

## Triplicity

By AmandaK

As soon as the woman walked in the door, Ellen knew she wasn't a hunter. Hell, she didn't even belong in Nebraska. In her forties, with ash-blonde hair cropped short enough that the tips merely brushed her shoulders, she wore low heels, a pair of wool trousers and a suit jacket over a white blouse. Amid the faded jeans, leather and plaid shirts that made up the dress code in the hunter community, she stood out like a corn-fed yokel in the stores of Minnesota's Mall of America.

Her blouse was wrinkled, showing deep creases from the left shoulder to the right hip. The result of wearing a seat belt: Ellen suspected that whoever she was, she'd been driving a long while. Most likely scenario: she was lost, and needed directions back to the nearest interstate. It happened, sometimes.

The newcomer's gaze skittered around the roadhouse, studying faces as if she was looking for someone. Her shoulders sagged a little with disappointment as she approached the bar and hitched herself onto one of the stools with a sigh. She didn't look lost so much as unsure where to go next. Ellen started to wonder if she'd been a bit hasty in her initial appraisal of the woman's reasons for coming into the bar.

Not that she was too worried about the odd outsider drifting in, despite the painful memories of the fire that had killed Ash and destroyed her livelihood. After she'd had the roadhouse rebuilt on the foundations of the old one, she'd asked the country's most talented hoodoo practitioners to lay powerful wards around it. Humans could enter Harvelle's without ever noticing anything, but nothing supernatural could come close. The roadhouse was safe.

Wasn't the same, though, Ellen reflected, as she moved along the bar and asked the woman, "What can I do you for?"

Not that she hadn't tried to recreate the look and feel of the saloon she'd run for several decades, first with Bill, then by herself. At first glance, she appeared to have succeeded, with haphazardly placed tables, pool players shouting in the back, and a jukebox filled with classic rock and country songs in the corner. But a closer inspection revealed that the floorboards hadn't darkened yet in the way only time could make them. Nor were they stained with years of spilled beer and whiskey and blood that no amount of scrubbing could ever remove. Place smelled different too. The faint odor of fresh paint still hung in the air instead of the familiar reek of old cigarette smoke.

Worse than that, the place contained no memories: not of dancing with Bill to some Reba

song after closing time, or Jo's first wobbly steps, or Ash snoring on the billiard or—

"Just some water, please," the woman said. She sounded exhausted, worn out. Ellen recognized the tone. She'd heard it often enough; it was how someone sounded when they'd reached the end of their tether and didn't know where else to turn.

Ellen arched her brows, but took a glass, scooped a couple of ice cubes into it and filled it with soda water. She put it in front of the woman, who took a sip and offered Ellen a grateful little smile that only served to make her look even more tired. There were dark smudges under her eyes, as if she hadn't slept much, and deep lines beside her mouth that Ellen suspected hadn't been there not too long ago.

The woman took another swallow of her water and fidgeted on her stool. She glanced around, tapping her fingers against her glass. The gesture drew Ellen's gaze to her nails. They'd once been perfectly manicured and painted, but now the paint was chipped.

The woman caught Ellen looking and curled her fingers, hiding the tips in her palm. Her cheeks colored slightly, as if she was embarrassed by the state of her hands.

Again, Ellen didn't comment. She'd learned over time that the quickest approach to getting people to speak—assuming they wanted to—was to not ask questions but let them work their way around to it themselves. And she'd turn in her liquor license if this lady wasn't just itchin' to open up to someone.

She could tell the exact moment the woman made up her mind, too: she sat up a little straighter, squaring those lowered shoulders a bit. But Ellen was unprepared for what came out.

"I'm looking for someone," the woman said, her voice low. "A man named John Winchester. I think he used to come here. Have you... do you know where I can find him?"

It took Ellen a moment to regain her composure. To give herself something to do, she snatched up a towel and started rubbing already sparkling glasses.

"Haven't seen him in a while," she said, trying to sound casual. She didn't want to lie, but neither was she quite ready to tell this stranger the truth either.

"Oh." The woman's shoulders fell again and she looked smaller than before. Tears glimmered in her eyes. It looked as if Ellen's reply had dashed the woman's last hopes.

"Why are you looking for him?" Ellen asked. "Maybe somebody else can help." A woman

dressed like this, asking for one of the best hunters Ellen had known, in a bar filled with other hunters? Had to be some kind of supernatural problem.

"No, I...." Her voice hitched and she cleared her throat before trying again. She let out a dry laugh that held no humor. "I don't know what I was thinking, coming here. It's been years since...." Again, she trailed off, blinking rapidly. Ellen frowned.

"I better get going," the woman continued once she found her composure again. "How much do I owe you for the water? And is there a place around here where I can stay for the night?" She slipped from the stool and searched in her purse for her money.

Ellen waved her off with the cloth. "Water's free around here," she said. "Listen, why—?" That was when she saw the pendant peeking out just above the top button of the woman's blouse. "Wait a sec," she said. "That looks like one of Bobby's charms. Where did you get that?"

"This?" The woman fished the amulet out and held it up for Ellen to see more clearly: it was a small, metal disk etched with symbols: definitely Bobby's work. "John Winchester gave it to me."

Ellen stared at her, hard, before sighing and planting two glasses on the counter top between them. She snatched up the bottle of single malt Scotch. "There's something I need to tell you about John," she said, pouring a liberal amount into each glass. "And you're not gonna like it."

oOo

Midmorning on a cold winter's day, and Harvelle's Roadhouse hadn't yet opened for business. Outside, low-hanging clouds threatened snow and blanketed the world in gray light. Inside, Ellen had the lights turned on and, despite the early hour, she kept some hard liquor within reach. She expected the Winchester boys might want a stiff drink after hearing what Arlene had to tell them.

They were sitting shoulder to shoulder at one side of a table in the middle of the room, while Arlene perched stiffly on a chair at the other side. Dean was yawning. He and Sam had arrived from New Mexico less than half an hour ago, after driving all night. Ellen put four mugs of hot, strong coffee down in front of them and pulled up another chair next to Arlene. She figured the woman could do with a little moral support

"So, Ellen...." Dean, never one to beat around the bush, broke the silence first. "Wanna

tell us why you called in the middle of the night to order us to get our asses over here pronto?" They'd been on their way to somewhere north of Santa Fe to dig up and salt and burn the corpse of a restless spirit when Ellen called, and clearly Dean hadn't forgiven her yet for interrupting his hunt.

Arlene answered in Ellen's stead. Helped along by a sleeping pill, she'd had eight hours of solid sleep in the spare bedroom, and Ellen thought she looked a little less exhausted than when she'd entered the bar the evening before. "It's my son," she said. "Shane. He's gone missing."

Sam glanced at Ellen. "You said this had something to do with Dad?"

"It does." Ellen gave him a quick nod. "Just let Arlene tell you."

"John and I met years ago," Arlene said. She stirred the coffee in her mug but didn't drink it. "I... I thought he could help, so I came looking for him. Took me forever to find this place. And then, Ellen tells me... he passed away."

"Yeah." Dean's tone was gruff, John's death still being a sore point. Sam had told Ellen some of what had gone down in the hospital after their accident, and she thought it was typical John to sacrifice himself for his boys—just like it was for Dean to do the exact same thing for Sam a year later. She'd always thought the Harvelles exhibited some fucked-up family dynamics, with her and Jo constantly at each others' throats, but the Winchesters made them seem positively normal.

Arlene looked up from her coffee, offering Dean a gentle twitch of her lips. "I can see him in you," she said softly. "Both of you. Sam's got his eyes, and you...." She gave a little shake of her head. Ellen knew what she didn't say: for one thing, Dean had inherited John's charm.

"I still don't get it," Sam said. He rubbed at his eyes with thumb and forefinger. "So, you and Dad knew each other once. What does that have to do with your son going missing? Or with us?"

Arlene shot a quick glance in Ellen's direction before looking down at her hands, curled around the warmth of her mug of coffee. When Arlene remained silent, Ellen took up answering. "Arlene believes that Shane might be John's son. Your brother."

For a long moment, the silence that fell was so complete that Ellen could hear the faint buzz of the fluorescents in the back room. Then, without warning, Dean jumped up, sending his chair clattering to the floor with a loud thump. He leaned forward, balled fists planted on the table, his eyes flashing. "Goddammit, Ellen! I can't believe you told us to

drop everything over a piece of crap like this. People could die because we didn't finish that job." He turned his furious gaze to Arlene, who flinched. "And you, lady. I don't know what your fuckin' game is, but I'm not buyin'. Dad loved Mom. For God's sake, the man wore his wedding ring until the day he died, never took it off. He'd never—" Dean's voice caught.

Ellen leaned forward and wrapped her fingers around one of Dean's fists. His knuckles were white. "Dean," she said softly, "your father was a grown man. There's no shame in needing a little human company now and then." She paused for a moment, dropping her gaze as she was caught up in her own memories. "It doesn't mean he loved your mother any less. Believe me, I know."

Dean looked at her, green eyes wide, and Ellen could suddenly see the little boy he'd once been, the child who must've looked up at his father and begged him to make it all better, to promise that the monsters weren't real. Her heart ached; Dean had been forced to grow up so young.

Now, he spun away without a word. For a moment, Ellen feared he might storm out of the door. But he stopped his flight beside the silent jukebox, his back to them. He was taking deep breaths, his shoulders hunched up high underneath the leather jacket.

Sam, who had sat frozen during Dean's outburst, twisted in his seat, watching his brother, his face clearly showing the debate going on inside his head about whether to follow Dean or not. At last he turned back. He glanced briefly at Ellen, before he addressed Arlene. "You're not sure, are you?" It wasn't really a question. "'Believe', 'might'. Why do you think it's him? Why our dad?"

Arlene was wringing her hands in her lap. She avoided looking at Sam and instead kept her gaze glued to the table. "Because he's the only one I can remember." The reply came in a whisper barely audible despite the quiet in the room.

"What?" Sam's brow lowered and his mouth twisted. Ellen realized how Arlene's words must sound to the boys.

"Sam," she said softly, thankful he swiveled his head enough to look at her. "Hear her out. Please."

His features softened and he sighed. "All right."

Ellen gave Arlene's arm an encouraging squeeze. "Tell them what you told me."

Arlene nodded.

"Eleven years ago," she began haltingly, "I had a... a black out. One night, I walked out of the supermarket with an armful of groceries. Next thing I know, a month has passed and I'm lying on the floor in the middle of my living room, hurting all over. The place is a shambles: broken furniture, glass scattered everywhere, and strange symbols painted on my ceiling. John is there. Your father. Cut and bleeding, but his hands and voice are so gentle when he helps me up and brings me water and tells me it's going to be all right...."

"You were possessed?" Dean had returned to the table on silent feet, and although he didn't sit back down and kept his arms crossed before his chest, he seemed willing to listen. Ellen smiled inwardly. John had done well with his boys, despite everything.

Arlene nodded. "That's what John said, too. Later that night, he and I... I mean, he was hurt and I was patching him up... I was so confused, and he... we.... It just happened."

"Right," Dean muttered. He sounded resigned.

Arlene took a deep breath. "Five weeks later, I found out I was pregnant. Look, I lost over a month of my memory. I don't know what happened during that time. But I think that I might have... that I...." Her voice broke and she started to sob.

Okay, enough was enough, Ellen decided. This was her cue to break out the whiskey, and to hell with it not even being noon. She got the bottle and glasses she'd prepared, and poured Arlene a large measure of first-class Scotch. "Here. Drink up."

Arlene drank it down, coughing when the liquor burned its way down her throat. Sam handed her a handkerchief, and she dabbed her eyes and blew her nose. Once she had herself back under control, she continued. "I never saw John again. And I admit, I don't know for sure he's Shane's father. But I really want to believe he is. John was a good man." She glanced up at Dean, then at Sam, pleading for their understanding, perhaps even their blessing.

Dean sat down heavily on his chair. "Okay. Assuming it's true—and I'm not saying it is—I don't understand why you came looking for Dad to help with your missing son. Eleven years is a long time. Why not go to the police?"

Arlene made a sound in the back of her throat that could've been a laugh as well as a sob. "I went to the police first. They believe Shane's a runaway. If it were up to them, Shane's face is gonna end up on a milk carton, and I'll never see him again."

"What's to say they're wrong?" Sam said. "I mean, maybe Shane simply did run away."

Arlene directed a quick glance at Ellen and said, "He had no reason to. And the windows in his bedroom were locked, the front door bolted from the inside. There's no way Shane could've gotten out of the house."

"Arlene says she noticed a strange smell in Shane's bedroom after she discovered him missing," Ellen added. "Sulfur."

"Sulfur?" Sam sat up straight. "A demon?"

Ellen gave a nod. "That's what it sounds like, doesn't it?"

Arlene sniffled and wiped at her nose with the handkerchief. "I must have messed up," she muttered. "Broken the salt lines somehow."

"You were salting the house?" Dean asked, brows raised. "Dad tell you to do that?"

"Yes. He told me it would keep me safe. Like the charm he gave me." She showed them Bobby's amulet.

"And you kept it up all these years?"

"Yes." Her eyes were haunted as she lifted her head to look at the boys. "After that month, what I went through, I never..." She broke off. Fresh tears welled in her eyes and spilled over, trickling down her face. "And now they've got my son." She reached across the table and grabbed their wrists, Sam's right arm, Dean's left. "Please. He's just a little boy. He's never done anything to anyone."

Dean exchanged a look with Sam. Ellen couldn't catch the silent words they exchanged, but she knew what they were talking about. So she wasn't surprised when Dean brought up his other hand, gently loosened Arlene's grip on his arm and took her hand in his. "We'll do what we can," he said, his voice low and deep. "We'll find your son."

Ellen shivered at the unspoken promise held within. The devil help those who pissed off a Winchester.

oOo

Sam stared out of the side window, not really seeing the endless fields that streamed by the Impala as Dean drove. Snow hid the naked ground from sight, covering everything under a smooth, white blanket, its whiteness only broken by a line of dark trees on the

horizon. The radio played softly, tuned to some local rock station that catered more to Dean's taste than Sam's, but that didn't bother him much, either.

He moved against the leather seat and rolled his neck, trying to loosen muscles that threatened to cramp up. He glanced at Dean: one hand on the wheel, the other on his knee, fingers tapping against worn denim in time with the music; eyes forward, never leaving the road; mouth unsmiling. Sam knew Dean was mulling over the same thing he was. Had been, ever since they left Ellen's with the promise to a distraught mother that they'd find her son.

"You think it could be true?" Sam asked. "That this boy is our brother?"

Dean threw him a quick look before turning his attention back to the road. He shrugged, shoulders rolling beneath his jacket. "Dunno. Maybe, maybe not." He glanced sideways again, a sudden smirk curling his lips upward. "Look at it this way, Sammy. If it's true, that means you won't be left without a brother when my year's up."

Sam pinned Dean with a glare; he didn't think that was at all funny. "Not the same thing, Dean."

The smirk faded and Dean twisted back to look out the front window. "Yeah. I know."

A moment later, Dean reached over and turned the radio up until the screech of guitars hurt Sam's ears and he could sense the pounding bass in his stomach. Outside, fresh snow started to drift from the sky, while the Impala shot forward into the darkening night. They had an innocent child to save.

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