scientists say."

Bobby snorted. "Son, modern science disregards anything they can't test in a lab."

Sam gave a soft chuckle. Bobby was right: if the Discovery Channel was to be believed, ghosts didn't exist either. Nor did werewolves, faeries, demons, chupacabras or leprechauns.

Suddenly, time travel didn't seem as far-fetched as it had before, either.

oOo

After they had secured Dean's body against further degeneration—slowed the passing of time within the circle Sam'd drawn around the bed, as Bobby called it—it was time for Sam to prepare himself.

"Now what happens?" Bobby said. "You just apply that power of yours and travel through time?"

"No. Nothing so simple." Sam would forever be grateful that Bobby didn't wince or flinch when he mentioned Sam's newly awakened powers; he managed to make it sound as if Sam had discovered a talent for the piano, or a knack for languages. He offered Bobby the book. "Open it."

Bobby shot him a look but obeyed. "Whoa," he breathed when he caught his first look of the intricate designs sketched on its brittle pages. "This is rare. I never seen anything like it."

And that said a lot about the spell, Sam thought. Not even Pastor Jim had had a book collection as extensive as Bobby's.

Bobby squinted. "Says here we gotta draw those on you."

"Yeah. That's why I need your help."

The ritual Sam had found required numerous sigils to be painted on his chest and back. When he'd tried the ritual before, he'd done so himself. It had been awkward and he'd probably messed them up, but he didn't think getting the drawings wrong was the reason the spell had failed. Sam wasn't entirely sure what the sigils' function was, but from what he gathered of the archaic text was that they were meant to be a focus for his power.

A power he hadn't had before.

Bobby looked up and met Sam's gaze. "Lemme guess: needs to be done in blood."

Sam offered a half-smile. "Oddly, no. Seems anything'll work." His smile widened a little. "But I'd prefer something that washes off."

Bobby snorted. "That means Sharpies are out. So's spray-paint." He thought a moment. "Charcoal should do it. Greasy enough to last awhile, easy enough to get off, after."

Sam grimaced but nodded. Bobby laid the opened book back down on the dresser and disappeared. He returned a few moments later with several sticks of blackened charcoal from the hearth. Sam stripped down until he was naked from the waist up.

He shivered as Bobby drew the first line, though the room was warm. Goosebumps sprang up on his arms when the stick scratched along his back and down his sides.

"Stop squirming, boy," Bobby grumbled.

Sam tried to remain still. "It tickles."

Bobby gave a wordless grunt. "How you plan on gettin' back, anyway?" he asked. "With nobody 'round to freshen up the paint job?"

"Shouldn't need it," Sam said. "Coming back should be easy." He twitched as Bobby

touched a particularly sensitive spot on his ribcage. "Sides," he said, pretending he didn't see the glare the other man gave him, "it's a spell. It'll wear off. I should get pulled back here when it does."

Bobby huffed. "You got an awful lot of should in there, son," he muttered. He bent closer to Sam and grabbed the piece of coal tighter between his fingers.

The room grew silent. Bobby reverted to the book often, carefully sketching the lines and circles the ritual required onto Sam's upper body. Finally, he drew the last of the designs between Sam's shoulder blades and pulled back to study his handiwork.

"Hmph," he grunted.

Sam turned around. "What?"

"You look like a biker dude," Bobby said. "Inked up and all."

Sam gave a soft guffaw of laughter. "Maybe," he said, "but I don't think a Harley eagle tattoo is quite as powerful as these are." He gestured at his chest.

"You'll draw quite a bit of attention, though," Bobby said, worried.

Sam reached for his shirt. "I'll just button up."

"Sam?"

Sam stopped dressing and looked over at Bobby. The older man had put down the piece of charcoal and was studying the book, an expression on his face that Sam couldn't quite place. But... was that a smile? Bobby rarely smiled.

"What?"

"Did you translate the entire thing?"

Sam shook his head. "No. Didn't have time."

"Thought so."

Sam frowned as he watched Bobby's lips quirk a little. Yep, definitely a smile. "Why? What's it say?"

"It says here," Bobby said, tapping a finger onto the page, "that you can't take any physical

items or worldly possessions with you.

Sam wasn't sure what Bobby was saying. "What's that mean? I gotta empty my pockets and leave my watch?" He'd feel a little vulnerable, going in unarmed and empty-handed, but Sam was already thinking about what he would do when he got to where he was going—hoped to be going.

"Son," Bobby said patiently, "that includes clothes."

"Clo—oh..." Sam's hands stilled, shirt half-buttoned up.

Bobby was no longer smiling, his moment's humor gone in the face of grim reality. "Sam, you'll be runnin' around in the Old West buck naked and covered in tribal markings. How's that gonna help your brother?"

Sam shrugged, and started to take off his shirt again. "I'll figure something out, steal some clothes or something. Listen, Bobby—" he continued quickly when Bobby opened his mouth to protest, "I can do this. I've got this power now. I didn't want it, but it's all I have. At least let me try and put it to good use."

Bobby looked as if he wanted to say more. A moment later he let out a long breath instead, and though his shoulders slumped, he nodded. "Ok. Let's do this, then."

Sam finished undressing, folding his jeans neatly and putting it on top of the rest of his clothes piled on a nearby chair. He felt a bit self-conscious, being naked in front of the old hunter, but he shook it off. If he got Dean back... A little embarrassment would be a small price to pay.

He gestured for Bobby to light the candles when another thought occurred to him. He took in a sharp breath and his heart sank. "Bobby... what about bringing back the Colt?"

Bobby stared at him, matches in hand, the look in his eyes telling Sam he realized what he was really asking. "I don't know, son," he admitted. "Just gotta give it a try, I guess. Or you could hide it somewhere, come back here and dig it up. You'd have to bury it good, though."

"Would that work?"

Bobby raised a shoulder. "Dunno. Not like I do this every day." His look said the rest: *your guess's as good as mine.*

Dammit. Everything hinged on that gun. And he might not even be able to transport the

Colt back across the decades after all? Sam shook off the despondent feeling that crept over him at the thought. He couldn't allow himself to doubt now. He'd need all his attention to get this spell right. There was no telling where he might end up if he got so much as a single phrase wrong.

Bobby lit the candles and herbs Sam had bought, and a pungent smell began to permeate the room. Sam asked Bobby to hold the book up so he could read the incantation.

He sent a quiet prayer to whomever would listen, begging that his plan would work, before he started the litany. Written in a language much, much older than the Latin they usually used, he tripped a few times over the strange words before he had the entire thing down. It wasn't until he could recite it fluently that he really concentrated on calling forth the strange sensation he'd felt when he resisted Lilith.

The words tumbled from Sam's lips smoothly, softly, like a benediction. The air grew warm; his skin started to itch and tingle beneath the symbols sketched onto his chest and back, and Sam balled his hands into fists to keep from rubbing at them. He didn't know what'd happen if he smudged the sigils, but he wasn't taking any chances; he couldn't afford to fuck this up. The room seemed to brighten, and the tingling sensation grew into a painful burning. Then the world exploded in a white flash, and Sam cried out as the sudden light stabbed at his eyes and seemed to tear him apart...

oOo

... Just like that, the pain was gone. It was dark and cold around Sam, and his skin pebbled in the cool air. He couldn't see a damned thing, and for a panicked instant, he feared that the bright flare had blinded him. But then his eyes adjusted and he could make out the shapes of trees and rocks as darker shadows against a star-studded night sky. Somewhere, an owl hooted and took flight in a flutter of feathers.

He didn't know where he was, and he certainly didn't know *when* he was, but it sure as hell wasn't Bobby's house.

He shivered in the chill darkness, wrapping his arms around himself for warmth, clenching his jaws together to keep his teeth from chattering. He better find some kind of clothing first, or he'd freeze his ass off before he could ever think about getting the Colt and help Dean escape from the pit.

He cautiously made his way out of the patch of scraggly bush he'd found himself in, hissing as thorns scratched at his naked skin and sharp rocks threatened to cut into the soles of his feet. Once he left the brush behind and could see more than just the sky above, Sam discovered he was right below the top of a hill. Moonlit desert stretched out

before him. Near the bottom of the slope stood a small wooden house, a cluster of ramshackle buildings surrounding it. It reminded him of nothing more than the ghost town in South Dakota, the town where he'd died a year ago. An uneasy shudder wanted to run down his spine, and Sam hesitated.

Down below a horse whinnied, and a weight fell off Sam's shoulders. There was life down there. He started down the hill, slipping and sliding his naked feet over the dry grass, careful of rabbit holes. It wouldn't do if he twisted an ankle right now.

As he approached the farm, he smelled the smoke that drifted up in a thin trickle from the chimney of the house. A soft orange light glowed through a small square window.

They could probably give him directions. Perhaps even provide him with a horse. He wasn't sure how far it was to the graveyard he was looking for—hell, he wasn't even sure he was in the right state, though it felt like Wyoming—and it might be a long walk on foot in the dark. He reached the house's small porch, and stopped, glancing down at himself.

He uttered a wry chuckle, shaking his head. *Use your brain, Sam*, he berated himself.

It looked like the tension and sleepless nights of the past week in his last, desperate scramble to find a solution for Dean were finally catching up with him. He was naked and shivering, covered in soot, his skin scratched bloody where thorns had bit into his flesh—not the best look to knock on the door of some unsuspecting farmer in the middle of the night and expect their help. They'd call the police—or, seeing that phones probably hadn't been invented yet, might take a shotgun to him before he had the chance to start to explain.

He turned away from the house and headed for the barn where he'd heard the horse whinny from. Perhaps he could find something to put on, a pair of old coveralls, or at least a blanket to wrap around himself. That'd also help with the night chill, although the long walk down from the hill had warmed him up a little.

Inside the barn, it was even darker than outside, but silver beams of moonlight pierced through cracks in the plank walls, offering enough illumination to make out there were several stalls on either side. All were empty, except for the one at the far side where a large horse was sticking its head out over the door, brown eyes watching Sam curiously. The horse had a white splotch on its forehead that stood out like a beacon in the gloom.

Sam ignored the horse and started exploring. He discovered a pair of old trousers discarded over an empty stall door and he quickly scooted into the rough canvas pants. They were a little wide around his hips and offered no belt loops, but Sam found a length

of coarse rope and tied that around his waist, tugging on the legs to make sure the rope held.

Satisfied the trousers wouldn't slide down, he continued his search until he found a striped shirt. It was dirty and reeked something awful, and there was a large tear in one of the sleeves, but it beat running around bare-chested, and he slipped it on. A stiff leather coat hanging on a peg near the door and a pair of heavy boots only one size too small finished his outfit.

Suitably dressed, he considered his options. He glanced back at the lone horse. He could simply steal it, not bother with the people in the house, but he had no idea where he was, or where he had to go. No, he decided, he needed information more than he needed a ride.

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Sam walked back out of the barn...

...and stopped dead in the doorway, staring into the twin holes of a double-barreled shotgun a few feet from his chest. Muzzle gleaming dully in the moonlight, it was held steady by a woman—no, girl, Sam corrected when she shifted every so slightly and her face was no longer shadowed.

He was suddenly very, *very* grateful for the clothes he'd found.

"Hold it right there, mister." Besides young, she also looked very determined.

The weapon was an antiquated model, but it'd be no less deadly at that distance, and Sam obeyed the order. He guessed she was maybe sixteen years old, certainly no more than seventeen, but the way she held the gun told him she knew how to handle it. She wore an old-fashioned dress that covered her from neck to ankle, with flaring skirts and long sleeves. In fact, he thought, she looked like an extra who'd stepped straight out of *Little House On The Prairie*.

Sam's hopes rose.

"Look..." he began, using the same tone that always helped put victims at ease while questioning them, "I didn't mean to scare you—"

"Scare me?" she interrupted. "You don't scare me." A faint tremor in her voice put the lie to her words and Sam made a mental note to proceed with care. People pointing shotguns were even more dangerous if they were frightened. He needed to get her to lower the

gun, or otherwise find a way to take it from her. But for that, he needed to get closer.

"I'm lost," he said gently, scuffing one foot forward a couple of inches before transferring his weight onto it. "I'm looking for help." He moved the other foot. "I don't mean you any harm." Another few inches. She was almost within reach. "Is your father home? Or your mother?" He tensed, ready to close the last few feet.

Something came at him; he felt it more than he saw. Before he could react, however, a heavy object connected with the side of his head. Sharp agony lanced through his skull and sparks burst into a cloud behind his eyes.

Then there was nothing.

oOo

Sam's head pounded in a rhythm in time with the beating of his heart. As he slowly regained consciousness, he found himself slumped awkwardly in a hard-backed chair, a fire crackling somewhere behind him. He could feel its heat through the borrowed shirt and coat.

He tried to sit up, and new pain shot through his arms from his shoulders down. A small sound escaped him before he could stop it. It took him a moment to figure out why he couldn't move his arms: they were pulled back and his wrists were tied together tightly. He attempted to move again, more cautious now, and managed to sit up a little straighter. He tested the ropes.

"Don't bother. Bess tied you up good."

He squinted as someone shifted in the shadows, coming closer, but Sam couldn't make out more than a vague shape in the gloom. Light flared as an oil lamp was turned up high. Sam blinked at the sudden brightness, his eyes watering.

The owner of the voice walked into the circle of light, and Sam recognized the girl from the yard, the one with the shotgun. But...? He drew his brow down in confusion. He was certain she'd been wearing a rose-patterned dress. But the dress she wore now was made of blue-checked cloth. He couldn't have been out for that long, could he?

Understanding dawned when he caught another moving shadow from the corner of his eye and he twisted his head around.

Twins.

"You hit me," he complained, a little chagrined to find a couple of teenaged girls had gotten the better of him. Dean would never let him live that down.

Dean...

The girl in the rose dress—Bess?—nodded. "Ginny did. With a shovel." She smirked triumphantly.

"Why? I didn't do—" Before Sam could finish, Ginny threw a mug full of water into his face.

"Shut your pan! We don' wanna hear yer humbug."

"What the...!" Sam spluttered at the water in his nose and mouth. It tasted stale. For a moment, the room was silent. Neither of the girls moved, but they looked at him, first with expectancy, then with growing confusion. Blinking water from his eyes, Sam glanced around, noticing lines of salt around the door and on the sill of the single, small window.

Bess broke the silence first, her voice hesitant. "Christo?"

Suddenly Sam understood. "You think I'm possessed?"

Ginny dropped the mug and pulled an amulet from beneath her bodice. She clutched it in her fist as she stared at him. Sam tried for his best innocent look.

"I'm not a demon," he said calmly. "And I'm not possessed by one." He tugged on the ropes. "Would you mind...?"

The girls ignored him. Instead, they exchanged a look in a silent communication that he couldn't decipher. They turned back to him.

"We gotta be sure."

Bess started rattling off the first words of the exorcism ritual that Sam was so very familiar with, and Ginny mumbled along with her. He sighed, waited for the girls to finish the first few lines, then picked up the recitation himself. The girls had fallen silent, their eyes wide, by the time he reached the end.

"See?" he said, flashing them a small smile. "Not a demon."

They still didn't untie him, though. Instead, they kept goggling at him like he was some

rare bug specimen caught in a jar. Sam glared back at them, growing more and more annoyed and anxious. He was on the clock; he didn't have time for this crap. He tested the ropes again, feeling how they'd been tied together. He realized Ginny'd spoken the truth: Bess knew how to lay a knot.

Which was why it was all the more surprising when he felt the rope shift a little beneath his fingers, one strand sliding against another until the first knot became undone. What the hell...?

"You know about demons?" Bess asked at last, pulling his attention away from the ropes.

"How?" her sister added. "Pa always says folk don' believe."

"Because I hunt them," Sam said. He gave a small shrug, and another knot fell away. He cocked his head. "As do you." It was a guess, but an educated one. He didn't think that exorcism rituals formed a regular part of girls' educations in the nineteenth century .

Ginny giggled, and Bess grumbled beneath her breath, "If Pa'd let us."

Louder, she said to Sam, "I don' believe you. Where's yer horse? An' yer guns?"

Before Sam could reply, Ginny's eyes grew round and she nudged her sister with her elbow. "He's wearing Luke's shirt..." She giggled again behind her hand.

The other girl squinted, and started to grin as well. "The one the cat peed on."

Sam's nose wrinkled. So, that was that smell. Well, beggars couldn't exactly be choosers, could they? He ignored the girls' snickering and instead concentrated on the sensation of the ropes slipping and sliding, untangling themselves as if guided by unseen hands. Behind him, the fire crackled louder as the desert wind picked up in force, whistling through the hole in the roof and wailing around the cabin. The wooden walls groaned, and somewhere, a tree branch started knocking rhythmically against the house. Sam was down to the final knot.

Bess cocked her head to listen to the wind for a moment. "Luke's not gonna like you tryin' ta steal his shirt."

"It's a long story," Sam said. "And I don't have the time." The ropes fell away from his wrists completely. He pushed to his feet, towering over the twins.

Ginny squeaked in fright and Bess gaped at him. They both stumbled backwards, chairs falling to the ground in a clatter.

"Look," Sam said, holding his hands out sideways. "I told you, I don't mean you harm. I don't mean anyone any harm. I just want to save my brother. I'm looking for—"

At that moment the door burst open and two men rushed in, wielding handguns that looked as outdated as Bess's shotgun had. Sam finally recognized the sound he'd heard hidden in the howl of the wind but hadn't paid attention to: it had been the clop of horse hooves approaching. He also realized it'd been a mistake not paying more heed to the noise.

"Ginny, Bess, stay back," the elder of the two men said over his shoulder to the twins, his gaze never leaving Sam. Too many hours of squinting into the sun had carved deep lines around his eyes and there were gray streaks in his beard. He looked like a man who'd take no crap from anyone. The other man was much younger, and resembled the girls so much that Sam instantly knew he was their brother. Might it be Luke of the cat-soiled shirt?

"How'd you get in?" the first man asked. "Salt lines ain't broke."

Sam stayed motionless, thinking fast. He figured that living on the frontier would make people cautious. And if he'd calculated right, there was a gateway to hell not far away, so they were probably wise to assume the worst. But this was getting ridiculous.

"Sir," he said, "as your daughters already discovered, I'm not a demon. Nor possessed by one." The older man cast a quick glance in Ginny and Bess's direction. They nodded as one.

"That's so," Bess said. "Ginny threw holy water. And I said the words."

"Hm." The guns never wavered. "May be that's the truth. Or maybe yer just very powerful."

Sam sighed. He was getting real sick of the delays. "Well, in that case," he said, "those pea shooters wouldn't really do you much good, would they?" He glared angrily at the antiquated weapons still pointed in his direction. Unbidden, that strange sensation welled up from deep within him again.

The next instant, both men cried out and their weapons clattered to the ground, spitting bullets, which rolled harmlessly into a corner. They shook their hands in pain, as if burned. One of the girls—Sam thought it was Ginny—whimpered.

Everyone stared at Sam, their eyes filled with shock and more than a little fear. Sam stared back, feeling as stunned as they looked.

"How did...?" Luke said. He cradled his right hand with his left.

Sam shook his head, glancing at the guns lying on the floor. "I don't know," he said softly. It was the truth; he'd just wanted to get those guns out of the way... He sent out another tentative thought, consciously this time but not really expecting anything to happen—it never had before, when he tried—but the guns slid over to him until he could pick them up and put them on the table behind him.

Huh.

It seemed Ava had been right. Jake too. It really was easy, once you gave in to it. He just wished he'd learned that *before* the hellhounds had dragged Dean off. But he'd been so afraid that... A small voice in the back of his head reminded him that it was also really easy to get corrupted by such power—as Ava and Jake had shown him too. Dad had given Dean that warning about him for a reason.

In fact, the only one of Azazel's special children that Sam could remember who had remained sane was crazy little Andy, whose worst misdeed had been to shove gay porn into a guy's head.

Sam swallowed, and pushed the thoughts of what he apparently could do to the back of his mind. Plenty of time to examine them later; he had more pressing concerns at the moment.

"Now," he said. "Can we talk?"

The older man, whom Sam surmised was the girls' father, gave him a curt nod. "Ginny, sweetie, put the coffee on. Luke?" He gestured for his son to pick up the fallen chairs. "Bess, go check the lines."

"Yes, Pa."

The old man reminded Sam a little of his own father: fully in charge despite the odds stacked against him and running his family with a firm hand. From the way his gaze never left Sam even as he gave instructions it was obvious he didn't trust him one bit. But being disarmed and with his children near, he didn't have much of a choice except to go along, at least for the time being.

Sam thought it best he'd not turn his back on the man.

Bess moved over to the window, angling a wide circuit around Sam, and he regretted

frightening her. The girl had spunk, even if she had bad judgment.

He sat down on one of the chairs at his end of the table, while the other man did the same opposite him. Luke went to stand at his father's shoulder, looking almost like a guard, or maybe a second.

"My name's Sam Winchester," Sam said in an attempt to break the ice once they were both seated. He tried to look as sincere as he could. If he were to succeed, he couldn't afford to antagonize the family any further. The last thing he needed was having to look over his shoulder constantly for some Old West hunters hot on his trail. "I've come... a long way. I'm—"

A loud pounding on the door interrupted him.

"Jed? Jed! Are you up?"

Luke started but hesitated. Jed raised a questioning eyebrow at Sam, a hint of a challenge in his brown eyes. Sam nodded at Luke, who went to pull the door open. A man rushed in and made a beeline for the table.

"Jed, I have an idea..." he began. His voice faltered when he caught on to the tension that hung heavily in the room. "Oh...I'm sorry..."

The newcomer wasn't very tall, with a neat, close-cropped beard and a tan buckskin coat. He snatched his hat off his head, and Sam's heart leaped with joy as he recognized him from the old, faded photos he'd found online. *See, Bobby? Not so insane after all.*

The spell had worked even better than he could've hoped for; he'd brought himself to the *exact* right time and place. Because this was the man he'd come looking for: Samuel Colt, the gun maker.

Now, he only needed one more thing, and he could go home.

Sam pushed to his feet and held out his hand. "I need your gun."

Colt hesitated. He glanced at the empty holsters of Jed and Luke.

"Better do as he says," Jed suggested softly. Luke rubbed his right hand along his pants, grimacing in memory of getting disarmed so painfully.

Colt's gaze shifted to the two guns lying in front of Sam on the table. He slowly pulled his sidearm with thumb and forefinger and offered it butt first to Sam. One look at the

weapon told Sam it wasn't the gun he'd come for.

"Not that one," he said. "The special gun. The one you made that kills demons."

Colt swallowed. "I don't understand," he said.

Sam felt anger stir inside him. It had been a long, *long* day. Dean was dead; the last chance to save him was slipping through his fingers. And Samuel Colt wanted to plead ignorance?

"Yes, you do," he said. "Everyone in this room," he continued loudly, "knows what I'm talking about. There're salt lines everywhere. Less than ten minutes ago those two—" he pointed at the girls busying themselves near the hearth—"tried an exorcism on me. And you," he nodded at Colt, "that amulet around your neck's not for show. So, don't give me crap, just gimme the gun and I'm out of your hair."

"But... I never made such a gun." Colt's shoulders sagged unhappily.

"You made it for a hunter," Sam reminded him. "Thirteen numbered bullets, specially cast."

Colt started shaking his head and opened his mouth again.

"I want it," Sam said before he could speak. "I need it to open the devil's gate and get my brother out."

Even before the last word had left his lips, the room broke out in a cacophony of voices as everyone started to protest at once.

"Quiet!" Sam bellowed at the top of his voice, and the little wood house shook on its foundations. Streamers of dust trickled from cracks in the ceiling. Mouths snapped shut with shock.

"You're insane," Colt whispered in the silence. "You want to open the gate? Have you any idea what you'll unleash into the world?"

"Yes, I do," Sam said quietly. But he couldn't let that matter; he had to keep his attention on the end game: rescue Dean. Once that was done, they could work on damage control together, send the demons that escaped with Dean back to where they belonged. They'd done it before; they could do it again.

He forced himself not to think about the innocent victims that would die in the interim.

He tried another tack. "If you didn't make the gun, then how did you seal the gate?"

Colt blinked, startled.

"It ain't sealed."

It was Jed who answered. He waved a hand at Sam's questioning look. "Trappers discovered the gate a half dozen years or so back. I been keepin' an eye on it since. Got it blocked and warded, too: granite doors, spells, cast iron talismans passed down from my great-grandfather. But hell's beasts are gettin' stronger. Door's just for show, and them wards won't hold long. Me 'n Luke, we doin' the best we can, but I'm 'fraid—" He ran a hand through his hair. "That's why I asked Mr. Colt to come have a look-see."

Colt's shoulders sagged. "I've no clue what to do about it, really," he admitted. "I've been thinking about lock mechanisms, but I'm not sure how to make it work. The gateway must've been around since the beginning of time; the Natives tell stories that date back generations. I fear this is far bigger than anything I ever dealt with. I'm a gun maker, not a magician."

Not really listening to Colt, Sam's brow furrowed as he thought quickly. If they told the truth, if the gate wasn't sealed shut... Hell existed outside of time, didn't it? Here, back in 1835, it'd be the exact same as in 2008. That meant that Dean's soul should be right there...

He felt his lips curl in a slow smile.

Getting Dean released from the pit might be easier than he'd thought; he wouldn't even have to figure out how to bring the Colt with him.

"I have an idea," he said. "If you help me first, I'll tell you how to seal that damned gate so nothing can come out ever again."

oOo

Sam gazed at the bullets lined up on the table before him almost reverently, admiring how the tiny objects were gleaming with newness. He felt a surge of gratitude toward Ruby. She'd been a conniving little bitch, but at least she'd taught them how to cast the special bullets.

Colt's eyes had lit up once Sam asked him to show him his sketches for the lock and suggested a couple of changes. He'd had to tax his memory to recall exactly what the lock

system on the gate looked like; a whole year had passed since he'd last seen it, and a few times Colt had frowned at an addition Sam made, or advised against it. At one point they'd reached a stalemate, unable to agree whether a certain line should curve in or out, and it was some ancient lore that Jed remembered which broke the tie.

Finally, Sam was satisfied they'd drawn every line of the lock that he could remember, and Colt peered down at the blueprint, muttering, "It might work."

"Oh, it'll work," Sam had said. He knew it would; he'd *seen* it work, after all.

Once the plans for the lock were done, Jed had taken them out back to a shed, which, much to Sam's surprise, he'd outfitted with a small but fully equipped blacksmith shop.

"Pa's always forged his own weapons and amulets," Luke explained when Sam asked. "He says it's the only way to make sure the iron's pure enough."

And while Jed and Luke started the work on the lock, Sam and Colt had turned their attention to the key: the gun that could kill a demon. Colt confessed a little sheepishly that he had tinkered with the idea of making such a gun and he showed Sam the model he'd put together.

"I can't get it to work," he admitted. "And I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

But Sam, who knew that particular gun well, did, and Colt had been eager to try the modifications he proposed for giving it its demon-killing properties. In the meantime, Sam had set himself the task of casting the thirteen bullets.

And now, they were nearly done.

He ran his fingers over the smooth surfaces of the bullets, imagining they still felt warm from having been cast only a short time ago. Dean had killed Yellow Eyes with one of those. *This one, maybe.* He took one of the bullets and held it up, turning it this way and that, trying to remember the number that had been scratched into that final bullet—and failing. *Perhaps it was this one?* Sam was about to pick up a second bullet when he realized Ginny was standing beside him.

He put the first bullet back on the table with the rest and cleared his throat.

"Mr. Colt says to see if he's got it right." She handed him a long tube of iron engraved with words. It was the Colt's barrel. Sam held it closer to the lamplight and peered at the etchings. The Latin inscription was flawless: *non timebo mala.*

Sam murmured the words softly: "I will fear no evil."

He gave the barrel back to Ginny. "This is good. Tell him not to forget to add the pentagram to the grip."

She nodded eagerly, and scurried off.

Sam was still pondering the bullets, engraving them with numbers, when Samuel Colt walked in, holding the assembled gun in both hands. Sam took it. Smelling of gun grease, the wood of the grip not yet faded with age, it shone dully in the light from the oil lamp. The inscription was clearly readable, the engravings sharp and bright, the pentagram rough to the touch.

Sam smiled up at the gunsmith. "It's perfect."

Colt beamed. But then his face fell. "So," he said. "Now we have a way to seal that gate. But that gun, it's like a... a key, isn't it. Anyone can use it to reopen the gate. What is to stop a demon on the loose from using it?"

Sam grinned. He'd thought of that too. But he knew things Colt didn't. "You ever hear of railroads?"

Uncertainly, Colt nodded. "Wagonways? Of course. Saw miners in Britain use them for coal. And I hear they built one for a steam engine near Baltimore. But how...?"

"Watch this." Sam glanced around, took a piece of charcoal from the hearth and started sketching on the table's smooth surface. He marked a spot with an X. "We're here," he said. "And this," he drew another X, "is the gate. Now, what you do, is you built churches here, here, here and here." Four more Xs marked the table top, in a rough circle around the gate. "Then you connect them with railroads. Iron lines. Like so." Sam quickly sketched in the lines, and when he heard the sharp intake of breath coming from Colt, he knew the man saw it.

"It's a devil's trap," Colt whispered. "You want to build a massive devil's trap."

Sam nodded. "As long as those tracks remain intact, it'll hold in any demon that manages to escape." He paused, then added, "And will keep out any that want to reopen the gate."

oOo

With the gun finished and plans for the future security of the gate decided upon, Sam and Colt went to help Jed and Luke assemble the lock and tumbler system they were building.

It was a major task with Jed's primitive tools and despite the many hands available, it took most of the next day to get the contraption forged. Made of iron, the interlocking wheels were almost too heavy for four men to handle, but eventually they managed to load the whole shebang onto a wagon. The wagon sagged against its springs with the weight, and Sam felt a little sorry for the pair of horses that would have to pull it across the Wyoming desert.

Jed lent Sam the horse with the star on its forehead to ride, and Luke'd offered him the use of a clean shirt and a hat. The sun was at the horizon, painting everything in a golden blaze and Sam accepted the hat with gratitude. He pulled it down to shield his eyes from the red glare of the setting sun on the dusty prairie.

Ginny and Bess went around as the men mounted to hand everyone a knapsack. "Provisions," they said. "Ginny baked the bread. There's some cheese and sausage too. And apples."

Bess held up a leather water bag for Sam to take as well. "Brought it up fresh from the stream." She waved a hand in the direction of the brook that gurgled down from the hill behind the house.

"Thank you." Sam leaned down from the saddle, pitching his voice low so the girl would be the only one to hear his next words. "Piece of advice: next time you think someone's a demon? Don't bring them into the house. That salt line is your last defense. You and your sister stay behind them, and you'll be all right." He straightened. "All right?" He smiled to ease the sting of the rebuke, but her cheeks colored pink nevertheless.

"Thank you for not tellin' Pa," she whispered back.

He nodded and tipped his hat at her, mentally clucking at himself for making the gesture; he'd seen one western movie too many, apparently.

While Sam talked to Bess, Colt had climbed onto the wagon's box and left the yard. The heavy wagon was lumbering onto the prairie, the two horses straining against their harness while Luke and Jed rode spread out to either side. With a last look at the twin sisters, Sam nudged his horse into a trot and followed them.

oOo

It was fully dark by the time they reached the graveyard surrounding the devil's gate, though the sky to the west still showed a hint of deep purple. Sam found he'd grown more stiff from a couple of hours in the saddle than after twenty-four hours straight in the passenger seat of the Impala, and he clambered down awkwardly from the horse,

wincing as he straightened and his spine crackled and popped. It took him several paces before his legs appeared to be working properly again. He made a mental note never to complain about the seats of the Impala again—sure, modern car seats were a lot better, but here he'd learned it could be much, much worse as well.

He left his horse with the others, tied together to a young tree, and glanced around. The cemetery, lit in the pale glow of a half-moon high above, was smaller than he remembered, the number of headstones less than a handful, but the heavy granite doors blocking the doorway to hell were the same—though they looked a bit, well, naked, without the heavy iron bars to keep them sealed.

Salt had been laid before the gateway and small rocks formed protective patterns around it. But Sam could tell that those barriers weren't gonna hold for very long; already the salt lines were fading as the grains were blown away by the cool desert wind.

By the flickering light of torches and oil lamps, Colt, Jed and Sam set to work to bolt the heavy locks to the granite, while Luke kept watch in case any creature had managed to crawl up and squeeze through the cracks. The young man seemed to have more faith in his own flintlock pistol and not the newly made Colt, and Sam didn't think that that old weapon would be much of a deterrent for a determined demon or spook. But no attack came, and by the time the eastern sky had taken on a pink hue to announce a new day, they were done.

"Let's see if it works," Jed said with a tired sigh. He brushed a sleeve over his brow, leaving a smear of dust.

"No," Sam said. He wasn't ready yet to close the doors to hell indefinitely; he had another job to do first. And he'd waited long enough; he was running out of time. Dean's time. "It'll work, I promise."

He told Luke to give the Colt to his father. "Anything comes out," he said to Jed, "shoot it. Don't hesitate." He wasn't worried about Jed shooting Dean; Dean was dead, a disembodied spirit, and not even the Colt could kill the dead. He turned away to walk back to the gate.

Colt snatched Sam's sleeve. "Are you sure about this?" he asked.

"About what?" Sam said.

Colt gave a vague wave. "All of it."

"Yes, I'm pretty sure," Sam said. "Trust me, the gun'll work; the doors'll be sealed. And if

you build those railroads like I told you, nobody'll open that gate again for at least another hundred and seventy years. Maybe they never will." He planned to bury the Colt somewhere in the desert where no one would ever find it once they were done with it.

The other three men watched him dubiously. Sam thought Luke might voice another protest, but one look at him and the younger hunter snapped his mouth shut with a little shrug.

"You know," Sam said, "you might wanna lay some salt circles. Things could get pretty nasty when I open those doors."

Jed nodded his acquiescence at Sam's suggestion, and dug up a sack of salt from his saddle bags. He offered the bag to Colt, who quickly began to pour a thin line around the three men. "What about you?" Jed asked Sam.

"Oh," Sam said absently over his shoulder, studying the doors to determine how best to open them, "I'll be fine." He had the tattoo to protect him from possession, and if Lilith's stupefied surprise as he stood up to her back in New Harmony was anything to go by, he had nothing to fear from your average demon that might come crawling out.

Pushing away any lingering doubts about the plan, Sam slowly approached the gate. He shot a last look over his shoulder to make sure the others were safe within their salt circles. Samuel Colt looked frightened and ready to bolt, but Jed held the Colt in two hands, ready to fire. He gave Sam a grim nod.

Sam reached for the door.

oOo

He gagged at the foul stench that hit him as soon as he wrenched the devil's gate open a crack. It reeked of sulfur and scorched flesh and rotten meat, and just about any other foul-smelling thing he could think of all mixed together in a single blend. A hot wind picked up, ruffling his hair and whistling through the widening crack.

Suddenly, the doors flew out of his hands, throwing Sam back and he landed on his ass. He picked himself up off the ground, ignoring the clouds of suffocating black smoke that came roiling out of the gate. "Dean!" he hollered into the gap. "Dean! Come on!"

Diaphanous humanoid shapes followed on the heels of the disembodied demons, some slow and lumbering as if disoriented, others determinedly scurrying off into the gloom of the early morning. One such being brushed past Sam in a cold wash of air, and as he watched the ghost disappear, Sam realized he'd made a terrible mistake. He grew chilled

to his core.

He didn't have a body for Dean.

Horror tightened around his heart. How could he have been so *stupid...?*

So eager to get to Dean that he hadn't thought things through properly. So damned relieved he didn't have to figure out how to bring the Colt back with him, so pleased to learn he could just as easily open the gates right here and now, that he'd forgotten the most important thing: he didn't have Dean's body with him.

He, who'd always accused Dean of acting rash, was about to lose his brother for good because he hadn't stopped to think.

"No... No no no..."

Sam raced back to the doors, trying to push them shut again before it was too late, but they wouldn't budge. He grunted with effort, closing his eyes as he threw his full weight against the granite slabs. Somewhere, gun shots rang out, the heavy bang of the Colt he so clearly remembered.

"Sam?"

Sam's eyes flew back open and he stumbled back. "Dean..."

Dean shimmered in front him. Sam could see trees and shrubbery through his brother's translucent form. He wanted to reach out, but Dean seemed so fragile Sam feared he'd simply dissipate if he so much as touched him.

"Dean, I'm sorry." Tears welled in Sam's eyes. "I fucked up. I thought..."

Dean shook his head, smiling as brilliant a smile as Sam had ever seen on him. "'s Kay, Sammy. You got me out."

Sam choked back a sob. "Yeah. Promised I would, didn't I?"

Dean nodded. Then his eyes widened briefly as if something surprised him, and he winked out. Sam stared at the spot where Dean's ghost had been a moment ago. This wasn't like Dad, who'd disappeared in a light so bright it had hurt his eyes. No, one moment Dean'd been here, and the next—

"Dean? Dean!"

But Dean was gone.

oOo

Five pairs of eyes rested on Sam's back as he rode away on the horse Jed had given him. The Colt sat heavily in the side pocket of his coat, creating a bulge. Seven bullets had been fired, and Jed swore he'd hit his mark with each one. Sam had no reason to doubt the old hunter. But it wasn't good enough. At least three times that number of demons, and who knew what else, had escaped before Sam had managed to shove the doors shut and Jed had jammed the Colt into the lock, sealing hell away behind the gun's magic.

It was a high price, and Sam knew people would keep paying it for decades to come. And for what? He'd failed; Dean was still dead.

Sam forced himself not to slump in the saddle. At least Dean was in a better place—or so he hoped. Nothing could be worse than hell. He took small consolation from that. Still, truth be told, he didn't think it was what Dean would've wanted if he had had the choice. Not like this. He hadn't even wanted to consider Doc Benton's weird science as a solution, and that had been far less deadly.

Immersed in his downtrodden musings, Sam let the horse wander where it would, not really caring where it took him. He'd promised Colt that he'd bury the gun in the hills somewhere outside the area the railroads would turn into a devil's trap. Hopefully, nobody would ever find it there.

A man appeared in their path, startling the horse. It shied and reared its head, nearly dislodging its unprepared rider from the saddle. Sam clenched his knees together by instinct but only a quick grab for the pommel prevented him from a hard fall.

"What the hell...?"

He reached for the Colt even as he blinked in surprise. There wasn't supposed to be anyone out here; this was still uncharted frontier land that wouldn't be laid open for decades. According to Jed, even the native tribes avoided the area surrounding the hell's gate. And most definitely, the last person Sam expected to see in the wilderness was a man who looked as if he'd stepped straight out of a gentlemen's club, wearing a dark-gray pair of trousers, a black waistcoat and a short wool jacket. Sam half-thought the man should be wielding a smoking cigar, or perhaps a pipe.

"Aw, if it ain't ol' Sammy Winchester," the man said. Something about how he said Sam's name was familiar and Sam tried to get the gun from his pocket without being noticed. "I

hear I have you to thank for my... release." The man's eyes shifted, turning yellow.

Sam gasped. "You."

The demon smirked. "Good to know you didn't let me down. Not that I expected any less from you. You always were my favorite."

Sam finally managed to free the Colt from his jacket and he fired it blindly at the demon. But the bullet dug a harmless furrow into the dry earth where it had been an instant before. A disembodied voice laughed. "See ya 'round, Sammy-boy." The sound faded on the last word.

Sam turned and twisted in the saddle, eager for another chance, but the demon was nowhere to be seen. Neither was the man he was possessing.

He checked the gun. Five bullets left. Just like when Daniel Elkins had found it.

A shiver of apprehension wanted to make its way along Sam's spine. How could the yellow-eyed demon be alive? Dean had killed the damned son of a bitch with this very same Colt; Sam had stood over the corpse he left behind. There was no way the demon could...

Suddenly cold realization dawned.

He'd started it.

He'd started it when he opened the gates to hell.

He, Sam Winchester, had let Azazel escape.

Everything that happened—Mom, Jess, Dad, Dean—it had all been his fault.

Sam's stomach churned with nausea and he feared the eggs Bess had cooked him for a late breakfast might come back up. He swallowed hard a couple of times until he had his stomach more or less back under control.

Predestination paradox.

The term popped into his mind from out of nowhere; he didn't remember where he'd heard it before. Some class or other at Stanford, probably. But he understood the principle behind it. If he hadn't opened the doorway to hell, the demon wouldn't have escaped to haunt his family. Dean wouldn't have had to sell his soul; Sam wouldn't have had to find

a way to get his brother released... And so he wouldn't have gone back in time to open those damned gates...

Sam groaned. Trying to figure it out, what sequence of events had brought him here, what action had led to what reaction, it made his head pound. He realized the horse had stopped walking and was nibbling on a patch of yellowed grass. He nudged it back in motion with his heels. Paradox or not, he still had a job to do.

Once he reached the range of low foothills he'd been heading for, he brought the horse to a halt. He let himself slide off but didn't tie the reins, instead letting the animal roam free to find its own way home. There couldn't be much time left until the spell ran out, and once it did, he'd get pulled back to his own time—where he had to tell Bobby how badly he'd fucked up.

It wasn't a conversation he looked forward to.

Sam crawled up the rocks, using hands and feet to drag and push himself higher until he reached a narrow crevasse between two towering cliffs. He peered into the gap, but the cliffs threw deep shadows and it was too dark to see beyond the first two feet or so of space. He snatched up a pebble and dropped it in, listening with satisfaction as it rattled down the black depths.

He took the box with the bullets, opened it and placed it carefully on the ground at his side before digging the Colt from his pocket. He admired the weapon a moment, tracing the words etched into the barrel. It was such a beautifully crafted gun, such a powerful weapon, it seemed a shame to throw it in a deep dank crack in the Wyoming desert.

Sam placed the gun in its velvet-lined slot in the box and closed it. He reached up for the shadowed opening, but paused before he let go.

Once he threw the Colt in, nobody would ever find it.

Without the Colt, Dean couldn't kill Azazel.

Could he risk changing history? Could he risk having the gun fall in the wrong hands? Could he risk someone using it to reopen the gates of hell and let loose the demon horde to ravage the Earth?

Sam heaved a sigh. He wished he could share his doubts with Dean, have his help to decide on the course of action to take. But Dean was gone for good. It was all on him now, Sam Winchester. He felt crushed beneath the heavy burden of responsibility.

Unbidden, Bobby's admonition popped into his head: *You can't change the past, Sam.*

If Bobby was right, it didn't matter what he did.

He bent to pick up the box and, before he could change his mind, before further doubt would paralyze him, Sam flung the box down the crevasse. He listened to its echo as it clattered down.

There was no way back now. What would be, would be.

Job done, Sam settled himself on a boulder to gaze out across the desert and waited. Far below, the horse meandered among the rocks, chewing on the dry grass. On the horizon, thunderheads were building, threatening rain.

He hoped the spell would run out before the storm reached him.

oOo

A groan escaped Sam as he woke. Everything about him hurt. He felt as if he'd gone twelve rounds with a semi—and the truck had won. He cautiously forced his eyes open, blinking at a beam of bright sunlight that pierced through a gap in faded curtains.

He knew those curtains...

Bobby's curtains.

He attempted to sit up, whimpering at the agony that shot from his neck up through his skull. He had a whopper of a headache, far worse than any of the vision-induced migraines he remembered.

"Sammy, you okay?"

Sam froze in mid-motion. That voice...

He slowly lifted his head and peered blearily into the sunlight. "Dean...?"

His brother rested against a heap of pillows, cheeks sunken and gray splotches under his eyes. His freckles stood out in sharp contrast with the paleness of his skin. He looked exhausted, as if the sheer effort of keeping his eyes open was wearing him out.

He was also very much alive.

"Dean..." It seemed to be the only word Sam could remember.

"You did it, Sam." Bobby's voice sounded odd, a little strangled, and Sam dragged his gaze away from the vision that was Dean barely long enough to notice that Bobby was smiling down on him, though his eyes glimmered suspiciously.

"How...?"

Bobby gave a shrug. "Don't know, son. You were only gone a minute when he—" he gave a nod in Dean's direction, "belted a snore loud enough to rattle the windows and started breathin' again. Scared the living crap outta me, too." The angry glare he shot in Dean's direction probably would've worked better if he hadn't been grinning like a loon at the same time.

A minute... "So, all this...?" Sam gestured at the smudged chalk lines around Dean's bed.

"Yeah," Bobby grunted.

Sam let out a breath.

"Christ, Dean..." He couldn't take his eyes off his brother. "I thought I'd lost you for good. When you disappeared like that..." He couldn't continue, tears clogging his throat.

"That was weird," Dean said. "Thought I was a goner for sure. But it was like..." He frowned as he searched for words. "... like something pulled me back here."

Sam turned to Bobby, who shook his head. "Don't look at me. Soulless body, bodyless soul, maybe they knew where they belonged? God knows weirder things've happened."

Sam tilted his face back toward Dean. He didn't really care how it had happened anyway, only that it had. "You're alive," he muttered, still not quite believing his eyes.

Dean grinned. "I never doubted you'd come get me." The grin turned to a smirk. "But dude? Go put some pants on, will ya? I was just raised from the dead, last thing I need is have your hairy white ass waved in my face."

Sam choked back a sound that was something between a laugh and a sob. He realized he was again stark naked, and pictured a pile of discarded clothing left behind in the Wyoming desert.

"Jerk."

Dean's grin widened. "Bitch."

Bobby grumbled something under his breath.

Sam smiled. He knew there would be questions, and that he had to tell Bobby and Dean everything he'd discovered. But it could wait till later. For now, all was as it should be.

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