

## **Old Rebel Yeller** **by Big Pink**

First chapter of Old Rebel Yeller. The boys have fun at Civil War reenactments while chasing down a ghost and a possessed family dog. There's plenty of swearing and a tiny bit of angst, but mostly just fun. A ripping yarn in the best Boy's Own Annual tradition. With swearing. I mentioned that, right? No spoilers, really. Set in the summer between when Dean picks up Sam from Stanford and before the first season finale. Gen as all get out.

### **Chapter One - Buttercup**

Posted May 28th, 2006

Disclamation! I just did my taxes, and much to my accountant's patent relief, she did not find any evidence to suggest that I own an enormous media company, nor any shelters for fictional characters played by real actors. But, baby, that's what the auditor's for, I told her. Within this story there will be swearing, both of the modern variety and – for fun! – historical expletives too! Even the dog swears! Also, despite a fair bit of research, I'm not a Civil War historian and I'm not even going to pretend that all this is incredibly accurate. But I can hum that real sad fiddle tune from Ken Burns's PBS series if you like.

Spoilerific: I'm ready for summer. How about you? This takes place in a summer, which never seems to come for our boys, stuck out west in some unholy Vancouver November as they seem to be. Always November and never summer. I'm just assuming that whole season finale arc is still to come...maybe next November.

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Fredericksburg, Virginia

She could smell it a mile off. More pungent than an old moldy sneaker, meatier than a butcher's shop, more alluring than a stranger's bum. A mile off, at least, but might have been next door for all that mile was going to matter.

Buttercup had a sharp nose, and since moving to this house on the ridge, the smells were ceaseless: death was all around them. During the day, it was easy to get distracted by small things. Squirrels were designed for one purpose and one purpose only: to get ripped apart, fast little fuckers. As far as she was concerned, the family existed so Buttercup could protect them and she had them under relentless surveillance when she wasn't driven to distraction by the fucking squirrels. The littlest human – what the hell was his name, anyway? – was forever dropping food from the table like he wanted her to have it. One day a whole fish stick, the next, a bunch of Cheerios raining down like hailstones. Buttercup didn't care; it was all food. Even the squirrels.

But this? This was more than food, this was like...like...well, Buttercup didn't know any words to describe what was better than food, but this was it. It was death, and it was decay, and it was everywhere. Under the sprinkler, over there near the hedge, way up by the corner store right there where the newspaper box sat. She'd make a point of peeing there, just to get a good whiff of it. Fuck, man, but this neighborhood was lousy with corpses.

Old ones, mind, but that was of no matter to Buttercup. She got yelled at by the big one – didn't know his name either – for digging up the garden, but what the hell were begonias doing there when there was, hey, talking to you, big human, when there's a body under there? Hello?

Nobody listens to the dog, no matter how loudly she makes her point.

So when the big one forgot to close the gate, just as the medium-sized one was struggling with the trash can (which, under normal circumstances would have been a bonanza, a real opportunity), Buttercup nudged medium aside, bounded out into the street, moved fast as a fat golden lab could, and turned her back on the life of an ordinary family dog.

Up to the ridge where the open trench waited, white strings attached in grids, tools packed up for the night, a tent zipped up until the sun came up, no one hanging about at this time, a relief.

She heard her name being shouted, over and over: she was a dog, did they think she couldn't hear them, for fuck's sake? Buttercup ignored them, started digging, screwing up all those pieces of string.

Soon, she found what she'd been looking for: a nice, long length of femur, old, old old, but that was okay, because as soon as she held it between her teeth, she could taste the ancient meat, felt the spittle drip from her muzzle. Man, nothing like it.

That's when Buttercup noticed the man sitting next to her. Manlike, anyway. He didn't smell like anyone she'd encountered before: he smelled of battlefield, of smoke, of sulfur, of blood. He smiled and made a low noise in his throat, but these were not human noises. Buttercup, clutching her prize between her teeth, growled. Mine, asshole.

The manlike thing did not hesitate; he reached out with one hand, placed it on her head.

And there were dark things there, things that roiled in Buttercup's basic, canine braincase like a sackful of snakes. This was a hunt, and he was a hunter, and she – Buttercup? – she was his dog now.

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By the third week, Sam was almost getting used to it. Waking up half the time with Dean nowhere to be found. The bed beside him empty, morning light just tipping into the window, illuminating every dead fly on the sill, the curtain drawn but pathetically flimsy, no match for the sun on this, the longest day of the year.

His head hurt from lack of sleep, a pounding desperate ache in no way alleviated by the fact that he knew, more or less, where Dean was. His brother had been a complete and utter slut for the better part of three weeks, cutting a willing, satisfied swath in the female population from Pennsylvania down the Blue Ridge Mountains, criss-crossing the Shenandoah Valley to here, somewhere just outside of Staunton, Virginia. Home to a McDonalds and not much else.

This hearty set of conquests was not precisely 'nothing new', as Dean had flippantly tossed out one of the mornings – mid-morning, actually – when he'd reappeared, looking not really rested, but sated. Not new, maybe, but not usual, either. Sam knew that Dean had his moments – and they were legion – but he was on the luckiest streak ever.

It hid stuff, this relentless behavior, but there was no way in god's green earth Sam was going to call Dean on it. And besides, it was nice to see Dean enjoying himself, if that's what it truly was.

Sam didn't want to think about this, didn't want to think about where Dean was exactly, at this minute. In his jaded state, Sam hadn't even bothered to go to the bar last night, had waved Dean on – Go Dog Go! – and had gratefully collapsed onto the sagging bed, hadn't trusted the gold shag carpeting to be free of vermin, and so he'd put the greasy bag of hamburger take-away remnants outside the motel room's door when he was finished.

Maybe, after waking up between three and three fifteen scratching like someone had rubbed cayenne pepper on his torso with sandpaper, he'd ought to have used the food scraps as decoy for the bugs, because without it the mites had come for him. What a fucking hole. The TV played snow, the bathroom light had revealed things that moved too quickly for Sam's light-blinded eyes to track, and he'd gotten a great rate because he was staying the night. The very existence of an 'overnight' rate suggested that there were other ways to rent the rooms, of course. Sam was profoundly happy it was mid-week, not a Friday night in Staunton, which would have been an intolerable horny hickfest of the highest order.

Dean of course, hadn't cared about the accommodations. He hadn't set foot in The White House (good grief, Sam had said when Dean had responded to the first 'vacancy' sign he'd seen, where do they get their unmitigated gall?), but had instead rolled to an engine-on kind of stop, let Sam get out with his bags, told him not to wait up. Driven off without so much as a see you later.

Let him be, Sam murmured to himself, scratching under his armpit disconsolately. He needs to get it out. Sam wished they had someplace to go, something to do, because part of the problem was that Dean had too much time on his hands. It had been weeks since they'd last heard from their father, last had any sort of job. Dean wasn't good with free time; he needed a place to prove himself. Easy to recognize with Dean, always had been. When they were little and their dad had gone off, Dean would throw himself into play, construct huge forts in the motel rooms out of blankets and pilfered cardboard boxes from the back alleys, from the backs of chairs and once, even, three of Dad's rifles, which had bought him a memorable Classic John Winchester Chewing Out. Now, Dean occupied his idle hours with driving and pool and women.

If I don't get breakfast now, my stomach's going to eat itself, Sam thought, rubbing his belly. No, not rubbing. Scratching. The clothes on his back were the same ones he'd been wearing yesterday; he hadn't wanted to unpack anything, get any of this motel room on his things. Who the hell knew what mites were now hitching a ride with his stuff?

He contemplated whether or not to chance the E. coli bacteria doubtlessly lurking in the shower water, then decided against it. For the same reason, he didn't brush his teeth, which always made him feel particularly ill equipped to deal with the day. He had the feeling that even if the vending machine in the motel's office was working, it wouldn't sell bottled water and he sure as hell wasn't going to brush his teeth with Coke, though he'd seen Dean do it once.

As he sat outside, his back resting against the cheap hollow door, the knob of which wouldn't have kept a determined three-year-old out, he closed his eyes and felt a blast of sun find his face through the tall trees surrounding the motel. Despite the cool mountain air, rich with sod and berry smells, it was going to be a hot, sticky day. He hoped they had a long drive ahead of them, so he could roll down the windows, stick his bare feet on the dash, make Dean mental. Maybe he could talk Dean into drifting down to the seaboard, to a beach, swim in the cold Atlantic, so different from the Pacific with all its promises of pineapples. The Atlantic promised to whip your ass, promised you cod and salt and icebergs. That ocean whispered Reykjavik and the Faeroes and Greenland in the same way the Pacific breezily dreamt up Tahiti and Fiji and Oahu.

Across the empty highway – not even really a highway, just a road cutting across the worn backbone of the Blue Ridge Mountains – a bunch of birds broke cover, abruptly reminding Sam that things hunted around here. Normal people would guess: bobcat, pine marten, even bear. Not Sam, he'd been raised with a different appreciation of danger, so for him it was: vampire, wendigo, werewolf. Shit. Nothing to get excited about, though, for the forest calmed, and so did Sam, only prodded from his half-sleepy itchy reverie when his phone rang.

“Sam, you ready to go?” And that was all Dean had to say.

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It was obvious, right from the get-go, that Dean was trying to keep his story straight.

Sam, half a lawyer already, was quick to see it, quick to pick it apart like a tricky Transformer he'd had as a kid: twist here, bend the head back, spin this and voila! It's not a helicopter! It's a Cybertron Mega Warrior! Doubtlessly, Dean would have objected to Sam manhandling him into the correct form, but it didn't keep Sam from thinking about it: if Dean were a Transformer, what would he turn into?

Dean's story, when he'd pulled up to room seventeen of The White House was this:

“Hey, Sammy. Good rest? Good. Not me,” with the grin that always made him look as though he ought to be arrested for something, “loooooong night. You itchin' to drive?” Cheap joke at Sam's fidgety red spots; first signal that something was off, that kind of request disguised as a favor. So Sam was immediately distracted by the process of driving fuzzy-toothed, unable to second-guess his weasling brother. “I'm so sleepy I might drive off the road.” Slid into the passenger seat while Sam loaded his flea-infested bag into the trunk. “Gotta call this morning,” not looking at Sam, pointing out the direction to turn on the highway. South. “Remember Beau McBean?”

Took Sam a minute for the nickel to drop, because Dean had pronounced it 'McBane,' which Beau had always insisted on. Sam, thinking the name looked like an heirloom bad joke, persisted in calling him McBean, both then and now.

He cocked an eyebrow at Dean, but kept his eyes on the twisty road. “Custer?” Beau's nickname, one that Dean had come up with when they were teenagers, mocking the weapons specialist. Which was too easy; Dean had stopped first, maybe a little embarrassed. Sam had continued, a mouthy thirteen-year-old, until their father had slapped him on the back of the head, wordlessly, not even looking at his son.

“Yeah, Custer. Calls me up, outta the blue. Says he's scared.” Didn't look at Sam, was searching under the seat for what eventually turned out to be his sunglasses. “Pull over there, Sammy. I don't think I'm going to make it if I don't get some coffee into me.”

Came back with two huge paper cups, hot and strong, and a bag of donut holes. Like that was a healthy breakfast for two fully-grown male adults of the species. Sam had to hold the cup between his knees, unnerving when it was so hot and he still hadn't brushed his teeth and Dean was trying to keep him off-balance, which just made him more edgy. Dean slouched into the seat, drank the coffee like it wasn't scalding. “So Beau tells me he's scared.”

“Scared of what?” Sam asked, pulling back out onto the highway.

“Down there, towards Waynesboro,” Dean gestured with his cup. Going down into the Virginia Piedmont, away from the mountains. Shit, maybe Sam would get his swim in the Atlantic after all, though

it would be a long day's drive. But only if that's where Beau McBean was, because it was obvious that's where Dean was heading, no matter how circuitous the route. "Didn't really get into details," and from how he said it, drawing out the vowels in that strange no-place southern accent Dean had, Sam knew immediately that Beau McBean had been full of details. The man ought to have been a statistician; he was nothing but minutia and details.

"No details? Custer's suddenly mute?"

Dean looked at him funny, though the cheap sunglasses disguised his evasion. "No. Didn't I say he called me? How'd he do that if he's mute?"

After a minute of not saying anything, Dean started up his story again. And again, Sam vigilantly watched for the hiccups. "So he thinks we ought to get together, maybe help him out."

Sam counted three red cars go by in the opposite direction before asking his next question, finally understanding that Dean wasn't going to offer more explanation than that without prompting.

"And how are we going to help him out, Dean?" Using his name like a cattle prod.

Dean shifted in his seat, feeling the jab. The leather interior was hot and damn, Sam wanted to kick off his shoes and put his feet up on –

"Just look into some ghost-type stuff he's picking up."

"Okaaay." The coffee had now cooled and the road was beautiful, and it was a sunny day, and who the hell cared about odd little Beau McBean and his ghostly visitations? "He doesn't have a weapon that works?"

"C'mon, Sam," Dean said, though it took him a good five seconds to come up with it, and Sam wondered if Dean had his eyes closed behind the glasses, his empty coffee cup long flung in the backseat. "Beau makes guns and knives. Makes his own fucking bullets, for god's sake. He doesn't know shit about exorcisms or witchcraft or stuff like that. He knows how to kill things that have the kind of bodies that bullets can kill."

True enough. Sam sometimes forgot that the Winchesters were all-rounders, utility players good in the clutch. There were others who specialized, and they wouldn't know a smudge stick from a prayer wheel. "When's the last time you saw him?"

Dean was back to looking out the window, but at least he'd pulled up the glasses so Sam could be sure he was awake. He saw the little spasm cross Dean's forehead, an effort to compile something that sounded right. "Maybe three summers ago," he finally said. Shrugged, looked over at his brother as though daring him to say otherwise. "Memorial Day, three years ago."

Truth. Okay, but why so cloaked in other respects, Dean?

"And it's just a ghost?" Sam's questions were flapping away against Dean, falling like ineffectual moths against a lightbulb in the night.

"Just a ghost," Dean repeated quietly, unrolling the window so the wind blasted through the car like a banshee.

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After giving a couple of vague directions, Dean slept for most of the drive, his jean jacket bunched up under his head, half-doing, really, because who the hell got a decent sleep when you were upright in a moving car? Sam watched him, aware that Dean was holding back and not knowing why. Making Sam drive them to the mystery destination – wake me up when we get to Charlottesville – and then falling asleep so Sam would stop asking inconvenient questions.

Damn, but it was beautiful, even though the magnolias around the University of Virginia were pretty much done, their white cups littering the ground, the Thomas Jefferson-designed campus gorgeous and lush and old in a way Stanford never had been. One saving grace: if Dean was asleep, or pretending to be asleep, he couldn't call the dining tune. So Sam pulled into a place that looked student-friendly, that would have internet access, good Guatemalan coffee and the servers wouldn't look at him strange when he asked for lox on his bagel. Would know that the best bagels came from a wood-burning oven. Would know what a bagel was. And – now Dean had jerked awake, was peering suspiciously at their culinary destination.

A measure of Dean's guilt or apprehension that he said nothing, simply allowed himself to be led in like a recalcitrant runaway mule before slumping into a seat and ordering the largest combination of smoked meat and pickles the human body could possibly cope with.

“What's Beau up to?” Sam asked, once, while Dean was chasing poppy seeds across the copper-topped table with his fingernail, squishing them when he caught them. It reminded Sam a little too vividly of fleas, which he thought even Dean wasn't devious enough to think up.

“Ah, little of this, little of that.”

“Remember that apartment of his?” Sam was looking for anything at this point. “All those books and artifacts he had? The piles and piles of video tapes.” He shook his head. “No wonder he never had a girlfriend.”

“Made good bullets,” Dean offered. “Good guns. A real talent for it.” Don't knock it, he meant.

“So, did Beau tell you much about this ghost of his? Is it getting, I don't know, vicious, or demanding? Is it just annoying? Is it half as annoying as Beau?” He stopped, because Dean was staring at him, his eyes glacial, seagreen, tough. “Half as annoying as you are today?”

Dean's mouth twitched. Sometimes he tried to be open. Sometimes he couldn't. Sam occasionally could spot the difference. Not today, not with that stare. “He's going to explain everything when we catch up with him.”

“He lives here in town? Why all the cloak and dagger, Dean?”

At which point, Dean stood, picked up the remainder of his coffee and told Sam they should push on.

Dean drove this time, which allowed Sam to succumb to his barefooted molestation of the dashboard, resulting in sharp words from Dean and a general decline into Motorhead's Greatest Hits, which were – in Sam's opinion – neither great nor hits.

The sun was sinking behind the trees when they finally came to the field, covered in parked cars, the rise of the farmer's fallow efforts masking whatever was on the other side. Dean parked, sat there for a

moment, allowing Sam to pull on his socks and Converse All-Stars. Allowing him to formulate the obvious question.

“What’s going on here?” He looked over at Dean. “Is this where we’ll find Beau?”

“Might take us awhile,” Dean replied. “Lock the doors,” he reminded Sam. Distracting him, Sam thought.

There were few people in the lot and Sam spotted plates from at least five different states. He didn’t hear a concert-decibel blast of music and there were no Harley Davidsons, which was actually the scenario he had half-formed in the back of his mind. Some of the cars bore bumper stickers advertising southern slogans not entirely out of place even as far north as Virginia: ‘The South will Rise Again!’ and ‘Southern by birth; Confederate by choice’. A few RVs were positioned just below the apex of the hill. The shadows cast by the lowering sun made everything gold and gray, and Sam heard the faint sound of fiddle music, then smelled campfire smoke and horse.

What the hell?

He followed Dean’s easy loping gait up the hill, noticing the tight line of his brother’s shoulders, as though bracing himself for something. Dean was going fast, something often disguised by the fact that he looked so unhurried. It had always been a weird fact of their relationship, that despite Sam’s longer legs, he was always playing catch-up.

So Dean was already standing there, looking down into the shallow valley, when Sam came up behind him. Spread before them, a hundred campfires, men and women sitting around them, little white canvas tents set up row upon row, horses tethered in huddled groups, the sound of fiddle and squeezebox reaching them intermittently on the evening air. To one side a flagpole had been erected, from which the flag of the Confederacy flapped lethargically. A group of men with a pick-up truck were pulling a flat wagon loaded with cannons.

More men walked towards them up the hill, laughing quietly in the descending gloom. They wore faded Confederate uniforms, slouch hats with pins glinting in the slanting sun. One of them was smoking a pipe, and tipped his hat when they passed. “Pickets going up at nineteen hundred,” they were warned. The men passed, and the pipesmoke lingered long after the men were out of earshot.

“He’s with the 22nd Virginia Regiment,” Dean said softly, waiting for whatever Sam was going to hit him with.

## Chapter Two - Farbs in the Woods

Posted May 28th, 2006

More of the same...Civil War shenanigans reenacted by obsessed fellows in period garb, Our Fearless Lads trying to rid the field of a ghost and a crazed dog. 'nuff said -- follow the underlined link for more...

Disclamatory Remarks: Rest assured, the only thing I own of any consequence is a 1988 Toyota Corolla. You can stop laughing. Really. Rated PG13 for a whole lot of swearing and maybe the occasional bloodletting.

a/n: If you read nothing else on the subject, you could do worse than to pick up a copy of Tony Horwitz's Confederates in the Attic, which has been the inspiration for this story. It is a hilarious and intelligent piece of journalism about the lingering affects of the Civil War on contemporary American society and a mighty fine read as well.

Bear with me: fun creepy stuff starts happening by the end of this chapter, but you'll have to squirm through the expository bits along with poor old Dean.

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Sam stood silently for several heartbeats, not even looking at his brother, which was evidently all the permission to proceed that Dean needed.

"And for god's sake, don't call him Custer," Dean muttered as he moved forward into the lowering sun and they picked their way down the scrubby hillside toward the campfires. Everyone that Sam could see was in period dress, despite the occasional anomaly, like the truck pulling the cannons. He heard the murmur of heated discussion, the occasional burst of song. Mostly men, but a few hoop-skirted women and even the wail and squeal of children.

"Why? Is the real Custer here?" Sam asked disingenuously in the descending gloom, not expecting an answer, but the chuckle died in his throat as Dean cast him a slightly panicked glare. And Sam understood comprehensively that he had fallen into the biggest make-Dean-squirm situation possible. In his wildest dreams, he could not have come up with something this beautifully cringe-worthy.

"There's another guy who calls himself..." Dean began, then bit it back. "Just shut up and mind your manners. You remember what those are, don't you?"

The pot was shouting 'black' from the rooftops, might as well have had a megaphone. Manners. Jesus, Dean. "Yeah, I might slip up and point out that they're all living in the 21st Century, Dean. And that would be..." he paused, failing to master his giddy grin, "inappropriate."

He thought he heard his brother say, "You have no idea," but he might have imagined it, because Dean had increased his stride to cover more ground and Sam now realized that they were going to stand out in this crowd. What would the reenactors do? Lynch them? And that actually didn't seem all that funny, given the circumstances.

"Hey, Dean," he called out and watched as Dean pulled up, a black shadow against the firelight, weight balanced on one leg, thumbs hooked into his belt loops, the picture of long-suffering patience. "I just figured out something that I've been working on all day." Sam couldn't see his brother's expression in the half-light, which was too bad, because it was somewhat the point.

“What’s that, Sam?” Dean sounded prickly, had that particular pointed tone.

“Three twists and you turn into Cybertron Johnnie Reb, don’t you?” His laughter bubbled out, delighted.

“Man,” Dean started, and Sam didn’t have to see his face to imagine the disdainful grimace of disbelief. “You amaze me. All that gray matter and this is what you come up with? Sheesh.” He kept walking, leaving Sam shaking with unbridled laughter.

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It was kind of like his worst nightmare, the one where his brother lost all respect for him and left. Except this was worse, in a way, because Sam wasn’t leaving, he was mocking, and that was the last thing Dean thought he could cope with. All the long drive here, he’d been trying to think of a good way to broach the subject – that he was dragging Stanford-educated Samuel Winchester to a Civil War reenactment campaign – but had been defeated again and again by the probability of just this kind of reaction.

Education had never really mattered to Dean, not in the traditional get-a-decent-job sense, but a couple of times in these last few months back together with Sam, a hole had opened up between them and this thing, this collection of courses and classes and assignments, lived at the bottom of it like a many-headed monster. Used to be that Sam was just smart, which was fine in the same way that Dean was good-looking or that their Dad was single-minded. But now it carried a set of rules and assumptions that Dean didn’t much like.

Though Dean had dreaded that look on Sam’s face, he couldn’t blame him, really. When their father had dropped Dean off at a similar gathering three years ago, he hadn’t exactly been a model guest at first. Beau and his buddies were goofier than drunks at a Star Trek convention, and Dean could appreciate how wacky it would seem to Sam.

Once Sam gets a load of what we’re up against, Dean counseled himself, he’s not going to be laughing so hard. Beau had been specific on the phone and Dean knew what they had come to do was going to be difficult. He’d been on old battlefields before and he was actually more than just a little bit concerned. Concerned for Sam. Concerned for the crowds the public reenactments tended to attract. That was tomorrow’s worry, though. Maybe they could accomplish something tonight and tomorrow would take care of itself.

And really, Sam’s mocking grin aside, this was way better than being bored. The last three weeks had just about killed him. Worrying about Dad. Worrying about Sam and his stupid hinky powers. Worrying about his own future, once Sam figured out that Dean’s entire master plan consisted of simply doing this kind of stuff over and over, nothing more. Sam was a smart boy. He’d work it out soon enough. And then they’d probably have words and Sam would leave. But not tonight, and not when Sam was about to have a whole lot of fun at Dean’s expense. Dean wasn’t built for worrying, and he didn’t take teasing all that well, either, so it was going to be interesting, if nothing else.

The reenactors – historical interpreters, Dean corrected himself – were polite, but also wondering what the hell these two civilians were doing in their camp, out of costume and out of character. They were told more than once that the public were welcome...tomorrow. Dean explained that they were looking for Pvt. Beauregard McBean, 22nd Virginia Infantry, at which point he actually could not look at Sam for fear of needing to wallop him in the face.

At the eastern end of the encampment – and there were at least three hundred campfires by Dean’s calculations – his careful inquiries finally hit pay dirt. By this time it was fully dark, and he was mindful that while they were being tolerated, they were not precisely welcome. Jeans and t-shirts, sneakers, Daytons. Not exactly hand-spun cotton with era-appropriate thread count and hand-stitched wool coats with urine-patina buttons and a crumpled kepi.

They were interfering with everyone’s period rush, and Dean was acutely aware of it, felt like an intruder, for all he’d been invited. As they approached the campfire that another bunch of 22nd Virginians had pointed out, Dean picked out Beau immediately. Or rather, heard his peal of laughter above the ruckus a thousand living history buffs could make on a summer solstice.

The brothers came to a sudden halt as a tall bearded soldier in a yellowed uniform reeled from the fire as though shot, staggered some distance from the flames, and fell to his knees. Toppling onto his back as his gray-clad comrades peered raptly on, the man’s spine arched forcefully from the ground, the buttons straining. Slowly, he seemed to expand, his cheeks rounding out, his hands pulling into claws as his arms curved into a rictus of death. His belly distended grotesquely and his face pulled into a savage death mask.

Around this perfect simulation of battlefield bloat, the ring of Confederate soldiers were momentarily silent. Then, as a group, they started to clap and hoot. The dead soldier leapt to his feet, sketched a little bow, and turned to face the manifestly out of place Winchesters. His hair looked as though it’d been greased with lard, then rolled in last fall’s leaf mulch.

“Well, if this ain’t a whole new level of farbiness,” he said to them, seemingly more surprised by their attire than their presence. “You boys aren’t even trying.”

A shout came from behind the bloating soldier, who was pushed aside as a blond man, shorter, but also rail-thin, stepped in front Dean. “Hey, you found us!” and clapped Dean on the shoulder before sliding his wary gaze to Sam. “Glad you could make it!”

He dropped his voice as he pulled Dean toward the fire. “You didn’t have anything less...noticeable to wear?”

Privately wondering what would be more noticeable than a full Confederate uniform complete with musket and hobnailed boots, Dean shrugged. “Not part of the usual wardrobe, Beau.”

Beau hadn’t changed one bit: he still could earn the nickname Custer on any given day, even minus the era-specific uniform. Long yellow hair, a little well-trimmed beard, and glowing light eyes that Sam had once memorably described as serial-killer blue. He was very thin, for all appearances a Civil War-era daguerreotype, sepia toned in the firelight. Dean didn’t recognize any of Beau’s campaign buddies at the fire, which didn’t surprise him; Beau had said on the phone that he’d broken away from his former regiment because they weren’t ‘authentic’ enough.

They were introduced and each given a tin cup of what turned out to be corn whiskey before settling by the fire. Dean was giving Sam wide berth, sat at an oblique angle so he wouldn’t have to watch his face. Sam, well Sam would have fit in physically well with this bunch. Shit, he had that hollow-eyed underfed Confederate look down pat, most days. Except for that boyish glimmer of sheer delight at the whole situation. Sam’s glance kept flicking over to Dean, who took great pains to ignore it.

“So,” Sam said, and though Dean wasn’t looking at him, he could hear the smile in his voice, “You guys get paid for doing this?” And for one brief moment, Dean wondered if he would stop any of the soldiers from taking Sam out into the bush and beating him soundly.

Bloating soldier, whose name was Harry Riddicker, shifted on the log beside Dean. He smelled of gunpowder and sweat. A little like piss as well, and Dean knew that his buttons would have the correct 1860s patina to them. Hardcores, not much like them.

“Hell, no. This part of it we do for fun.” Riddicker chuckled, as did some of the others. “I sometimes pose for photographers, and I been in some documentaries for the History Channel, but it’s mostly for fun.” The way he said the word ‘fun’ was practiced and Dean knew that this was the rehearsed line, the one he’d give to the families tomorrow when they paid their five dollars and could wander around the camp. Fun did not begin to describe why these guys did this.

“Yeah,” Beau cut in, and Dean knew that he was playing up his native Mississippi accent, “but it hasn’t been much fun this last month,” he finished, soliciting nods from around the fire. “Been pretty weird.”

And that was a demonstration of such epic understatement that even Dean had a hard time keeping a straight face. Dean chanced a look at Sam, who was red from withheld laughter, and he was fairly sure now that he’d actively encourage the soldiers to take his brother behind the tent for a little tune up.

“What kind of weird?” Sam managed, choking, before Dean could speak up.

Beau settled back in his camp chair – Dean recognized it. Hand-made, with the proper issue canvas and era-appropriate hardware. Actually, Beau had made the hardware himself. At the moment, Beau was sorting through his bullets, had a small cardboard box perched on his knee from which he was examining his own handiwork: minié balls. He passed a few around to the others. Live rounds, Dean thought. What is going on that Beau is passing around live rounds the night before a public reenactment?

Beau glanced at his comrades. “These two boys, well their Daddy’s a mighty fine hunter of strange things and he’s unavailable right now. His phone message told me to call Dean, so I did. Tim, you want to tell these boys what you saw last month, over at the Spotsylvania park event?”

Tim, who was so gaunt and tiny he looked like a bearded Olsen twin in uniform, cleared his throat, embarrassed perhaps.

“It’s okay, Tim,” Beau cautioned. “Dean’s been with me before. Up at Gettysburg a few summers ago. His Daddy wanted me to teach him how to make bullets. So he’s been around a campaign before. He knows were not crazy.”

“Much,” Riddicker said with a loud laugh. “I pee on my buttons, Beau. I spend a quarter of my paycheck to make sure my boots don’t have a right or a left and that my canvas tent is made to the same pattern as the one my great-great-great granddaddy used. So don’t you be calling me normal.”

Tim shrugged, stretching his arms forward with a crack. “It’s either this or golf. At least when I get home after a weekend of this, the wife knows that I’ve been with the boys...from the smell alone.” The men all laughed. “But in Spotsylvania last month, I was ready to hand it in for a set of clubs, let me tell you.” He held out his tin mug for another hit from the crock that Riddicker kept beside him.

Dean leaned forward, forearms on bent knees. He’d heard this from Beau, and hoped Sam had cleaned the wax from his ears.

“Been seeing a ghost round here.” Oh you don’t say, Dean thought, listening to the catch in the man’s voice. The super hardcores lived for the period rush, that feeling when you’d actually stepped back into the past. No shit he was seeing things, especially here in Virginia, where you couldn’t throw a brick without hitting some Civil War battlefield. Houses and trees still had bullets buried in them, and wasn’t a spring went by without some gardener digging up a soldier’s remains while replanting the tulip bulbs. The past wasn’t so far away, here.

“What kind of ghost?” Dean asked, and he realized that these were the first words he’d spoken. Sam had had his fun; enough, now.

Tim shook his head. “Confederate. Looked like he was from North Carolina, by the insignia I could see. He seemed...confused.” Tim looked up at Dean, perhaps realizing that Dean wasn’t going to mock him, not for this. “Like he didn’t know where he was, or was looking for his unit.”

“Where did you see him?”

The logs in the fire shifted, and sparks flew up. Riddicker put on a pot of coffee, swung a blackened tin over the flames. “We seen him in Spotsylvania, in the middle of the battle. No live rounds, of course. We were part of the infantry, but a bunch of the saber fairies showed up...”

“Cavalry?” Dean clarified, more for Sam than himself.

“Yeah, the horse boys. That’s how I knew that he wasn’t...one of us.” Riddicker shrugged, a little embarrassed maybe. “Spooked the horse, and then the horse ran right through him. Appeared a couple of other times, around the pickets at night.”

“Same ghost?” Dean didn’t flinch from the word.

Tim nodded. “Yep, same uniform, same hang-dog look to him. At first I thought he was just hardcore, he was so skinny and his threads were so period correct...”

“Yeah, great jacket. Musta been a type one, early to mid ’62, with piping.”

“Cotton and wool jean.”

“Super hardcore,” in unison, the pinnacle of reenactment cool.

It was another moment where Dean wasn’t about to look at Sam, afraid of what he might see.

He heard his brother clear his throat. “So this ghost. Other than showing up and spooking horses, what’s the problem?” And only a Winchester would ask that question. It took Dean a moment to imagine how that probably sounded to someone not in their line of work.

“He’s following us around,” Tim answered softly. “Been at every event since Spotsylvania last month.”

“That must be getting tiresome,” Sam quipped and had he been sitting next to Dean, would have received an elbow to the ribs. “So he’s not tied to one spot.”

“He ever try to talk to any of you?” Dean asked, cutting off Sam.

“Nope,” Tim replied with a quick smile. “And if he just spooked horses, I’d actually be okay with that. It’d be pretty awesome, having our own ghost. But things are getting dangerous.”

“How?” Dean prompted, when all the guys fell silent. “What do you mean, dangerous?”

Beau spoke, his accent slow and soft, mixing with the warm night air. “Two weeks ago, the ghost was beside the cannons, kinda eyeing them. Then, later, when the Union guys showed up, one of the cannons exploded, killed two and maimed three others. Lucky it was a closed event,” meaning that the public wasn’t invited, that it was for reenactors only. “And then last week, one of the dog soldiers went wild and shot up a bunch of Ramada Rangers as they was leaving camp. Afterwards said that he couldn’t remember a thing but the ghost telling him to do it.” He smiled at Sam, knowing that he wasn’t following. And Dean found himself grinning too. “Dog soldiers are the guys that volunteer to guard the camp at night; Ramada Rangers are the soldiers that’d rather sleep in a motel than in camp.”

“Farbs,” one of the soldiers muttered darkly.

“And now there’s the dog,” Riddicker said, voice rough. “I’d be fine with a ghost, but that dog’s starting to freak me out.”

“Well, at least it’s only attacking the esteemed enemy,” Beau drawled. “For now.”

“What kind of dog?” Dean asked, and Riddicker poured him another mug of whiskey. It was going down better now. Dean wondered which one of them had made it and whether or not it would make him go blind. Tim got up and opened the wooden box he’d been sitting on, retrieved some beef jerky that he passed around and some homemade hardtack. Dean inspected his for weevils, knowing that these guys were so not beyond putting them in just for effect.

“Big yellow lab,” Riddicker replied, after a minute. “Mean bitch. Goes after Yankees like they’ve been rubbed with a piece of sirloin. Seems to take orders from the ghost, but that dog’s real enough. Brushed past me last time and foam from its mouth got slobbered on my pants. A horse might gallop right through the Reb, but that dog’s days are numbered.”

“That’s why you guys are carrying live rounds?” Sam asked, but his tone was a little quieter, a little less hilarity in it. Finally, Dean thought.

“Yep,” Beau verified. “One of us is gonna plug that bitch soon, if we can get a clean shot. I’ve even got some authentic minié balls to try out,” and he picked out another box from a crate that was full of period weapons, Dean could see. Beau had always been a bit of a scavenger, a human Geiger counter for bits of shrapnel in the ground. It wasn’t really legal, picking up this stuff, but since when was a Winchester going to split hairs about legal issues, especially when the contraband was a hundred and forty years old?

Beau had reconditioned period guns with rifled bores, which shot the inch-long slug known as the minié ball. This single innovation had made the Civil War a much bloodier affair, Beau had instructed a younger Dean when he’d shown him how the spin from the minié flung the slug five times farther than any bullet up to that point in history and could kill a man at half a mile. Dog, too, for that matter, Dean supposed.

“Pickets’ll be up now,” Beau continued, loading a rifle and adjusting its sit on his shoulder as he stood. “You might want to hang around a little. We haven’t seen him since we arrived here yesterday, but you never know when he might show up.”

Dean glanced at Sam, sure that he wasn't going to have to deal with any more of his derisive humor. Sam stared steadily back before asking, "Salt gun?" to which Dean shook his head.

"For once, I'm going to suggest asking questions first," he replied, then thanked the soldiers for the grub (and he winced a little at the word 'grub'), before following Beau into the darkness, Sam trailing behind him.

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The woods were so quiet after the conviviality of the fireside that it took Sam a few minutes to pick out which way his brother and Beau had gone. Both men moved well in terrain like this, silently, and the hair on the back of Sam's neck lifted. Goddamn ghost stories and then they leave him out in the woods like a piece of cheddar in a mousetrap. Though he supposed that he probably deserved it. But, come on, Dean, this was priceless. They'd done some pretty strange things before, but this took the cake.

Finally, he heard the low murmur of voices in the underbrush ahead of him, then the scrape of a match, and a candle lantern flickered into view, glassed on three sides with a flaking silvered mirror to reflect the flame. The lantern lit a group of five or six men in mixed uniform carrying an assortment of rifles and muskets, the youngest of whom was a boy who looked no more than thirteen, dressed in butternut yellows and faded grays, a long rifle slung across his back, smudge of charcoal across one cheek. When the kid's knowing glance landed on Sam the child smirked, looking for all the world like any too-cool-for-you thirteen year old. In clothing that hadn't been in style for more than a century. Instinctively, Sam knew that this kid had probably been raised with a hardcore dad and that this was as normal to him as hunting ghosts was to Dean and himself.

And he just thought about that for a minute before coming up to his brother's side. Dean looked contained and intense, the way he usually did when he was trying to figure out the rules of whatever monster or ghost or demon it was that they were hunting.

A revelation that Dean had been out campaigning with Beau at about the same time Sam had spent a summer serving up fresh squeezed juice at a boardwalk concession in Palo Alto. Sam had learned to make wheatgrass smoothies; Dean, apparently, had learned how to make bullets that could kill Union soldiers. What else Dean might have learned under wacky Beau McBean's tutelage really didn't bear thinking about. Sam knew his brother was a crack shot, but he'd been that since they were kids. All this arcane military knowledge, though? Shit.

Sam turned his head as a slight noise attracted his attention from the depths of the darkness, far beyond the small pool of light that the child held, that painted them all yellow down one side. A snapping of sticks. A colder than expected breeze. God, he was jumpy. Dean must have caught Sam's sudden shift in attention because he paused in his interview of the kid to ask, "What is it?"

Sam felt like an idiot. Dean was being so grounded, so respectful, and Sam was just goofing off. "Nothing," he said, a little too quickly, his eyes darting back to the woods.

"What, nothing?" Dean prodded, and Sam knew that his brother took most of what he said seriously. It was a little disconcerting, to have someone listen to you as much as Dean did. He doubted he'd ever said a word that Dean hadn't caught on some level.

Sam didn't say anything, but couldn't shake that there was something out there, beyond the light, further into the woods where the stars had come out and pale moonlight gilded everything not gold, but silver.

Dean didn't say, 'let's take a look,' or 'you sure?' He just sidled softly out of the lantern's range, stepped into the inky blackness, sure that Sam would follow, which he did.

Once away from the light, it took Sam a few minutes to adjust his vision. In the meantime, his foot turned noisily over loose rocks and he put out a hand against an oak tree to regain his lost balance. He just about jumped out of his skin when Beau's delta accent sounded at his ear, "Good catch, Samuel. We got company."

Ahead of him, a pale gray shadow against the darker trunk of the tree resolved itself into his brother, and Dean turned back to Sam, an arm's length away. Sam heard the breath he took. "Where?"

"There, by the stone fence." There was no way Sam could see anything approximating a stone fence, but he followed the dark line of Beau's arm to a clearing ahead of them, marginally lighter than the surrounding woods. In the clearing, something moved, shifted like a smudge on a photographic negative, then stopped. Sam could feel Dean's massed attention beside him, an animal intensity. The shift happened again, and the smudge of gray against gray solidified, became a tall thin man, kitted out with gun and bedroll, like any number of reenactors on the field behind them, beyond the trees.

A cold breeze hit them, indicating this was anything but a simple first-person interpreter out to take a piss in private. Sam watched in fascination as the specter drifted silently into the trees just to the right of them, maybe a hundred feet away, melting into the night.

"Not yet," he heard Dean whisper in that low, concentrated voice. A warning.

Then, right beside Dean, so close that it was in between the two brothers, the shifting gray rebel soldier reappeared, wavering slightly, an expression of surprise and fear flitting across his fine boned features as he surveyed them. In the darkness, the ghost was the lightest thing. The cold was astonishing.

It lifted a hand towards Dean. Bet he wishes we'd brought the salt gun now, Sam thought, not entirely sympathetic. This was a ghost, a reflection of a soul caught in folds of time not of its own devising. All it will want is to go home. Probably.

Behind them, Sam heard a growl.

And then, just as the ghost faded into nothingness, he heard the crack of a rifle in the not-nearly-far-enough-away-distance and a splinter of bark flew across his face from the tree next to him, bloodying his cheekbone. You know, he thought, you're not supposed to hear the shot that kills you, given the speed of sound and all. Not unless the person shooting you is only fifty feet away, which the pickets were.

The night lit up with fire, and Sam dropped to the ground beside his brother and Beau, a hard rock jamming itself unhelpfully into his sternum.

"Shit!" Dean swore.

"Live fire!" Beau shouted. "Friendlies! Friendlies!" he yelled hoarsely over his shoulder. That fucking kid, Sam recalled. That fucking kid is shooting at us.

Another bullet whizzed through the air, close enough that Sam felt the breeze pass over his head before it slammed into the tree beside him.

That fucking kid was trying to kill them.

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Muchly thanks: Lemmypie, who fearlessly listens to my hysterical “...and then, and then...this could happen, and then...and then...” and still prompts me with: “So tell me about this new reenactors site you’ve found.” Also to my cheering section, Northface and alleged, who give me encouragement and good ideas (the ‘fucking squirrels’ that so torment Buttercup – all Northface’s doing).

### Chapter Three - Wilderness

Posted May 28th, 2006

Story thus far: Dean has dragged a reluctant Sam to a Civil War reenactment campaign in the Virginia Piedmont. An old family friend, weapons specialist and hardcore reenactor Beau McBean, has asked the brothers to investigate a Confederate ghost who's been hanging around various reenactment events and causing nasty accidents to happen. The ghost is accompanied by his very much alive canine companion, Buttercup, a family dog gone bad. As we join the boys, they have come under friendly fire from a Confederate picket while roaming the woods at night in search of the ghost.

Disclaim, descant, decant: Having not heard back from Revenue Canada or my tax accountant, I'm now having to assume that I don't own the WB. But maybe I can own the next iteration, which would be really, really cool. And I'll share the boys with all of you. Promise. Rated for cursing and general ickiness. And you can turn a \$12 bottle of red wine into a \$25 bottle just by decanting it. That's my tip of the day.

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For one horrific moment, Sam thought he'd wet himself.

Then he realized that he'd dropped into a small depression on the forest floor and it was damp and muddy. After the first burst of rapid gunfire, the woods fell into a ringing silence, though he could barely ascertain even that because his blood was rushing so loudly in his ears, his heart thudding somewhere up around his larynx. Turning his head, he spotted Dean's hand about an inch from his nose.

"Dean," he hissed, and his heart came right onto his soft palate.

In the darkness, he saw the sudden gleam of teeth bared in a known smile, heard the slight exhalation of breath as Dean raised his head a little. To Sam's other side, Beau levered himself up on his elbows. "Man," Beau whispered, like he was in church. "That was beautiful." His head angled to Dean. "What a goddamn rush."

Only when both men turned to him did Sam realize that he'd made a little sound, uncomfortably like a whimper.

"22nd Virginia Infantry, you golblamed twats!" Beau called out, an unmistakable thrill in his voice.

"Zat you, Private McBean?" Came the unsteady response, and Sam reluctantly got to his knees, feeling the squelchy mud and stones beneath his hands as he did so. He rubbed his chest absently where he'd slammed against the rock. Damn, that would bruise. His cheekbone was bloody and stinging, and he guessed he was lucky that piece of bark hadn't smashed into his eye. Or a minié ball, for that matter.

Dean's attention was entirely on the far picket, where the lamplight flickered sporadically. Around them, the smell of old leaf and rot. The air was summer-night warm again, and Sam's night vision couldn't pick out anything that ought not to be there.

They walked cautiously back to the picket, and Sam was a little surprised that Dean wasn't cursing. The soldiers, almost all of them examining their guns with wonder etched deeply on their faces, made room for Dean as he joined their circle. He had that sort of bristling presence at the moment; just because he wasn't swearing didn't mean that he wasn't pissed off.

“Mind telling me just what you thought you were shooting at?” he asked, rattlesnake quiet.

The soldiers made a show of looking at each other. One of them, taller than the rest, a tell-tale t-shirt peeking out of his collar, looked at his booted feet before saying, “We were ordered to open fire.” The rest muttered in agreement, even the kid, who was owl-eyed and solemn.

Dean’s stare met Sam’s over the heads of the others, then fell on the tall soldier again. “Ordered.” Dean repeated, following the first rule of interrogation: just restate the last thing they said, don’t even make it a question. Non-confrontational, despite the fact that everything about Dean at the moment said he was pretty much itching for a fight.

“Yeah, him,” and pointed over his shoulder. At nothing.

Seeming to gather his wits, the tall soldier paled, which was a remarkable thing to notice in such poor light. He looked shocked beyond all reason. “Oh god. Oh god, boys,” and stuttered into silence as Beau put a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Sam was already far back from the huddled group, purposefully keeping out of Dean’s way. He wasn’t going to interfere with Dean when he was about to tear a strip off someone. And with these guys, with soldiers, Dean was likely to get more information if Sam stayed out of it. A simple division of labor: bad cop, good cop. With tough guys, Dean got to be the heavy; little old ladies were all Sam’s. It worked out.

It took him a moment to realize that there was a pair of glowing eyes on the far side of the group, steady in the woods, down low about knee height. And Sam remembered the growl, just before the gunfire. He edged around the men, only half-listening to Dean’s terse, demanding voice. The eyes did not move, were trained on the soldiers, not on him. Intent, like a big cat watching a floundering broken-winged bird.

One of the men had attracted its attention, and it was on the hunt.

Except it wasn’t a lynx or bobcat, Sam saw as he drew a bit nearer. It was a golden lab, all burred and marked with dirt, a wild feral look to it, flanks so lean Sam could see bone structure. Sam moved further away from the men, back behind the dog. His foot surprised a stick, and the dog turned suddenly, aware of Sam standing not twenty feet behind it.

The moon had come out, so Sam had more than enough light to see the dog snarl, noticed the foam dripping to the forest floor. Stiff legged, the dog shuffled towards Sam, the growl so low as to be virtually inaudible. Sam backed up slowly, a thousand bits of information coming to mind, like he was shuffling a deck of ‘worst case scenario’ cards: rabid dogs. Back up slowly. Make yourself look bigger. Climb a tree. Play dead. Make a lot of noise. Open up an umbrella. Realized he was actually thinking about what to do in case of a bear attack.

His back met a tree trunk, and he lifted his attention from the dog to the tree, trying to see if it was climbable. Luckily, this was a dog, not a bear. Bears could climb trees; he remembered seeing a picture of Winnie-the-Pooh doing it. Sam, he told himself, this is no time to be basing important decisions on children’s literature. He tested the lowest branch – a stick, really, growing out the side, the only hand hold he was likely to get – and it came away in his grip. So much for climbing the tree.

The growl was louder now, and they were a good hundred feet away from the men, so far away that Sam could no longer hear Dean’s voice. If he shouted, they would come, he knew. Dean, he tested the idea in his head, come help me, please. I’ve been cornered by a Labrador retriever. So, that was out.

The dog's eyes were following the stick as he waved it around, meaning to be threatening in a stick-waving kind of way.

"Nice dog," he said softly, hoping like shit that Dean wouldn't hear him. Noticed something. "Want the stick?" he asked suddenly, understanding the light in the dog's eyes. "Stick?" The growling had stopped, and the dog came down on its front legs, tail going a mile a minute. Downward dog, Sam thought, completely pointlessly.

Sam threw the stick as far as he could. He had a good arm and a clear shot; that dog was gone.

The game was fetch, though; the dog was going to bring it back. No rush, maybe, but he returned to the lamplight at a run, straight into Dean's hard stare.

"Dog," Sam explained hurriedly on a note that carried the thin edge of hysteria.

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She had no idea where the fucking stick had gone. Goddamn sticks. She always thought they would taste better than they did. That tall one had her number, all right. Dumb, dumb, dumb, she berated herself. Fall for it every fucking time, don't you?

Her new master patted her on the head, which almost made her feel better, though it didn't really, because it made her realize that she'd let him down. She'd been able to smell it on them. Something that had that wild wonderful him scent, that smelled like her master, that he needed back.

All he asked of her was that she go get it. Well, get it and rip apart a few of those stupid people as well. They ran around like goddamned squirrels half the time, and those fucking things ought to have been banned from the beginning.

She could feel how badly he needed it, and she wanted to make him happy. He was so unhappy. And she was so hungry she thought she might start gnawing on her own leg if she didn't hunt something fast and warm-blooded soon.

The warm-blooded bit wasn't to be, no matter how hard she wished for it. He led her down to the river and she ate some frogs nesting in the mud, crappy little creatures, all jumpy-crunchy in her mouth. They weren't quite the same as Alpo, but they would do for tonight.

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A strange kind of equilibrium had been attained with that one word.

Sam might not think it a fair exchange, Dean reckoned, but by crashing out of the woods screaming the word 'dog' like it was a demon from the third circle of hell, Sam had just put Dean in the position to hand Sammy his ass.

Dean could be big about it. He didn't need to rub it in on the drive to find the 22nd Virginia Infantry-recommended motel. He could wait, patiently, for the right time to discuss it gently with his brother. Or, should circumstances warrant, to hit Sam over the head with it like it was a rubber mallet at a Strength-o-Meter carnival sideshow. Either way, okay. Up to you, Sammy. How're you gonna play it?

Sam looked a little subdued, that pasty-faced kid way he got, especially with his cheekbone all bloody and bruised. Not quite so cocky, now, right? But instead of saying what first came to mind, Dean only scanned the road for the ‘vacancy’ sign that he was hoping for, left Sam in the car as he checked in – special rates for the reenactors, apparently, Beau had said – and scammed his way into a suite with a kitchenette and separate sleeping quarters. Nice lady in her mid-forties wasn’t going to charge him any extra for the General Lee suite. This was turning into a goddamn holiday. Next thing you know, she’ll be telling me about the – outdoor pool, of course. Oh, perfect. Sammy, I hope you brought your swimming trunks. Your big brother’s taking you on a little vacation.

In fact, he went for a swim while Sam took a shower; having access to a decent pool was such a freakish luxury. Dean loved an unplanned swim, even in a chemical-shocked pool. He had spent the last few summers pulling the Impala over to the roadside beside whatever river or lake had beckoned, stripping down to his skivvies and running or jumping in without giving himself time to get used to it. Floating on his back, diving as deep as he could, where the water went winter cold. Loved glacier-fed streams high in the mountains for the intensity of the shock. Came with the territory when you had a vintage car with roll-down air conditioning, the looking for water.

Strolled back to the motel room barefoot, smelling of chlorine, slapped a clean and refreshed Sam with his wet towel and a wide smile before spending a full half hour under the hard jets of a motel shower with superior water pressure. By the time he got out, Sam had managed to scare up some late dinner in the form of room temperature beers and microwaveable Kraft dinner straight from the motel’s 24-hour commissary, a meal only marginally more edible than home-made beef jerky and weevil-riddled hardtack. Dean knew of only one person who was a worse cook than he was, and that was Sam. They ate out of coffee mugs.

For the first time in a long time, Dean felt like watching TV in his underwear while Sam typed distractedly on the laptop, looking for background information. They finally had something for him to research. He continued tapping away as Dean scanned rapidly through *Starsky & Hutch*, *The Price is Right*, and some grainy Western.

“Dean?” Sam prompted, and Dean jerked awake, still sitting in the chair. Man, he was getting old. “You should go to bed. You’ll get a terrible backache sitting like that.”

Despite the fact that they could have had separate rooms, they both flopped down in the larger of the two bedrooms, the one with two queen sized beds. Neither turned the lights on, both able to see perfectly well by the neon sign located immediately outside the window that flashed ‘Gray & Blue Motor Hotel’ in amazingly mundane shades of gray and blue.

“Hey,” Sam said finally, always the one to start. “You awake?” Dean grunted, not really wanting to encourage him. “Why d’ya think they do it?”

“Do what, Sam?” He knew perfectly well what, but he’d make Sam work for it.

“You know, dress up and play make believe?”

He was getting cocky in the dark, perhaps forgetting the dog. “I don’t know Sammy. Makes them feel close to their ancestors, I guess.”

“Yeah, but, you know, playing a Confederate kinda makes you an asshole, doesn’t it? I don’t see any African Americans out there in uniform.”

Oh, it was going to be one of those conversations with Sam. “I know, Sam. You’re right. Beau and his buddies, they know who won the war. They do, most of the time. Most people get their Civil War history in the usual ways. You read books and watch documentaries and all...”

“Took that school trip to Antietam one time, when we lived in Mechanicsville,” Sam added. “And I think most of those guys out there would call it the War Between the States, Dean.” He laughed quietly and dropped into a perfect imitation of Beau’s Natchez Trace accent. “The Recent Unpleasantness.”

The warm beer had softened the edges for Dean, so he laughed. Sam wasn’t entirely wrong; men like Beau lived with one foot in the past and a hundred and fifty years might as well have been last week. “You’re right,” he agreed. “But these guys live out the history in a different way from books. I don’t know,” he fumbled around for the words, thinking of Beau and the way they talked about bivouacking with live ammo in the same breath as driving to the Piggly-Wiggly for a soda. “People remember things in different ways. Aren’t we all just making it up, sometimes? Remembering what we want?”

There was a huge silence and Dean wondered if Sam had drifted off – hell, he had almost drifted off – but then he heard the rustle of sheets and he glanced over to see Sam put both arms to the back of his head, staring up at the ceiling. “I guess it’s just such an appealing story, being the underdog, the rebel. They probably just want a little taste of something that’s not punching a clock or cleaning furnaces.” He turned so Dean only saw the shadow on his face. “Not so different from you, Dean.” But it was soft, and it was a question.

“Maybe. I sure as hell wouldn’t spend every fucking weekend eating jerky and drinking bad homemade hootch. I get enough excitement.” Enough excitement most weekends, he might have added. But the abyss was always there, he’d just had a sample of it, having had nothing but time on his hands these past few weeks. He’d go talking-to-an-imaginary-friend-named-Napoleon crazy, given nothing but that.

“You ever heard those stories, about how some families, especially in this area, split apart during the war, took different sides?”

Oh, Sammy, please go to sleep, Dean thought. Trust him to concentrate on the intellectual aspects of getting your ass fired on by Civil War reenactors egged on by a ghost. “What do you mean, Sam?”

“You know, a father or a brother signs up for the Confederates, and the son or another brother goes over to the North?” He must have looked over again, because Dean could hear his voice get a little clearer, but Dean had already closed his eyes. “You know, happened a lot. Two brothers facing each other across a battlefield.”

“Yeah,” Dean breathed, this close to being asleep.

“It’d be weird, don’t you think? Can you imagine such a thing?” And Sam probably went on, probably at length, but Dean had already fallen deeply asleep and was finally, blissfully, impervious to his younger brother’s curious musings about fratricide.

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It was a mess, but that was somewhat fitting, given that the battle the two armies were trying to reenact was Wilderness, the beginning of U.S. Grant’s six-week attempt to get around Lee’s flank.

In 1864, the two generals engaged in a series of running battles over a hundred-mile crescent, only ending at Petersburg, where both men settled in for a siege. At Wilderness, the two armies met on familiar

ground: Chancellorsville, fought over the year prior. During the Wilderness Battle, troops clashed in unimaginably dense underbrush littered with the bones of the year before. Units were lost, soldiers fired on their own troops, and the fighting was close and bloody. In two days, Lee lost seventeen thousand men, many of whom burned to death as fires caught in the underbrush.

So what the hell, Sam thought, folding the brochure in half and stuffing it in the back pocket of his jeans. Maybe they should just smack each other over the head with their rifles and call it a day. What reenactment could be complete without men trapped in burning underbrush? His cheek hurt from the night before and his brother wasn't cutting him an inch of slack, despite the fact that Dean had been up at dawn and still smelled like chlorine. Very farb scent, Dean.

The gates were due to open to the public in half an hour and the call had just gone out to de-farb the camp. Everyone was scrambling to stuff plastic coolers under camp cots, toss watches and polyester mosquito netting into canvas gunnysacks, to rid the camp of any signs of the present century. The hospital tent was set up with saws and limb baskets, General Lee's camp huge and somehow cheerful, the small first-person interpreter playing Lee for this event already on top of his dancing gray horse.

Needless to say, Beau's 22nd Virginians were relaxed, were cooking coffee to tar, not having to put away any farbware because they didn't have any farbware. Not unless you counted the two young men in faded dark jeans and threadbare cotton button up shirts that shared a tin of coffee between them, trying to appear as though the dense liquid didn't taste like engine oil. Sam knew he and Dean were so farby that Beau's men almost wanted to make them wait beyond the roped area, where the public milled in a long line-up, families with their coolers and BBQs and industrial strength tubs of sunscreen.

Beau's men were tucked back in the woods, apart from the main part of the camp, where they would soon form up to a line and the Union troops would take their places. Preparing to answer public questions – 'hate the pilgrim baiters' Beau said to Sam, 'those assholes that try to provoke you into an argument' – the troop decided how'd they play it. First-person all the way, no 'my time-your time' crap, no take off my hat to drop my character ploys. Hardcore all the way. There was no reasoning with them, Sam thought.

"Gotta a few spare bits and pieces, Dean. Sure?" Sam caught the tail end of the conversation that Beau was having with his brother, and he just about spit out his coffee. Actually, it would be nice to have an excuse to spit out his coffee.

"Nah," Dean replied, but Sam could tell from his body language that he was hoping that Sam hadn't heard. No way he was going to let this slide, not with the dog hanging over him like a fucking albatross. "We'll wait by the crowds, see if we can tell what's going on."

Riddicker came up beside them, smiled grimly. "Keep a weather eye on the goldurned Yankees. The dog seems a might partial to them. Loaded up?" he asked the rest of the troop and everyone nodded. Fuck, that had to be a bad idea, carrying live rounds during this sort of thing. There were kids here, for crying out loud. Sam tried very hard not to roll his eyes, but Dean spared him a glance as he turned away with a sigh.

"Something to add, Sammy?" Like he had a stick. Fetch. Too close.

Sam shook his head. Beau looked back and forth between them, then pointed to where the gates had just opened, families streaming in, picnic blankets and aluminum frame chairs held like battle flags. The sun was already hot; the day in this shallow valley was going to be a furnace.

“Hey, why don’t I introduce you to Mira,” Beau said to Dean, as though Sam wasn’t even there. “She can tell you about the Fredericksburg dig.”

Sam was going to ask more about that, since it seemed that Dean already knew what the hell Beau was talking about, but the men all started to move at once, grabbing weapons and locking up crates with period-appropriate locks.

“Everyone got water?” Riddicker asked, cleaning up the coffee, throwing the dregs into the bush. He dropped his voice and leaned towards Sam, who could smell him. Okay, chlorine was better than this, Dean. “You don’t have to finish it,” like Sam was a slow and difficult child.

Sam smiled, swallowed the last mouthful and passed the tin mug to Riddicker. “Thanks,” he replied, and had to hurry to catch Dean and Beau, who were already walking away from the encampment towards the crowds.

“I was luring the dog away,” he called after them, and Dean turned, put on a pair of sunglasses, his smile indicating that he was a million miles away.

“Whatever,” he agreed, too amiably.

“Who’s Mira?” Sam asked, falling into step beside them as they meshed with the crowd, avoiding small kids and sunburned parents.

“My sweetheart,” Beau with an expression of saccharine joy that gave Sam the creeps. “Pretty as a picture and smart as a whip.”

“You have a girlfriend?” Sam blurted out, stopping.

“Apparently,” Dean wasn’t even trying anymore. He pushed Sam lightly from behind and dropped his voice, glaring at Sam’s surprise. “Archaeology student at James Madison.”

They’d fallen behind Beau, who had come up to a softly rounded young woman with the longest hair Sam had ever seen, held back in a ponytail, a pair of khakis already smudged with dirt, her face flushed with heat and maybe something else as Beau took off his cap and bent over her hand, kissing it soundly. “My dearest Miss Bell-Hopkins, how good of you to grace our humble struggle.”

He turned, a happy grin spreading beneath his blond beard. “Gentlemen, this is Miss Mira Bell-Hopkins, of Fredericksburg. My darling girl, these are the Winchester brothers, Dean and Samuel.”

Mira pulled her hand away, clearly charmed, and whacked Beau on the shoulder. “I never trust anything he says when he’s in uniform,” she said cheerfully. “Beau told me you’d done this before,” Mira said, directing her comment to Dean while shading her eyes from the sun. She pulled out a pair of sunglasses from a large bag. “You don’t look the type, must say.”

Dean shrugged, but Sam could see a mist of sweat sheen Dean’s temples, the back of his neck already reddening because he was too stubborn to wear sunscreen. “Was more interested in how he made his hardware.”

“Well, gentlemen, I must away now, I’m afraid. My magnolia,” and Beau kissed her hand again. “Perhaps we can rendezvous anon. Wish me godspeed in battle. Boys,” and he sauntered off through the appreciative crowd, more than a little full of himself.

Sam watched Mira watch Beau walk away, knowing that this was the best way to know how in love someone was. Beau, however odd, had found himself something.

Above the din of screaming kids and overly harsh parents, the hawkings of the program sellers and the droning of what he assumed were a group of reenactors playing out a scene in the tents closest to them, Sam heard his brother clear his throat. "So you're working on the Fredericksburg dig this summer."

Mira smiled, and turned to the brothers. "Fourth year of the dig. By the Sunken Road, our section. Real history," she said, winking.

Sam laughed. "You don't buy all this?" Gestured with one hand to include the entire camp – tents, kids, Southern belles, missionaries, horses, cannons, and soldiers.

A sudden fusillade of cannon fire alerted them to the fact that proceedings were getting underway, and the sharp scent of gun smoke wafted over the crowd. "Come on," Mira urged. "We'll never get a good spot." She turned to Sam. "Not unless you'd rather go taunt the interpreters."

Ouch, Sam thought. That actually smarted. "Only if I was stuck with them on a deserted island with nothing better to do."

Mira possessed one of those laughs that made people turn around to see what was so funny. "Well, I'll get you settled. I can't stay the whole day; I promised the gang back at the dig that I'd take the afternoon shift. There's been too much vandalism lately. Stuff getting stolen. Shitty world when people take stuff from an archaeology dig." She turned, took a bottle of water out of her bag and unscrewed the cap. "Follow me." And tipped the bottle up to her mouth as she shouldered her way through the crowd.

Sam ruffled a hand through his hair, already damp with sweat. Where could you buy water around here? Mira had the right idea. Beside him, Dean had actually taken off his sunglasses to pierce him with a sharp stare. Ask her something? Take off in the opposite direction? Is that what that glare meant? Jesus, Dean, it would be nice if you'd take the time to hone those ESP skills of yours.

"I got something to ask Beau before he gets started," Dean said abruptly, jerking his head towards Mira's retreating form. He lowered his voice. "Find out what kind of vandalism. Find out what things have gone missing. Do, you know, some research."

Sam shrugged, and waved vaguely farewell. "Watch out for snipers," he said, only realizing that it was probably in bad taste by the time he caught up with the archaeology student.

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"Okay, Beau," Dean started, completely ignoring the fact that Beau was just about to take a leak against a tree. Custer smiled, continued to unbutton his pants. You had to plan ahead when wearing this kind of gear, Dean knew. "What gives?"

The Confederate private didn't answer until he was finished, by which time a happy family of DC suburbanites had looked askance at them, huddled by the copse of trees, the distant sound of drilling on the field accompanied by shouts and the occasional blast of bugle. Their teenaged daughter had said 'gross' out loud, which was probably just the first time in a long day of endless opportunities. The family was followed by a tiny pink drunk who wobbled in and out of a straight line before her mother scooped her up in her arms and hurried her off to a more family-friendly area.

“Gives?” Beau repeated, being privy to the same interrogation techniques as a Winchester.

Dean smiled, despite the fact that he knew what Beau was up to. “An archaeology student? Really? Not working on an Egyptian dig, is she? Or even something from the Moundmakers. No, she’s a Civil War archaeologist.”

“Archaeology student,” Beau amended, fixing his bayonet. “Still has graduate work to do.”

“Uh huh,” Dean stared hard at Beau’s glass-colored eyes. “Any perks to this particular gig?”

Beau grinned, revealing teeth that were alarmingly period-appropriate. “You mean, aside from...”

Dean nodded. “Yeah, aside from that.” He crossed his arms, felt the sweat slide down the side of his face, down his back. He knew how hardcore Beau could get, and knew that Beau had certain knowledges that went far beyond the typical reenactor’s. Knew exactly what kinds of opportunities an open battlefield pit might present.

For the first time, Beau looked uncomfortable. “You can’t blame a guy,” he protested. “Just a few little things, when she lets me help out.”

“A few little things?” And if Beau noticed that Dean was using the questioning strategy against him, he didn’t mention it.

Beau shrugged. “You know. A buckle, some horseshoe nails, some coins. A ring or two.”

“Grave robbing.” Didn’t even make that one a question.

Beau smiled suddenly. “Not technically a grave.”

Dean raised both brows in disbelief. “What? You gotta have a gravestone to make a grave? Awful narrow definition, Beau.”

And another fusillade sounded, the whinny of horses, and Ruddicker’s booming voice calling the 22nd to action. Beau smiled again, and it was thin as poorhouse soup. “Destiny’s calling,” he said, stepping out of Dean’s reach.

As he moved through the trees to join his troop, Beau turned back, his gun held slackly in his hands, eyes glowing, totally in the moment. “Hey, Dean Winchester, you still carry it with you?”

Dean thought about not answering that, looked away to the teeming field, the cannons and the horses and the shade umbrellas emblazoned with soft drink manufacturer’s logos. “Course,” he replied, one hand in his pocket, fingering his car keys. “I don’t lose shit like that.”

Beau grinned in response, and then the cannons started up in earnest, and he ran onto the field of battle, leaving Dean standing alone in the wilderness wondering what kind of trouble had found him this time.

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That one, Buttercup thought, her mind twisting like a terrified mouse held between the paws. She was down on her haunches, could feel the hunger wind its way from her belly into her mouth, causing saliva


to spill. Beyond the screen of trees, crowds clambered about, running and confusing, all sorts of food dropping to the ground. Could have had her pick – hotdogs, sandwiches, goldfish crackers, a bunch of fucking grapes, a half-eaten stick of pepperoni.

Knew it was there, it was maddening it was so near. Confusion all around, but clarity when she focused on the one, the one who had what her master needed.

He sat beside her, no less watchful, one hand on the raised hairs along her shoulders and spine. They were silent in the woods, watching the two men. She could tell her master was confused, was scared. She could tell he sensed it too.

Close. I can smell it. That one.

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Thanks: to the crew, especially lemmypie, who is my total hardcore darling. I never, ever have to twist her arm to read anything, no matter how shabbily written it is. She befriends reenactors to get the goods, and dresses her kids up in CW gear just for fun. How's that for dedication from your beta, eh?

a/n: 'Pilgrim baiting' originated in Mystic Seaport historical site – it's when an audience member starts heckling a first-person interpreter's routine, a well-known phenomenon in the field of museum interpretation. Okay, taking off my museum-worker's hat now. Shutting up.

## Chapter Four - Dog Soldier

Posted May 28th, 2006

Hey! It's another chapter! You know the drill -- heaps o' swearing and gotta say -- this chapter, the violence ramps up somewhat, so you're forewarned.

A little less conversation: Okay, I like the conversation as much as the next girl, but now – as the readers have reminded me – time for some ass-whupping. Rated PG-13 for swearing and some nasty bone-crunching nasty nastiness. Grrr.

Disclamation-nation: Cleverly avoiding lawsuits, BigPink declares boldly that she'll go where no man has gone before...except WB/CW and Eric Kripke and his unholy minions.

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Mira was just at the point of spilling her heart out like a drunk fifteen-year-old girl at the junior prom when all hell came to visit earth.

Sam had done nothing to bring on the confessional, but he had, unfortunately, the word 'confidante' printed on his forehead in some secret code only girls understood. They were standing in the middle of mothers and fathers and diapered kids and old bearded men who smelled of last week's laundry and chewing tobacco. This was not, clearly not, a slumber party with a half-mickey of Dad's vodka under the pillow, yet Mira kept talking. And Beau McBean, if Sam remembered correctly, could shoot a bottle off a fencepost at half a mile without even using his gun's sights.

So this was unsettling.

"Ah," Sam stalled. "I'm sorry. You were saying that animals have been disrupting the dig site?"

And she hadn't actually been saying that, she'd been saying how lonely it got, having your boyfriend busy all weekend at reenactments, only to come to your apartment stinking of black powder and sweat, eager to crawl into bed with – and lalalalala, Sam was extremely close to sticking his fingers in his ears and humming 'When the Levee Breaks' as loud as he could.

Mira looked surprised. "Yeah. You and Dean should come by – I'm there most days." She made a face. "God only knows that Beau's not –."

She was interrupted by the very undeniable fact that a cannonball smashed into the dirt not twenty feet away, scattering clods of earth and lawn chairs and – spectacularly – a huge red umbrella advertising Brazilian beer. And a man. A man's body parts, not meant to withstand the impact of a cannonball to the chest, flung chunks of meat dropped into the crowd, spillage from the world's most disturbing piñata.

Then Sam heard the massive, concussive explosion. Lightning then thunder, he thought, at exactly the same time that he pulled Mira to the ground reflexively, like every human in history knew to do when someone is throwing iron balls at you from distances resembling city blocks. Duck and fucking cover. But cover with what? They were in the middle of a field, for god's sake.

Apparently, not everyone was familiar with the 'lie prone in a pasture and kiss your ass goodbye' response to Civil War reenactments gone awry. People were screaming, were running in all directions, some with blood streaming from wounds to their heads and bodies, one man carrying a young child

whose arm swung tendonless from the shoulder socket. Sam, who had seen heaps of weirdness in his life, knew to suck in a breath so he'd have some extra oxygen, could keep a clear head. But the air around him seemed devoid of sustenance, like he had a plastic bag wrapped around his head.

Mira raised her face from the ground, blue eyes round. He looked to her, nodded once: I'm here, don't worry. He surveyed the battlefield around them, looked to the ridge, where the Confederate cannons were wreathed in smoke, just at the edge of the woods. They seemed surprisingly far away, but Sam supposed that if he'd been a soldier, they would look too damn close.

He wasn't a soldier, none of them were, but they were getting fired upon nevertheless. Another blast, another bucketing upheaval of earth and blood and bone, this time into the ranks of dark-blue clad Yankee soldiers who stood in groups farther across the farmer's field, not quite ready to march, confused and shouting.

Sam stood up, shouted, waved a family to the far side of the field, away from where the cannon muzzles were trained. Once that family was on its way to safety, he gathered another, guided them to the higher, safer ground. After a moment of this, Mira struggled to her feet, helped him in this task. He recalled thinking that this farmer's field was going to be a furnace today, when in actual fact, it had become a slaughterhouse.

And his next thought was: Dean?

The children and the parents and the old folks, they were imminent, they were right here, and he could help them. He should help them. But as he did so, as he assisted bewildered, sobbing tourists to the higher ground, he kept scanning the woods to where Dean had said he needed a word with Beau, trying not to see the bodies lying on the ground between where he was and where the cannons were and where he hoped Dean was, safe.

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Dean noticed the dog before he noticed the ghost.

A difficult thing to miss, the dog, considering it came at full-throttle, hitting him like a fanged boulder to the chest. Dean fell onto his back, a yell trapped in his throat, twisting there in unbelievable pain like some kind of creature trying to get out. The dog had a mouthful of his jeans in its jaws, the part alarmingly close to his groin, but thankfully no skin, no meat, and was pulling on it, shaking it back and forth, the bulk of the front pocket taking the brunt of the attack. The dog lessened its grip to get a better bite, and in that instant, Dean rolled away and came to a shaky stand by a tree. He grabbed a rock in the process, and roughly calculated his chances of beaming the dog on the head.

Pretty good, he thought, winding up.

Then he felt how cold it had become, how the sweat on his forehead and across his back had become ice, just plain uncomfortable. The dog halted its advance, foam flecked muzzle snapping, its eyes glowing a bloody sick red. The next two things happened more or less simultaneously: the ghost stepped out from behind a tree not ten paces from Dean, and the screams of people being torn apart by cannonfire reached Dean's ears.

Dean could not afford to take his eyes off the dog and the ghost to find out what was happening on the field just through the trees. Sam, he thought, so hard it hurt. The ghost put his hand on the dog's head, calming the growls for only a moment. The specter was tangible: Dean knew his ghosts same as he knew

the Metallica back catalogue, and this one looked like it meant business, was not some dime-store flimsy thing moaning in the attic and shrinking away from the first splash of holy water or muttered Latin.

A young face stared back at Dean, with pale eyes and a soft beard, so thin that the eyes looked hollow. Their eyes met, and Dean suppressed a shudder: what he saw was pure need. He wasn't scared, though, not of a ghost, and not of a dog. His fingers tightened on the rock and every muscle sang with expectation, an electric code vibrating from brain to nerve to muscle to will. The ghost smiled slightly.

Wired for what was in front of him – and shit, wasn't that diverting enough? – Dean didn't hear what was coming behind him until it crashed into him like a freight train. He clutched the rock in his hand, not willing to let go of his only immediate weapon, as a huge man in Confederate gray pushed him to the ground, smashing against his body, driving every molecule of air in his lungs out. Instinctively, Dean rolled, pushing the sheer weight of the man to the side as he did it, looking wildly around for the ghost and the dog while trying without success to make his lungs work.

Damn it, he thought, as the soldier, a glassy crazed look in his eyes, lifted the rifle in his hands and turned it, bayonet down, to where Dean wheezed uselessly on the leaf-soft ground. Not thinking, ignoring his lungs for the moment because they were really the least of his problems, Dean brought his legs up and slammed his feet into the attacking soldier, throwing him back against a tree. He heard the crack of gunfire, close, closer than the cannons which were still going, and another rebel soldier came running past, long blond hair flying as his kepi dropped to the ground. Beau. Dean hauled himself to his knees, forcing his lungs to take in some air.

And Beau brought his rifle up to his shoulder, made it look easy.

Dean turned in the direction of whatever it was that Beau was aiming at, saw the dog coming right at him. Shit, Beau, I hope you're as good a shot as I remember. The dog, once a golden lab, some kid's happy embodiment of unconditional love, seemed bent on sinking its teeth into whatever part of Dean was convenient. Dean braced himself for the dog, and for the shot, which he reckoned would converge on him at the same time.

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There, there, THERE. Damn it, fucker, stop moving. You think I can't see that rock in your hand? Very funny, asshole. You're not here to play fetch. I'm not that dumb twice. Stop moving, already.

Right there, right there, I can smell it. Oh, I promise, it'll be yours. I can do it. So near, and...

Buttercup wasn't quite sure what to do. Her new master needed it, needed it to feel better, to feel whole, to be himself. There, in that one's pocket. Easy.

So close. Just hold still a second, dumb wiggly fucker.

--

The dog hit him at the same time as the bullet. Luckily, both were a little off.

The bullet passed through the dog's neck, kept going. Whispered past Dean's shoulder at an angle meaningful enough to draw blood, but not to lodge permanently. It ended up in the tree trunk behind him. Which was good, because a soft lead minié ball at this range went in like a needle and came out with a hole the size of a man's fist, obliterating flesh as it went.

A bullet, minié ball or otherwise, wasn't going to stop this dog, though, not today. The dog ricocheted off Dean's chest, yelped, and fell back, blood pouring from its neck, but it shook itself and came again. Dean staggered back on his heels, not even feeling the hit to his shoulder, eyes still on the dog. Beau was yelling something, Dean saw him flail his arms and his mouth might have been moving, but it was all so removed, might as well have been on an old TV set with the volume turned down.

A group of twenty or more soldiers were running through the woods now, and the dog looked around, confused. The soldiers were fighting each other, rifles used as clubs, insanity literally running amok. Dean felt obliged to take his immediate attention off the dog as another soldier, eyes the same glassy non-compliant way Dean was coming to associate with getting his ass kicked, raised his rifle butt-first, intending perhaps to slam it into Dean's face.

Oh, enough of this shit already. Dean reached up to meet the gun halfway, pulled himself up on it, coming to his feet in one smooth motion, stepping out of the way, taking the gun easily out of the soldier's hands. In the same move, he pivoted and brought the gun's stock down on the man's temple hard enough to knock him out. Turning, he found Beau beside him, eyes dancing, fully into period rush and Dean thought he might just shoot Beau himself.

Tiny Tim and big Riddicker burst into the underbrush, and they were shouting too, had their muskets primed and at the ready. As Dean watched, Riddicker shot the dog again. Dean actually saw the bullet hit the dog on the shoulder, but it was snarling madly, foamed and bloody and fucking unstoppable. It leapt at Tim, who was slow bringing up his gun. Dean despaired, knowing that this dog was not going to be stopped by ordinary bullets. It buried its teeth into Tim's throat, an enormous, appalling gush of red following, splashing down the era-appropriate threads, so surreal Dean had to blink the sweat out of his eyes. Tim's scream choked into the garbled noise a live pig might make as it was thrown into a wood-chipper.

The dog flashed away, covered in blood now, parted the astonished men and the haze of cannon smoke, heading deeper into the woods. The day was hot again, Dean realized, and he was drenched in sweat and his head was swimming.

Beau was shouting something next to Riddicker, both of them bent to Tim's still body on the forest floor, but Dean had trouble hearing them, his ears still ringing from the close gunfire, his nostrils filled with the sharp odor of sulfur and flame. He thought the cannons might have stopped. The ghost and the dog were gone, and the soldiers around them were resting – oh, those were the ones he and Beau had taken on, so 'resting' was maybe a nice way of saying 'beaten unconscious' – while the others looked blankly around, just starting to come back to themselves.

The ringing helped disguise the screams coming from the field, but Dean could only ignore that for so long.

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Several men from the 22nd handed in their guns that night. Sam watched them under the police lights, weirdly noble, the Lost Cause once again bowing to superior numbers. The clean-up had been going on for hours now, and the whole thing was such a total mess that the real army had been called in and now the field was cordoned off with miles of yellow tape, investigators combing the ground for indications of how the hell this had gone wrong.

In the aftermath, a few scenes played out memorably: General Lee with bandage round his head, thrown from his horse in the confusion; southern belles in ersatz sateen streaked with blood, staggering about like a gaggle of Scarlett O’Haras after the burning of Atlanta; a horse running riderless through the hazy smoke, sweat dripping from its flanks, several US Army soldiers running after it, one with a lasso. No one had been arrested yet, but that was only a matter of time. The event organizers were openly weeping, and one of them had to be sedated and taken to hospital. CNN had arrived. It was time to go.

Five dead, four from cannonfire, one from a dog attack. Thirty people hospitalized. At least fifty treated at the scene by paramedics. One of them Dean, who had remained silent and aloof while the paramedic had sewn up his shoulder. The paramedic was so rattled that he’d made a mess of it, had to actually take out his first few stitches and start again, and Sam had almost volunteered to do it for him. Dean had said almost nothing. Throughout the course of the afternoon and into the early evening, Dean had retreated into a rare but recognizable mood: he was ready to get down to business, and he’d gone to that hard and unforgiving place he’d cultivated for just these sorts of situations.

Sam wasn’t far behind him. If the ghost had caused this mass hallucinatory event – and Sam had no doubt now that it had – then Sam wanted it stopped. They needed to find its bones and burn the shit out of them, and he had a pretty good idea of where to start. That kind of knowledge was the best gift he could give his brother right now.

“C’mon, Dean,” Sam said, sick of watching Dean pace the taped field’s perimeter, tired of this day, just wanting to go back to the motel. A swim. God, a swim would do him a world of good.

They walked back to the parking lot, dark and difficult to negotiate because of all the emergency vehicles and news network vans parked randomly around it, and Sam couldn’t for the life of him remember where they’d left the Impala, because that had been, like, a lifetime ago. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught Dean stumbling a little and he knew that his brother was sore and tired and would thump Sam if he mentioned it. Suddenly, Dean was standing beside the Impala, which had appeared as though whistled for.

Dean went to the trunk, and Sam knew this wasn’t a good sign, meant that Dean was searching for the first aid kit, probably for some kind of painkiller, which he would never admit to Sam. Despite Dean always listening to Sam, he rarely told Sam anything, the exchange so lopsided it could make Sam grin. The situation demanded that Sam step up to the plate, that he make the notion of ‘help’ palatable enough that Dean would accept it.

“Keys?” Sam called out, instead of pointing out how bushed Dean was, which was kinda like pointing out how bushed Dean was. Sam stood by the driver’s door, his intentions obvious. Dean stopped rummaging, turned to him. In the darkness, Sam couldn’t make out his expression.

Then Dean threw the keys over the open trunk to Sam, who immediately dropped them, having half-expected Dean to refuse. A capitulation of sorts, letting Sam drive, a tacit admission that he was hurting. Bending down to retrieve the small bundle of keys, Sam heard the growl. He almost sighed. Of course. Why not.

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She’d eaten a human hand today. First for everything. It wasn’t much more exciting than frogs, but it had been warm, which frogs certainly weren’t. Also, frogs tasted like mud and the hand – once she’d gotten past the crunchiness of the cartilage, so much less tasty than bone – was more like a hotdog, which she vaguely remembered.

She had some holes in her now that she hadn't had before, but they weren't bothering her too much, were only somewhat distracting – itchy – but they weren't going to put her off her mission.

Her master bent down beside her and whispered in her ear. She never understood a damn word he said but she recognized the notions of smell and hunger well enough, which lay behind the words.

So fuck it, here she was again with her master, trying to get that wiggly, tricky one to give it up. The bigger one was afraid of her – she retained that from the other night – but the wiggly one would kill her, if she let him.

And then came the confusing part. The wiggly one didn't have it. Not anymore. But it was near, it was close, so she circled around the cars – and they would have been a distraction, if they'd been moving, very enticing, like big noisy squirrels – and her master came with her, silent on his feet.

Got it back in focus. Excellent. There. Drop it, asshole.

--

“Dean,” Sam warned, low in his throat. He'd heard about the dog today, had seen what it had done to Beau's friend Tim; it was why the Parks Boards' animal control truck was in the lot this evening.

Dean was already moving, maybe he'd seen the glowing eyes emerge from between two parked cars, or maybe he'd heard the growl, Sam didn't know which. What was important was that he had the trunk open and he could hear the distinctive sound of the salt gun being loaded.

“Salt?” Sam asked softly, trying not to doubt Dean. It rarely did him any good, doubting Dean. He stood slowly, keys in his hand, unlocked the door. Driver's door open, passenger side not. If push came to shove, Dean could jump in the trunk and Sam could drive off, which was such a fucking stupid possibility that he almost laughed out loud. The dog whined in the dark and Sam shook his head. It had killed a man today, been shot twice, and it had a ghost beside it. Not your average dog.

Dean didn't answer him. Instead, he circled round the side of the car, trying to get a good line on the dog, Sam thought. The dog was crawling forward, almost cat-like, hunched down, coming right for Sam, growling, hair spiky with dried blood. Sam held his arms away from his sides, the keys jangling in the night, and he watched in amazement as both the dog and the ghost followed the movement.

Just a moment, and then the loud blast of a shotgun as Dean fired a load of salt right into the ghost, not the dog. The rebel ghost disintegrated immediately, dissipated like the smoke from the cannons, and Sam could hear the splatter of rock salt pinging against the cars in the lot. Dean was standing steady, already pulling the gun down and throwing it back into the trunk, slamming it shut with a curse. When Sam looked back to where the ghost and dog had been, there was only darkness. That and distant shouting. The Army was just over the ridge. Like they wouldn't jump when they heard gunfire.

“Sammy, if you've figured out what's going on, I'd be happy as shit for you to tell me, but let's do it in a moving car, okay?”

Once they were out onto the highway heading for the motel, Sam felt that maybe the cops and the US Army hadn't followed them. He was driving faster than usual, but not as fast as Dean usually did, so he wasn't surprised when his brother cleared his throat and drummed his fingers on the console between them. Hurry up, Sam, it meant.

“Why’s the dog going for us?” Sam asked, not expecting an answer, just putting it out there.

“Dog’s not just going for us,” Dean mumbled.

“How do we stop it?” He had some ideas, but wanted to hear what Dean was thinking first. Because Sam knew that dog was after them, felt it in the steady malicious gaze of the beast, didn’t need Dean to lie to him.

His brother was quiet for a few moments, watching highway signage flash by in blurs of green and phosphorus. “Dog’s been possessed by the ghost. Bet it used to be some family’s mutt, must have met up with...”

“Dug up its grave,” Sam turned to Dean, quickly. He liked to keep his eyes on the road mostly, and it was usually easier talking to Dean when he didn’t have to look at him, but this was important.

“What?”

“Betcha that dog dug up the soldier’s grave,” he clarified. He was pretty sure of it. He was sure of something else, too. “And I bet that it’s got something to do with the archaeology dig on Marye’s Heights.”

“Yeah?” And despite what they’d just been through today, this was nice, having Dean all surprised, because his brother would usually prefer to chew off his own tongue than show any sort of lack in his body of knowledge, especially where ghosts and Sam were concerned.

“Mira said that an animal had been in the dig the day before they’d discovered a bunch of human remains – old remains, Civil War remains, just behind the stone fence by the sunken road. And only a few days before this all started at the Spotsylvania reenactment.”

Sam concentrated on the road, but it was sweet, imagining Dean’s face then.

After a few road signs and their turn-off for the Gray & Blue Motor Inn, Dean sighed. “I need to make a bullet,” he said, as though that was something he did regularly, like getting a tetanus shot. “Fill it with holy water. That’ll do it.”

Sam turned off the engine, sat still for a moment, fatigue washing over him. “You know how to do that?”

And Dean grinned, bringing considerable cocky charm to the assurance, “I know how to do that.”

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And, bringing up the rear: We have new people to thank in my seemingly endless litany of thank yous...jmm001, for her Evil Eye of Character Continuity, and Eric the Civil War Reenactor, with whom my intrepid beta Lemmypie has struck up a massively productive email correspondence. So, you know? This shit is the bomb. You’re getting the good stuff now. And that being said, I’m fairly sure Eric would be appalled at what I’ve done with the nice reenactment event in this story. Sorry.

## Chapter Five - Lucky Bullet

Posted May 28th, 2006

Fixed the wacky-assedness of the box size -- ALL of chapter 5 is now. Thank god you say. Whew, sez I.

Disklamshion: Ich grabben nieght to do mit das kunstentelevishion programmen "Supernatural", met Ich vant to. Erik Kripkekunstenmaster ownst it ahl. Fuchking Schweinhund.

Schnell! Schnell!: Das historika ist "T" fur kursting – lots und lots der kursting. Und violenka. (Jesus, the things I write in this section just to keep myself awake)

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The day started better this time, possibly because it didn't involve being shelled by Confederate artillery.

Dean methodically demolished the "Trucker's Special" which consisted mostly of animal proteins and carbohydrates swimming in various forms of fats: three eggs over easy, buttered grits, a small family of chubby pork sausages, and a slab of Virginia ham. And something called 'scrapple', the food group designation of which left Sam guessing. He didn't even like looking at it.

Outside the diner's window, a large billboard read, 'If at First You Don't Secede, Try, Try Again,' and was decorated with Confederate battle flags and a cartoon Johnnie Reb. Sam watched his brother's brow furrow as he stared at it as though he didn't quite get the joke, or didn't know if it was a joke, but it didn't stop him from cleaning his plate with a piece of toast.

Sam, mildly disgusted, poked at his bowl of cornflakes, wondering what had possessed him to order it in the first place. The bowl had arrived with cream, not milk, and they were frosted flakes. The orange juice tasted suspiciously like Tang, and it stung his throat, still raw from smoke.

They had ignored the morning newspaper, although Sam was somewhat interested in how the Fredericksburg Gazette had explained yesterday's carnage without sounding like the National Inquirer. The headline had screamed: Rocket's Red Glare: Death Toll 5 at Civil War Reenactment. He'd gone so far as to pick up a newspaper abandoned on an uncleared table, but Dean had simply snatched it from his hand and thrown it back onto the bench seat as he followed the waitress to their table.

"The dig?" Dean asked, wiping his fingers on a grease-spotted paper napkin. "You know where it is?" He wasn't looking at Sam; he was busy picking some wayward sausage casing from between his teeth with a fingernail. Sam added 'tell him about toothpicks' to the day's to-do list.

He nodded, unfazed by a near-lifetime of Dean's table manners. It was like living with a monkey some days. "Sure," and pulled out a battlefield map that showed all the major National Park Service battlefields in the area: Wilderness, Chancellorsville, Spotsylvania Court House and Fredericksburg itself. They were all only a few miles apart. "Mira said to go to the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center and ask. Their dig is at the Sunken Road, just below Marye's Heights."

He ran a finger along the route they'd take, feeling a twinge of excitement. Maps, visitor centers, interpretive signage on the side of historical trails – all of it was feeding into his innate love of things making sense. Order: these things imposed order onto messy history. And Dean would probably rather put out an eye with Sam's cereal spoon than step one foot in a park visitor center.

Dean chewed slowly, swallowed down the last of the ham with cold coffee. “You gonna eat that?” he thought to ask, but was already pulling the bowl of cornflakes across the worn tabletop. Sam thought about bananas.

There was no way Sam was going to be allowed to drive; he already knew that. He guided Dean into town, though there was no need, really, because Fredericksburg embraced its Civil War identity. Every inch was well marked.

As predicted, Dean hovered outside the Visitor Center while Sam went in to ask about the James Madison U dig. Ten minutes later he emerged laden with walking tour brochures, maps, and a free notepad. He’d sacrificed watching the 22-minute movie about the battle mostly because he wouldn’t put it past his brother to wander off if he left him alone for too long. He spotted Dean leaning over the hood of the Impala with his t-shirt’s sleeve pulled up, showing two young women his stitches from Beau’s bullet. They seemed impressed.

“Hey, Mr. Walking Wounded,” Sam called out, not coming too close, not wanting to hear whatever story Dean was feeding them. The truth was too much; Dean would have something that involved a drag-race shoot out, Sam was sure. “The dig’s this way.” And pointed to where clipped greenery and tall willow trees partially masked an asphalt road and several clapboard buildings. A sign pointed the way to the National Cemetery and the start of the Sunken Road Walking Tour.

“Doesn’t look too sunken,” Dean said as they took the gravel walkway and warily eyed a large reproduction of a horrendous battlefield painting posted by the path. “The cemetery’s up there?” He gestured with his chin up the hill to the west, asking for verification, since Sam was unfolding his site map.

“Yeah, I think that’s where a lot of the dead were buried.” The walking tour map was close to his nose, and he was wondering if the dig would be at the reconstructed stone wall, or nearer to the original stone wall. He didn’t realize what he’d said until he heard Dean make a little choking noise, like a cat when it was barfing.

“You think?” Dean repeated, trying to maintain a straight face. “In a cemetery?”

Sam scowled. “Cujo didn’t give the cemetery a second look and it’s full of Civil War dead. The dog went for the bones at the dig site.” At that moment he caught sight of Mira beside a long shallow trench, a tripod set up in the hole. She was aligning something that Sam couldn’t quite figure out from this distance.

In a purely theoretical way, a professor from a second year anthropology course had impressed upon Sam that field archaeology was largely science, dirt and sunburns, followed by winters in the lab, analyzing pot shards and horseshoe nails. Sam grinned, mostly because he saw that furrow start on Dean’s brow again.

“There’s Indiana Jones now,” Dean muttered, moving in front of Sam, determined to be first at the pit’s edge.

If Dean had been expecting golden idols and skulls, he would be disappointed. As Mira looked up with a tired hello in her eyes, Sam saw that the bottom of the trench – only about a foot and a half deep – was mostly covered in dirt with a scattering of stones set in a patterned array along one end. A black and white scale stick was laid beside one of the stones and Mira was taking a photograph of it.

“Hey,” Mira greeted them, then smiled, but it was forced. Forced gaiety wasn’t her style; true gaiety was, but she’d seen a lot yesterday that most people shouldn’t. “You came.” She glanced behind them. “Alone.”

Dean shrugged, almost apologetically if Sam didn’t know better. Sam plucked his t-shirt away from his chest, where it was sticking to the sweat. Man, it was hot and it wasn’t even ten in the morning. “Beau needed to set up the maneuvers they’re doing tonight.” Licked his lips, evidently wondering if this was coming as a surprise to her. “At Chancellorsville, an overnight with some of the guys.”

Hard to tell with Mira, but her mouth crooked in what looked like amusement. “Tell him that if they’re on the actual NPS battlefield, it’s illegal to bring a metal detector.”

Her tone was light, but Dean ducked his head anyway, and scratched behind his ear. “Metal detector’s pretty farby equipment, but I’ll tell him. We’re going over there after this.”

First Sam’d heard of these plans. He quirked an eyebrow at Dean, but didn’t pursue it. “What are we looking at?” he asked Mira instead, more to break the mood than anything. Mira turned.

“Original stone wall,” and she bent down to the rocks she’d been photographing. “After the war they tore most of it down, but we’re slowly finding the foundation.”

Dean whistled low. “Hmm, rocks,” he murmured. Since Mira was still bent away from them, Sam backhanded him on his sound shoulder, and Dean chuckled then said at his usual volume, which was to say, loud, “Lotta men died trying to cross this wall. Which way did Hooker’s assault come?” And he peered down at the remains of the stone wall.

Sam started to realize something just then. Huh, he thought.

Mira raised a hand to shade her eyes. “That way,” and pointed across the open lawn to where a flagpole gleamed white in the distance. It was too far to see the river.

“Was cold then,” Sam caught Dean say, but not quite to himself. “December 13, 1862. Early in the war. Lee was up there,” and he peered over to the hills behind them. “And Burnside across the river, tens of thousands of Federals in the town.”

“Dean?” Sam asked, the only word he could muster, but it came out more like a sound than a word, a single exhalation of wonder. Dean either didn’t hear him, or was lost to his thoughts. Both, maybe.

Behind him, Sam heard Mira putting the lens cap back on the Minolta. “Yeah, it’s mostly rocks and horseshoe nails and dug lead that we turn up around here. Nothing to get excited about.”

“Dug lead?” Sam repeated.

Mira stepped over to another tripod, this one suspending a large square frame covered in wire mesh. It was incredibly dirty, with rocks and other detritus caught in the screen. “We usually sift the dirt from the dig through one of these, catch any small stuff. Here’s one,” and she plucked out a chunk of lead as big as her thumb, all squashed and misshapen. “Soft lead minié balls grabbed onto the rifled grooves inside the gun’s barrel, gave it good spin, which is why it had such a long range. When the bullet hit though...” She passed the piece to Sam, who turned it over in his hand. It looked familiar, but before he had time to figure out why, Mira had taken it back and tossed it into the sieve. “Dug lead: spent bullets literally dug

out of the side of buildings, or fence posts. Beau sometimes'll make new bullets out of these old ones, but he'd prefer to have pure lead."

Dean laughed. "Does he still get it from X-ray lab renos?"

Mira nodded. "What a freakin' weirdo. Yeah." She looked at Dean, who was staring out at the fields. Something in her face softened following Dean's gaze, and Sam knew that Dean occasionally had that affect on people, something that was innate and had nothing to do with sex or picking up women, though Dean thought it did. "I'll show you the original stone wall," she suggested, packing away her camera. "Part of it's still standing. You get a bit of a sense of the battle."

"It's too pretty," Dean observed, his eyes on the gardens and lawns.

"It is," Mira agreed.

The original stone wall wasn't a far walk. As they strolled between historic clapboard buildings, keeping to the Sunken Road, Dean gave his brother the bare bones of the situation on December 13, 1862: Four lines of Confederate infantry at the bottom of Marye's Hill on the Sunken Road, protected by a four foot stone wall. Confederate cannons further up the hill able to shoot over the heads of their comrades clustered on the road below. All the Confederates had unlimited and sheltered sightlines onto the long stretch of barren winter pasture between the town and the wall. A huge number of Federals crossed that expanse, and more than eight thousand of them died that day, a fraction of the Confederate casualties, another egregious fuck-up in the long line of Yankee blunders that occurred at the war's outset.

Sam looked at what remained this beautiful day, the smell of willow and grass, sunlight sweeping the lawns in waves, shadowed occasionally by strips of cloud. Cold, Dean said, voice in a strange place, and muddy, and full of the cries of the dying, who lay there all night, bleeding and freezing.

Dean had always been good at this, Sam remembered. Telling stories. As a kid, Dean had never relied on storybooks when it came to putting Sam to bed. Dean had stretched out beside his little brother, taking up most of the room on whatever motel mattress had found them that night, lights on, waiting for dad, fighting yawns. Sharing one room for everything meant that Dean almost always went to bed at the same time as Sam; he'd never leave Sam to drift off on his own. He made up stories as Sam tried to settle down, but the adventures were always too exciting, or too funny, or too sad. It took Sam forever to go to sleep, which was part of the pleasure for the both of them.

Sam missed it.

Rearranging the brochures in his hand gave him something to do as Dean spoke, because he worried that his brother wouldn't like it if he thought Sam was listening too closely, if he was judging. That he might stop talking. What was it that Dean had said the other night? Something about people learning history in different ways, not always out of books. About remembering things differently.

Then Dean was looking straight at him, and Sam couldn't tell what he was thinking. "Chamberlain brothers fought here. So did the Perlys. And the Warricks. Neville Warrick fought for the Confederacy. Charles Warrick for the Union. Their father said it broke his heart. Charles died here, on this field, and Neville five months later, when the Federals attacked this hill again." His eyes returned to the manicured field. "Can't even imagine that," he stated firmly, without hesitation. But soft, and Sam knew that even though Dean had been falling asleep as Sam had jabbered on excitedly about things he didn't know the first thing about, his brother had been processing it at a level Sam couldn't even begin to understand.

The faraway look snapped suddenly, came back to Sam with a jolt, because Dean was now smiling sunnily. “So where’d you dig up the body?”

Mira showed them – it had happened almost a month ago. Wasn’t all that unusual, uncovering body parts more than a century old, but this one had been different in that it had been more or less complete. Mira had training in osteoarchaeology – the study of ancient bones – and she said that the body looked as though it had been left where it fell, the only signs of who it might have been small North Carolina ensignia pin and brass buttons of the type worn by Confederates early in the war. She couldn’t be sure until she spent some time with the remains in the lab, but she had noticed a round hole in the skull, just above where the soldier’s left ear would have been.

The discovery had been made late in the day, and so Mira and some of her teammates had covered up what they’d found, knowing that they’d be able to excavate fully in the morning. But the next day she’d returned to find the site dug up, the bones scattered throughout the trench and grassy verge, some snapped, showing wear marks typical of a larger canine. Mira and her team had gathered the remaining bones and sent them to the university lab for later study and identification.

Sam surveyed the unremarkable trench. It looked like someone was digging a new flowerbed, nothing more exciting than that. He’d noticed Dean glancing at him from time to time, perhaps worried that Sam’s weird nightmares might surface in a place so full of death, but there were no rules to that particular gift or curse. Or maybe horror had an expiry date. In any case, Sam felt nothing out of the ordinary.

They thanked Mira and returned to the parking lot, Dean more slowly than Sam for once, a rare look on his face – not just thoughtful, but immersed to the point of dreaminess. Consequently, it was Sam who spotted what Dean would have usually noticed first.

“Hey,” Sam turned to Dean, who was coming up behind him as the heat wafted off the parked cars in a breeze so lazy it was a doldrum, shimmered in the growing kiln of a day. On the power pole beside the Impala, facing away from the car so they wouldn’t have seen it until they returned from this particular angle, was a homemade sign that relied far too heavily on different fonts for excitement.

#### LOST DOG

Have you seen Buttercup?  
Much loved. Reward.

A phone number and a picture. Dean was dialing before Sam was finished reading.

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It fit.

Elliot Farmer had told them that his kid had stopped eating for five days after Buttercup had taken off. Luckily, four-year-olds were forgetful types generally, though little Tyler had a stubborn streak. They had found a lot of food dropped under the table before they’d realized that Tyler wasn’t refusing food, it was just that his usual food disposal unit had run away on the evening of May 20th.

Run away, Elliot had stressed, his trim light brown beard framing an amiable face, not unlike a golden Lab himself, proving to Dean that people looked like their dogs. She hadn’t been stolen, she wasn’t lost. Elliot was certain that she’d had someplace to go, something in mind. Dean had bitten the inside of his mouth to stop from rolling his eyes. The things people believed about their pets.

Still, Elliot had paid top dollar for purebred Buttercup and he'd like to see her back, even though she was forever digging up the flowerbeds. The flowers had looked okay now, given a month's reprieve from Buttercup's attentions.

The Farmer family had looked for her, of course. She was the sweetest dog imaginable, full of tail wagging and licks and that silly smile that Labs got when they were happy. Maybe a little overweight, but that was to be expected. She would never hurt a fly.

"I think Buttercup's dropped a few pounds," Dean said as he pulled out onto Route 3, more famously known as the Plank Road, heading towards Chancellorsville.

"Jeez," Sam shook his head, pulling out his map again. "A family dog. I mean, a real family dog. D'you see the kid?"

"Little Tyler?" Dean asked, rolling down the window. The car's interior was unbearable, and he was having a hard time keeping a grip on the steering wheel, which might as well have been burnished with a blowtorch. "He's gonna be bummed when Buttercup comes back with someone's arm in her mouth."

He'd expected Sam to laugh at that – it was the reason he'd said it, for god's sake, Sam was way too serious today, and Dean didn't like it when Sam got serious – but his brother was studying the countryside out the window, the heat of mid-day bleaching the vibrant greens gray as sagebrush.

"Buttercup's not coming back," Sam replied, after a long moment. "You're gonna kill that dog, aren't you?"

Dean didn't like it, not one bit, that accusatory tone in Sam's voice. He pushed the cassette already perched in the tape player and Bad Company blared through the speakers. He swore Brian Howe's voice sounded burbly, as though the tape was melting.

"Sure am," he affirmed, trying not to think of the kid.

They didn't say anything else on the drive to the next battlefield. Dean hadn't told Sam that they were going mostly because he was sure Sam would have a fit. After yesterday, the idea of another outing with the hardcores was unappealing in the extreme, wouldn't have been tolerated by most thinking people and Sammy was a thinking person if he was anything. Dean – well, he considered himself something different. Not a feeling person, never that. A doing person, maybe.

And right now, what he was intent on doing was finding Beau and dragging his ass back to his place where they would likely spend the hottest day of the fucking year melting lead into bullets. Beyond the making of highly specialized bullets, he wanted a word with Beau about his real reasons for summoning them here, and he'd have to ditch Sam to do that properly. Working in Dean's favor was the fact that Sam was not going to want to sit around while good old boys cast Civil War ordnance in a stifling hot garage decorated with Rebel Battle flags and curling photos of Confederate soldiers. Maybe he could drop Sam off at a nice museum or something. He'd mentioned that movie at the visitor center. That might do.

Finding Beau and his severely depleted 22nd on the Chancellorsville battlefield wasn't easy, considering the site was huge and densely wooded. Coupled with the fact that Beau and his boys were hiding, of course. The brothers came around the corner of the ubiquitous Visitor Center and almost immediately joined a group of sweating tourists fanning themselves with NPS flyers as they milled around in front of yet another hideously graphic battlefield painting.

Dean took one look at the park guide about to start the walking tour and turned in the other direction. Sam blocked his way, and could see clear over Dean's head, and his face was rapt. Dear god, now he was going to have to drag Sammy away from yet another educational experience. Near broke his heart every time.

"Welcome to Chancellorsville National Battlefield Park, everyone," and Sam wasn't responding to Dean's cleared throat at all. "Over three days in early May 1863, these fields and woods saw one of the North's greatest defeats and one of the South's greatest tragedies. Today, I'll take you from where Union General Hooker entrenched his superior numbers at the Chancellorsville estate to where Generals Lee and Jackson split their lesser numbers and surprised Hooker by initiating the attack. Many thousands of men died here in the thick woods to our right, but no death was more important to the South's ultimate defeat than that of General Thomas 'Stonewall' Jackson, killed by what we would now call 'friendly' fire."

Right, Dean thought. That's where Beau will be, where this whole thing started. He pinched Sam on the fleshy part on the upper arm, hard. Let's go, Historic Site Boy. Sam dipped his head, a protest dying on his lips as he saw the expression on Dean's face.

Lucky there was signage for it, otherwise he'd have to ask Sam, and that would have been unpleasant. Sam didn't question Dean's direction, but made those little sighs that told Dean he thought that Dean was being a big fat jerk. They walked into the woods, a wide cleared dirt road leading them up to the Jackson Memorial. Sure enough, Beau and about ten of his comrades were just a little ways off from the stone cenotaph, almost right at the place where Stonewall Jackson had been shot by his own soldiers. Dean heard them first, cursing in era-appropriate fashion. Someone was getting called a golderned whoremonger for stepping out of line. They were drilling, evidently.

Beau might have been expecting them, because he didn't look at all surprised as they came through the woods, which really were ridiculously thick, no wonder Jackson had been mistaken by his own troops, thinking that he was part of a Union advance. Good that Beau was expecting them, too, because the ten men whirled around, rifles coming off their shoulders, ready before Beau shouted "Halt!" and the guys all relaxed. Relaxed as much as they could, considering what they'd been through yesterday.

"Hey, Beau," Dean called, raising his hand, hoping that he hadn't jumped when the boys in gray had wheeled around, bristling. "Mind not firing on my ass just for walking through the woods? We're not at war." Not really, he might have added, seeing the expression in Beau's eyes. "I hope those aren't loaded."

"Damn dog's still around," Riddicker said, and his big face was stony. Fair enough, after what had happened to Tim.

"Regular bullets aren't going to stop it." Blunt as a butterknife. "That's why I've been trying to find you, Beau. I'll drive you to your place and use your stuff to make something that'll work." He looked at the men, worried about their loaded guns, knew how crazy they could get. "You guys should take a break until we get back." He tried not to grin, because of the guns, and he was standing in front of them in jeans and a t-shirt. A civilian, telling them to take it easy. "You could grab a coffee at the Visitor Center." And couldn't quite keep the smile away. "You still have some extra stuff, Beau?"

Now it was Beau's turn to grin ear to ear and he looked like a fucking pirate, not a Confederate infantryman. "Sure do, pard. You suiting up?"

Dean let the moment linger before delivering the goods. "Nope. Sam is."

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Sam argued all the way back to the car, or would have, Dean was sure, except that they ran into the walking tour again and Dean didn't look a gift horse in the mouth. He suggested that Sam could spend the next couple of hours watching whatever movie he liked at the Visitor Center, following any walking tour that appealed to him, could read every damn historical plaque on the grounds, which would probably take him until next Easter.

Sam folded like a Japanese fan, suddenly hiding his pattern, silent and pissed. Dean would have happily left him with the tour, except that he wanted to make sure Sam had the salt gun, and Sam had also left his knapsack in the trunk, which contained his cell phone. Dean didn't want Sam thrashing about the woods with a ghost, a rabid dog, and armed men who thought they were living a hundred and forty years in the past without a means of communication and a weapon that at least seemed to make a dent in the ghost. Quite frankly, though, Dean was more worried about Buttercup, because those teeth were real.

"...and here is the location where Jackson was fired upon by North Carolina troops on the evening of May 2, mistaken as part of a Yankee offensive." The park guide seemed as earnest as when they'd started. Some of the tourists were starting to flag, though. They perked up at the appearance of Beau in full drill gear. The guide didn't miss a beat. "He was hit on the palm of his hand and twice in the arm, necessitating its removal. He died a week later. This despite the lucky bullet I mentioned before, the one he'd been given the year prior at Fredericksburg."

Sam suddenly stopped, and Dean took three steps before he realized it, only noticed that Sam wasn't beside him because he heard his brother's voice behind him.

"Sorry," and that was just like Sam, to interrupt a fucking tour, to need some kind of clarification, to ask why. "I missed that part of the tour. A lucky bullet?" And Sam was way too fucking smart, always had been, and Dean didn't need him to hear about this, because he would hit the fucking roof. But unless Dean was willing to drag Sam bodily away, which presented its own problems, Sam was about get exactly what he wanted. Why's the dog going for us, Dean? Fuck.

The park guide smiled bemusedly, perhaps a little ticked off that they were traveling in the company of a war reenactor, who had admittedly taken the attention of his otherwise attentive audience of suburban white folk.

"I'd be pleased to. Not a very well-known story, and likely apocryphal, because there's no real evidence to back it up other than oral histories collected years after the fact. But back in December of 1862, a young soldier named Jubal Garrett from the North Carolina 11th Infantry was considered the luckiest man in the corps: he was practically bulletproof, they said. He traveled with a big dog that terrified the Yankees, and was cool as a cucumber under fire. The day before the Union assault on Marye's Heights, Jackson reviewed the troops and is said to have had a conversation with Garrett, asked him what his secret was. Some claim he took Garrett's lucky bullet when the young man offered it to him. You have to understand, Jackson was a very godly man. Some religious folks say that while it brought him victory in battle, it was the devil's work. North Carolina bullets ended Jackson's life, so maybe that much is true."

The crowd laughed, and Dean knew that look on Sam's face, the one that anyone else would think was merely amused, but that actually meant he was going to pitch a fit as soon as he got Dean alone. Dean started to back away from the tour group. Actually, he'd never heard the Jubal Garrett part of the story before, especially hadn't heard about the fucking dog, but he knew about Jackson's lucky bullet all right. Knew all about it.

“And, excuse me,” now Sam was getting insistent, and Dean had a pretty good idea that a) Sam would have been completely insufferable in a class full of freshman, and b) that Sam was going to give him an earful, maybe more.

The park guide, a middle aged man with little round glasses and a gentle smirk, raised his sandy eyebrows. “Yes?” Okay, more than a little annoyed.

“Did they find the lucky bullet on Jackson when he was hit?”

Sam, Sam, Sammy, leave it.

The guide’s face screwed up a little. “Well, he certainly wasn’t buried with it. There’s no mention about what happened to that bullet.”

“And what happened to Jubal Garrett?” There was nothing of curiosity in the voice now, and anyone bothering to listen would hear the anger. It was probably confusing the shit out of the park guide. A different kind of pilgrim baiting, Dean thought.

“His fellow soldiers say that he died the very next day, right after giving away his good luck token,” the park guide said. “But they never found his body, what with all the carnage at Marye’s Heights. The dog went wild and the Confederate troops had to shoot the poor beast.”

Dean had heard enough. Sam had definitely heard enough. Dean walked away, pulled out his phone and asked Beau what Mira’s number was. If he was on the phone, then Sam would have a chance to cool down. Except there was no way Sam was cooling down anytime soon and god alone knew Sam was capable of holding a fucking grudge for decades.

“Hey Mira, it’s Dean,” and he could hear Sam coming up behind him, felt sweat run down the middle of his back, it was at least four o’clock now, the hottest part of the goddamn day and Sam was going to crucify him when he put it all together, which wouldn’t take him... “Yeah, gotta favor to ask.” She was a reasonable girl. He smiled grimly at Sam, who was not smiling at all. “Can you bring those bones back to the dig?”

Turned out she wasn’t so reasonable. Finally, Sam extended his hand and raised his eyebrows. He didn’t look happy. Dean licked his lips, gave his brother the phone.

“Mira?” Sam said. “Sam here. It’s important. Beau’s told you about the ghost and you saw what the dog did to Tim. Just bring the bones. We have to end this.”

And how was that any different from what he’d just said? But apparently it was, because Sam arranged to meet Mira tomorrow, late afternoon – the university lab being locked up for the weekend – and she’d bring the box of bones. Sam clicked off the phone, handed it back to Dean wordlessly.

The Impala was on the far side of the lot, because there had been some shade there two hours ago. Now it stood exposed to the blazing sun, and Dean could commiserate, facing Sam like he was standing at the mouth of a blast furnace.

“Give me your keys, Dean,” Sam said quietly, proving beyond a doubt that not only was he mad, but he was smart.

Dean wiped his forehead, and his hand slid around some in the sweat. He glanced quickly to Beau, who looked so freakishly innocent he might have been a choirboy in a kepi. Slowly, Dean reached into his front pocket and pulled out the keys, weighed them in his hand. A chunk of lead hung there, a piece that to the inexperienced eye looked like a fishing weight, a lump of dark gray, heavy. Not much larger than a big marble. He kept them close, so Sam wouldn't grab them.

"Lucky bullet, Dean?" Sam asked, but it wasn't really a question. He went on to demonstrate that it wasn't a question by filling in the silence. "I ought to..."

"To what, Sam?" Dean's rule: never admit to being wrong, especially when you were really, really wrong.

"Where'd it come from?"

Dean wasn't a squealer, never had been. He couldn't look at Beau then without giving it away. So he just crossed his arms, kept hold of his keys, tucked them under his left elbow. He started walking towards the car, determined to ride it out. How the fuck was he supposed to explain it to Sam? When would have been the appropriate time? Until right this second, he wasn't even completely sure himself. A hunk of dug lead, retrieved from the ground. With a metal detector. By Beau, on this battleground, who had done enough research, had the sense of where to look for things like this. He was a specialist, after all.

Dean ran his hand alongside the Impala, and it burned. Popping the trunk so Sam could get the salt gun and his pack, he then unlocked the driver's door as Sam crowded him – loomed, maybe a better word would be, because Sam was fucking masterful at looming – and didn't move at all. Dean tried ignoring him. He opened the door, but not all the way, because that would have involved shoving Sam to the side. Instead, he waited for Sam to shift, which he was pretty practiced at, really, the only kind of waiting he was good at.

Sam had that stupid clenching of the jaw thing going on that always made Dean think of gunslingers from old Westerns. If he didn't watch it, Sam was going to clench himself into a knot, but apology wasn't an option. He glanced at Beau, standing beside the nearby bushes, and he shrugged as if to say, 'wasn't me keeping a secret.'

Sam was struggling; Dean could see it plainly. "How long have you had it?" Hard to articulate with your jaw locked like that.

A shrug would have pushed Sam over the edge, but Dean considered it anyway. "Three years," and swallowed. "You weren't around then, Sam. Weren't exactly in the sharing caring frame of mind."

Sam unclenched enough to smile that awful smile he had when he was this furious. "Let me see it." He held out his hand and Dean backed away from the open door, gestured to the trunk, the keys in his hand, catching the angled sun.

"Get your pack, Sam. Jackson's bullet is all we need to get the dog to us. But we can't kill it till I make the right bullet. So stop talking –"

"You knew!" Sam suddenly shouted, taking a step forward, away from the car. Dean circled round him, hoping to gently herd him toward the trunk through sheer tenacity and willpower.

He didn't realize that he was getting angry too, didn't recognize the signs. Because just then, despite his best intentions, he shrugged, turned it into an insult. Sam made a grab for the keys and Dean jumped

back, crashing into the Impala, jamming his left shoulder onto the roof. Right where the stitches were and that hurt. The keys flew from his hand, landed on the car seat.

“Course I knew, Sam,” he said between gritted teeth, holding his shoulder and wondering how four small stitches could hurt so fucking much. Right then he really didn’t care how pissed his brother was. “What was I going to say? ‘Hi Sam, haven’t seen you in awhile, here’s my Stonewall Jackson lucky fucking bullet, let’s be friends again?’”

He never did find out what Sam thought he ought to have said, because at that moment Buttercup came crashing out of the bushes right beside Beau, who barely had time to blink, let alone warn them, and hurled herself at Dean. Except, no, not really at Dean, he was just in the way. She knocked him down – he was off-balance anyway, holding his shoulder and slightly bent at the waist – and blasted into the car like a line drive from a heavy hitter.

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Stay down, wiggly fucking fucker. Outta my way. Stay still, waving it around like a fucking frisbee. You have no idea how fucked up you guys are...just stop fucking moving.

Sit. Stay. Shit, never worked for me, either.

Owww! Hands off! Drop it! Stop grabbing my ---

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Dean, on the ground, yanked hard on the dog’s tail, trying to prevent it from getting into the car, though it was most of the way there by the time he got good purchase. Get the fuck outta my –

And yelped as the dog’s scabbling paws – and what the hell that was doing to the leather interior he wasn’t going to consider just yet – dislodged something that came flying out like a rocket to glance off his cheekbone.

“Let go! Dean, let go!” he heard Sam yell on the hard edge of panic, loud enough it might as well be in his ear, and he stopped trying to drag the dog out of his car, hoped like hell that Sam or Beau or somebody had gotten a gun or an ax or something lethal from the open trunk, because as soon as he let go of that tail, the dog’s going to... “Roll, roll, ROLL!” Sam screamed at him, so he did, getting out of the way as Sam slammed the Impala’s door shut so hard the window rattled in its casing.

Dean, breathing hard, sat up, looked over his shoulder to see Buttercup going apeshit inside the Impala. He stared at Sam, who had a determined, calm set to his face now, watched as he bent his long ridiculous length and picked up the keys from the ground. Reaching up, Dean felt where the flung keys had hit him on the cheek. Sam stared at the keys in his hand, looking at the chunk of lead there, glanced over at the hysterics of the dog in the car, the Impala rocking with the ferocity of the barking and the jumping.

“What the fuck have you done?” Dean cried, unable to decide which was worse: the keys in Sam’s hands, or the rabid dog in the car.

“Given us time to think,” Sam replied, pushing his stupid long hair out of his narrowing eyes. Okay, still pissed. “To weigh options. Come up with a plan. Act with a strategy.” And Dean groaned, got to his feet, almost unable to think for the barking going on inside. In this heat, maybe the dog would bake. Nah.

Possessed dogs didn't die from ordinary bullets and they weren't going to expire from heat exhaustion either.

"Dog like that could make a terrible mess of a car's upholstery," Beau observed, leaning down to peer through the window.

"Shut up," both Winchesters said at the same time.

Coming up beside Beau, Sam gestured for him to move away, which he did. Slowly, Sam brought the keys to the window. Buttercup threw herself against them, a long glob of saliva messing the window as the clack of her teeth against the glass made Dean wince.

"So, the dog's not after us in particular?" Sam asked him softly, almost maliciously.

"Not really," Beau said, even though he'd been told to conduct himself otherwise. "After the bullet, I reckon."

"Maybe we should let her have it," Sam suggested, and met Dean's stare. The voice of reason. "Maybe she'll take the bullet to the ghost of Jubal Garrett, he'll be at rest and this'll all be over."

Dean found that he couldn't look at Sam anymore, couldn't look at his smug sensibility. Buttercup was now attacking the steering wheel, chewing it. He didn't know how much more he could take.

"Yep, only one problem with that plan, pard," Beau said, undeterred by the combined Winchester death stares. "What happens to the dog? Still on the loose. And we still need to burn the bones, I'd say. I mean you could try it," and he shrugged. "Just don't see how it helps us catch the dog."

"We've caught the dog!" Sam yelled, openly frustrated. Dean watched as he collected himself, but couldn't really concentrate because Buttercup was repeatedly throwing herself against the driver's side window and, holy shit...

Craaaaaack. A long thin line silvered across the window like forked lightning. Dean stepped forward, swearing at the dog with every curse he knew, which was not an inconsiderable set of words and phrases. He barely noticed when Sam came back from a trip to the trunk, pushed a salt gun into Dean's hands, pulled him away from the window.

Dean heard Sam jingle the keys in his hand, his face still and focused. "Dean, get ready. On my count, Beau, open the door."

"Are you fucking nuts?" Dean asked, but Beau was already there, and Buttercup was thrashing about and she was coming out, one way or another.

On Sam's shouted 'three', Beau yanked open the door. Dean had the gun to his shoulder, the salt loaded and the hammer cocked, and Sam wound up like Roger Clemens on a good day twenty years ago and pitched the keys as far as he could.

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Good boy, tall one, there's a good boy. All over, just give me what I want, and this'll be all over. Good boy, good boy. Don't fucking tease.

So much movement, so many arms and legs and fingers, and the smell of blood on the wiggly one, wouldn't mind taking a bite outta him. Stronger still, the smell of need and want and hunger. Hunger – just throw it, just throw it. Could almost see it, see it flying away making her heart want to follow. Just like that. Fast as a fucking squirrel.

And there.

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She was gone. Into the underbrush, where they could hear her for a few seconds, then that too disappeared, replaced by the occasional outburst of heat bugs. A few minutes later, they heard a howl, far in the distance.

Dean leaned onto the car like it was a life raft in the North Atlantic, didn't care how hot it was, how it hurt, even through his sweat-dampened t-shirt. After a long moment and with a heavy heart, he peered inside, bracing himself for the worst. The steering wheel was okay, though sticky with dog spit. The driver's side seat, however, had several large rips in the leather, the cotton ticking and layers of 60s era padding seeping out like intestines from a cavity wound. He leaned in, not wanting to talk with anyone, the heat and his abused bullet wound and the Impala's interior and the smell of dog combining to make him feel a little sick.

"Let's go," he heard Sam say behind him. He didn't sound angry anymore. He sounded something else, and Dean couldn't put his finger on what that was.

Straightening, wiping his face of more sweat, wishing he had some water, anything to drink, he looked at Sam, who had put the salt gun back in the trunk and slammed it shut.

"How?" Dean asked, his eyes following the trajectory of the thrown keys, which had landed god alone knew where in the dense underbrush. He turned to Sam, trying to find anger, but failing. "How?"

And Sam smiled lopsidedly, pulled his hand out of his pocket, placed Dean's set of keys, lucky bullet and all, onto the palm of his brother's hand. "Here's Jackson's lucky bullet. Let's be friends."

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They stuffed the reenactor in the backseat where he belonged. Both brothers were a little tired of Beau, but Dean was right: they needed to make the bullet, fast. Sam imagined for a moment having a Get Smart Cone of Silence that he could put down over the front seats so Beau would just stay out of it, because Sam knew what was coming.

They weren't even out the parking lot before it arrived. Dean at least cleared his throat, a warning. "Where'd the keys come from?"

Sam, window unrolled, trying not to breathe too deeply because a feral dog soaked in day old human blood trapped in a hot car stank in a truly indescribable way, sighed. "What? I can't have keys?"

Dean's sunburned nose wrinkled, whether from the stench or from Sam's refusal, Sam didn't know. "Just didn't think..."

"I had a life, Dean," he said quietly. "It involved an apartment, a bike lock, Jess's car, her parents' cabin up north, the padlock to the boathouse – "

Something in his voice must have made Dean uncomfortable; Sam could see his brother's larynx cartilage jump up and down as he swallowed. Sam turned to the window again.

"Sorry," Dean said, finally. Roughly. "I'm sorry."

Sam waved his fingers in the breeze. "S'okay. Doesn't matter." He glanced over at Dean and their eyes met for moment before both of them looked away.

"I don't get it," Dean said in that long-suffering tone he sometimes got, but it was after a moment of consideration, his voice returning from whatever place he'd gone, sitting silently in the ripped seat. "Those keys weren't important to you? Really?"

But he did get it, didn't he, and he wasn't really asking a question so much as giving an answer.

Sam thought about that. Thought about the place of things in your life that had no practical purpose anymore, that were all memory, the true purpose of which was only mined by stripping off layer from layer: metal keys, function, memory, feeling, meaning. Lawn, topsoil, packed earth, human remains. Bedrock. Knew what the meaning was for him, whether the keys were there or not.

He smiled lightly, but didn't need to look at Dean. "Seemed more important to keep the keys we actually need."

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a/n: I've totally taken the biggest liberties with this part of my fic. Although Jackson was killed by friendly fire at Chancellorsville, and lots of Confederates but especially Union troops died at the Sunken Road, the story of the 'lucky bullet' is just that – a story, completely fabricated by me. Jackson was so religious, I doubt he had anything 'luckier' than a cross. Also, the names of the various brotherly soldiers I mentioned are also fictitious, though brothers fighting brothers on the same battlefield certainly wasn't.

## Chapter Six - Tastes Like Chicken

Posted May 28th, 2006

Dscl: Kripke: 4 gazillion; BigPink: 0

Splrs: 0

STF: The Winchester brothers have a 'lucky bullet' that a Civil War era ghost wants back. He's sending his possessed dog to hunt it down. Dean's figured out that the dog can be killed by a holy-water filled bullet, which he's going to make. Them's the bones, here's the meat:

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Beau's garage did little to inspire confidence in the whole bullet-making venture. It had about twenty-five different small firearms in various stages of deconstruction scattered across a central work table, several bundles of dried flowers and herbs hanging from the exposed wooden rafters, vats of evil-smelling dark liquids under one small window, and seven or eight red tins of turpentine positioned uncomfortably close to a blowtorch at rest. Sam was surprised Beau didn't have them sign a waiver before stepping inside, because the whole thing looked as though it would blow sky-high if you just looked at it funny.

Which Sam was doing, of course. He'd come to a stop just inside the open rolling door, taking in the oily and acrid smells with an open mouth. Dean picked his way through the armory wreckage to the far corner where a two-burner stove and a kiln huddled together. Sam assumed that was the forging area. Beau had left them to explore the wooden garage; mindful of his 'good' clothes, the reenactor had run inside the bungalow to change into mysterious 'bullet-making gear'. Probably not sold at Walmart, whatever it was.

Dean wasn't heading for the forge after all, Sam noticed with relief – he was opening the beer fridge, which was a banged up Harvest Gold and stocked with beer from this century, some cheap wastewater brand, but blessedly coldish. Dean twisted off the caps, snapped them into the air with thumb and forefinger so that they flew through the drying vegetation, and handed Sam a sweaty bottled benediction. They stood outside the garage to enjoy the early evening breeze, leaned against the peeling clapboard. Sam held the beer to the side of his neck for one blissful minute before swallowing half of it in one long pull.

They said nothing for quite some time, as long as it took to finish the beers. Wordlessly, Sam took Dean's empty bottle and put it in a cardboard case beside the fridge. He noticed a small cannon resting against the wall under some rusting license plates from Arkansas and Alabama and Mississippi, all dating from the late 1950s and early 1960s. The calendar nailed above was holding steady at September 1989, and advertised the services of a 'sutler' who guaranteed full satisfaction on all dry goods or money back. A framed Confederate bill rested on a horizontal 2x4 above the blowtorching area.

"Go ahead," Dean said quietly, but he didn't seem defeated, didn't seem as though he was bracing himself for a chewing out. Just sounded as though he was...willing to talk. That would be a new one, Sam thought, smiling because his back was to Dean.

"Go ahead, what?" he asked, turning and arranging his expression to innocence.

Dean came a few steps into the garage, reached up and pulled the chain of the overhead light. Nothing happened. It wasn't quite dusk, but it wasn't far off – the sunlight came slanting in the window, touched everything in its path gold. "I didn't tell you about the bullet."

“No, you didn’t,” Sam verified.

“Beau told me what it was; I thought he was full of shit, until now.” It was close to an apology, which was not comfortable territory for Dean. “C’mon, for crying out loud, the trunk’s full of crap like this. You don’t have a fucking clue about half the stuff that’s in there.”

You know, Sam told himself, he’s right. The trunk is crammed with strange shit I don’t know enough about. But none of those things had caused a crazed golden Lab and a Confederate ghost to come looking for them, had caused five innocent people to be killed. And Dean kept the lucky bullet on his keychain, not in the trunk. It was too hot to argue, so Sam gave Dean a nod, which was returned. Standing next to the rumbling fridge, Sam lifted his shoulders to better move the sweat around, wondered if he should have another beer on an empty stomach.

“We should order a pizza,” he suggested instead, peering into one of the vats. “What the hell is this stuff?”

“Nineteenth century dye,” Beau said, coming into the garage, an aluminum foil wrapped plate in one hand. He looked disturbingly chipper, as though his day was just getting better and better. “Mix ‘em up to color some of the gear.” His nose wrinkled. “Nasty stuff. Wouldn’t breathe too deeply.”

He wore mechanic’s overalls, his hair caught back in a ponytail. In the light, he looked like an overcooked lobster. His nose was peeling. Sunscreen? Obviously only for farbs. “Mira’s sandwiches – think she made ‘em Thursday. Should still be good, right?”

“Depends. Have they seen the inside of a fridge?” Dean asked as they sat at the worktable and Beau shoved a couple of gun barrels and wooden stocks to one side. Sam hoped that the sandwiches weren’t tuna or egg, hoped even more that they wouldn’t add salmonella poisoning to the weekend’s adventures.

But the sandwiches were grilled vegetable and cheese and still reassuringly cold. Beau got a few more beers and cranked up the stove like a sick college prank. Tipping the bottle to his lips, he replaced the burned-out light bulb as Sam tried to think up a joke, but it was too fucking hot to even consider being funny. Making bullets with a beer in one hand and a blowtorch in the other: good times in the Virginia Piedmont. Yee-ha.

There were mosquitoes the size of dragonflies in the darker corners of the garage and they had always liked Sam better than Dean, a weird affliction right from birth. They seemed to prefer Beau as well, for he lit a mosquito coil, adding a new toxic delight to the general hillbilly ambiance.

Dean returned from the Impala with a supply of holy water and an older handgun that Sam had never seen before, not his preferred Glock, something more era-appropriate. Sam’s weapons skills were hardly anything to scoff at, but as he watched Dean melt the chunks of X-ray lab lead, heat the molds against the pot, stir the molten lead to send the slag to the pot’s edge, and widen the sprue hole on the plate with a drill so that bubbles wouldn’t form, Sam despaired at ever being able to do anything as well as Dean seemed to be able to do with one hand tied behind his back.

Dean threw the first bullets cast to one side, declaring them unfit. Beau nodded approvingly, and Sam realized that Dean was making it look easy. Beau examined Dean’s workmanship in the same way a prof would participate in a good student’s thesis defense, encouraging and non-interfering. Letting him shine.

Sweat dripped from Dean's nose and he wiped his face on his shoulder. Both his hands were encased in thick leather gloves: the lead was heated to 620F and the equipment – tongs and molds and the pouring containers – was all hot and heavy and dangerous.

Sam discovered there was water in the fridge as well as beer, and opened a plastic bottle for each of them before he took a tall stool in the corner, near enough to the mosquito coil that the bugs wouldn't bite him all that much, far enough that he wouldn't need to breathe its carcinogenic fumes. Close enough to see exactly what his brother was doing.

Beau sidled up to where Sam sat, guzzling water in a way that made it drip from his beard. Somehow, it wasn't as disturbing as Sam might have imagined. Dean, bent over the table, was concentrating so hard on the task at hand that Sam could probably have stripped naked and danced the Macarena before he'd look up. Not even then, maybe.

"Kinda scary, ain't he?" Beau said quietly.

"Oh, you have no idea," Sam replied, grinning. He glanced at Beau's profile. "So, how'd you find it?"

Beau smiled slowly, though it didn't quite touch those freaky eyes, took some more water in his mouth and swished it around before swallowing. He continued to concentrate on what Dean was doing. "Did some research. They got that memorial in the wrong place; Jackson was shot a few hundred yards from the cenotaph. Lots of first hand accounts of Stonewall getting shot, diaries and so forth, lots of inventories of what was on his person when he was brought to the doctor. Bullet had to be somewhere in the bush, I reckoned. I got it down to ten square yards. That's good enough for a metal detector." Then he did glance over to Sam and his smile was wolfish. "Don't tell Mira." He shrugged, leaned against the wall. "Your brother didn't believe me, thought it was just a souvenir. I made a loop for his keychain so he wouldn't lose it."

Sam shook his head, finished the water, tossed the empty bottle into an incongruous blue box. "He doesn't lose shit like that." Something shifted in Beau's clear eyes. "Why'd you give it to him?"

And Beau looked quickly away, which told Sam something. The reenactor smiled slightly, but it was bitter. "Had us a bit of an argument."

"You gave him something you thought was unlucky?" Jesus, Sam thought. "Something that you thought killed Stonewall Jackson?" He kept his voice down, barely.

"No," Beau whispered, shocked. "I'd never do that. The opposite: it seemed like it would be lucky for Dean. And unlucky for me. That fucking thing has shitty luck." That softly, like admitting a superstition vaguely like walking under a ladder or throwing salt. "When I saw that ghost, saw that dog, I knew we needed it back here. So I phoned."

Sam let out a long breath, felt anger sizzle through his veins like a circuit had been completed and powered up. Beau had played with fire, and used Dean as his firewall. Still, Dean wouldn't thank Sam for pointing it out, not when he'd been carrying that bullet for three years without incident – well, if you didn't count the usual weird shit that happened to them – and not when Sam hadn't been around at the time to help with any decisions about whether to accept the loaded gift or not.

Beau was back to watching Dean. And what he was doing was compelling enough that Sam watched too.

Dean squeezed the handles of the hot mold in his left hand and gave the mold a sharp smack with a wooden mallet before opening it up. Finally, he cast a few balls that seemed to satisfy him. Dropping them to tin basin, he let them cool while he grabbed an empty pot from the stack on the shelf. Beau, who had gone back to making more bullets for his own gun, looked up quickly. Sam watched Dean pull out his keychain from his front pocket and slide off the lucky bullet. He placed it into the small heavy pot, where it landed with a dull clank.

Beau's face was impassive, but flushed. Might have been sunburn, but Sam thought Beau's naturally lazy voice sounded unusually tight; not surprising. "You sure, pard?" he asked.

Dean nodded once, determined, put the pot onto the hot surface of the stove. "More useful this way. Just in case," he said, slid a look to Sam, who shrugged. If Dean thought it best to melt that sucker down, who was he to argue?

While Jackson's lucky bullet was melting, Dean picked up the hollow bullets he'd just cast and turned them over in his fingers. He examined them for rough edges, then took his handgun and an Enfield rifle that Beau had said Sam could use and laid them on the table. He made sure the bullets slid cleanly down the bore of the rifle and fit into the breech of the pistol. After sizing, he removed them from the weapons, and set them on some putty Beau had, hollow end up. He asked Sam to pass him the holy water and he filled the cooled bullets with a dropper, a miniscule amount. Sam was unaware of the correct possessed animal to holy water ratio; he hoped the few drops would be enough. Dean capped them off with a tiny bit of lead solder that looked like the sort used to join stained glass. Then he weighed them on the electronic scales that Beau had next to a 'Daughters of the Confederacy' tea towel tacked to the wall.

Beau peered over Dean's shoulder, mouth set in a serious line. "Pretty damn light," he said.

Dean sighed, and Sam could tell he was worried. Sam wished he knew more about this.

"Range'll be shit with those," Beau continued.

"I know," Dean agreed, a little bit of testiness creeping into his voice. "We never see the fucking dog until she's on top of us anyway."

"You'll get one shot, then," Beau sighed with some finality. "Best make it count."

"I've made a few extra bullets. One of us'll plug that damn dog." He gestured to a small box on the worktable beside Sam; it was overflowing with papers and an old coffee canister with a piece of peeling masking tape, the word 'blackpowder' written on it black marker. "Sam, you know how to wrap a paper cartridge?"

Sam didn't and was willing to admit it. So Dean showed him how to fold the paper, funnel in the right proportion of powder, drop in the holy-water filled bullet and twist the end. Sam got pretty good at it by the twentieth one.

Dean watched him for a few minutes, then reached across, took a paper and put a penciled X on it. He took that to his side of the table as Beau looked at the small pot that Dean had set on the burner. He gave the pot a little stir. "This looks ready. Same mold?"

Dean nodded, then cast Jackson's lucky bullet from a keychain ornament back into something that would kill. Wrapped that one himself.

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Beau dropped the duffle bag onto the middle of the living room parquet; it contained dark blue woolen trousers, a cotton pearl-buttoned shirt that had once been white, and a jacket that might have fit a dieting Kentucky jockey. The sleeves came halfway up Sam's forearms, and it wouldn't meet across his chest, which lucky on two fronts: half the buttons were missing, and it was a woolen jacket on a steamy summer evening in Virginia. Sam kept staring at Dean, imploring him to call a halt to whatever practical joke he was perpetrating.

"I don't really have to..." he petitioned one last time, hoping he'd make them see reason. He stood in Beau's living room, which also seemed to serve as a bedroom, dining room and kitchen, feeling like an organ grinder's monkey.

"Dog goes for the Feds, especially if Jubal's there," Beau muttered, moving a button on the side of the itchy trousers so that they didn't cut Sam in two. "So if you're wanting young Sammy here to be the bait, this is the best I can do." He looked up at Sam, eyes glittering. "You look good in blue."

"It's Sam," he muttered under his breath, the full ramifications of the word 'futile' becoming painfully clear.

Dean leaned against the television set – a vintage cabinet floor model from the mid-1960s – with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He was nursing another sweating beer, this one from the more efficient fridge in Beau's bungalow. The pistol, loaded up with a holy water bullet, was jammed in his waistband.

"Sorry, Sam," he said, and Sam heard just enough in those two words to understand that Dean wasn't sorry in the least, "but we need to distract Jubal and we need to bait Buttercup. Jackson's bullet," and he tapped his front pocket where the bullet was nestled in a paper cartridge, "will do for Buttercup, but we want to confuse Jubal enough that he's not going to addle the rest of us into blasting each other to smithereens."

"So both Jubal and the dog are going to go for me?" Sam asked. "And I get a holy water bullet as well, don't I?"

Dean smiled at this, handing him Beau's Enfield. "Of course. Wouldn't leave you defenseless."

Sam took the gun, but wasn't convinced. "If you want me to be bait, I have to have the bullet, Dean. Jackson's bullet." Before Buttercup had got trapped in the Impala, they'd already had one shoving match over it; Sam wasn't anxious for another one, but he if he was bait, might as go all the way.

"Technically, Jubal Garrett's bullet," Beau corrected, cutting the button's thread with his teeth and motioning Sam to turn around so he could look at his handiwork. "You think burning it with Jubal's bones will do the trick?"

"Won't be able to find out till tomorrow," Dean replied, draining the beer. "Might just shoot him with it tonight if push comes to shove."

Sam snorted. "Yeah, but if that didn't work, we'd never find the bullet again – unless we shot him against a tree or something and dug out the bullet again afterwards." He glanced at Dean, who grinned suddenly. Jesus, Dean was winding him up: How many Confederate ghosts does it take to change a light bulb, Sam? Get back to me on that one.

“I don’t see you in uniform, Dean.”

“I’m not the bait, Sam.”

“Jubal seems to get a little freaked out when he sees civilians,” Beau piped up, the overalls unzipped to his waist, hanging down, only a white cotton undershirt on, his arms ropey and tattooed. Rebel flags, Tasmanian Devil. A couple of scars. Been fighting the same sort of battles the Winchesters had, and Sam ought not to forget that. “You might reconsider, Dean. This is the only Yankee outfit I have, but there’s plenty of gray gear, nice butternut field jacket with...”

Dean sighed. “I’m not wearing those colors,” he said, voice soft. He glanced at Sam, who couldn’t tell what was going on behind the shuttered gaze.

“It’d be authentic as all hell,” Beau persisted.

Dean said nothing, but that look had come into his eyes, and Sam recognized it, however infrequently it surfaced. A stick of dynamite wasn’t going to budge him. A flicker of contact, and Dean’s eye caught Sam’s, only for a second, but it was enough: no gray while Sam had blue on his back, not on this side of hell.

A long, uncomfortable moment passed.

“Do I have to wear the hat?” Sam asked, breaking the suddenly charged atmosphere of the fetid room. The Union kepi was tiny, meant for a pinheaded drummer boy.

“You always did have a freakishly large skull,” his brother muttered. “C’mon, Beau, get your gear on and let’s go. I gotta dog to kill.”

Sam held out his hand, and Dean stared at him. That look was also painfully known: Sam was causing him worry and Dean was trying to hide that fact. Dean grabbed his sleeve and jammed the paper cartridge containing Jackson’s bullet into Sam’s open hand. He told Sam not to use it if he didn’t have to – even if Jubal Garrett was standing in front of a tree -- that just having it would be enough.

Thankful for the trust, Sam nodded to Dean, but his brother wasn’t looking at him, was already out the door into the marginally cooler night, bugs and all. The boots fit, at least, Sam thought, but he left the hat sitting on the chair.

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The bushes rattled in front of them, but it was only the wind.

It was fully dark now, and a breeze had picked up, blowing the warm air around in a way that Dean appreciated. He made sure his canvas side bag was filled with water bottles; Sam would probably underestimate how hot it got on Virginia evening even at night, especially when you were wearing wool. Because no one in their right fucking minds wore wool at this time of year. Only Beau and his hardcores. Full-blown nutcases, all of them.

The NPS battlefield had been locked up when they got back with the bullets, but that served as no matter to the brothers and Beau, who had jumped the fence and covered the distance between empty parking lot and visitor center without seeing anyone. Beau guessed aloud that his boys would be bivouacked in the location they’d scouted earlier in the day. Beau was familiar as all hell with this battlefield; it was his

favorite, the location of the losing of the beloved 'Lost Cause', more so than even Gettysburg, Dean knew. Chancellorsville proved how superior the intellect and strategy of the South was, how it was only numbers that gave the Union its edge. All bullshit, Dean reasoned, following the dark forms of Beau and his tall brother, eyes constantly moving to the bushes.

Dean wasn't about to burden Sam with all that. And he certainly wasn't about to let him carry the bullet that would draw that fucking dog right to him. He'd given Sam a holy-water bullet, not Jackson's one; that was still in his pocket. Dean was planning to shoot Buttercup himself, didn't want Sam to have to do it. He knew himself to be capable of killing a kid's dog, just the same as he knew a little bit of Sam would die if the younger man had to do it. That bit of Dean had been gone for so long he barely remembered it.

All in all, better if he did it.

The 22nd Virginians were exactly where Beau said they'd be, tucked into a narrow fold between two hills, a small fire going, the scent of woodsmoke and slightly rancid bacon reaching them before the sound of voices. Beau let out a low whistle, and Riddicker stood up, musket to his shoulder.

"Evening, pards," Beau said, coming forward into the firelight. "Got us a Yankee prisoner."

Dean hadn't bothered telling Sam that part of the plan.

"Well, maybe we'll take an oath from you, son, regarding your good conduct. Otherwise we might have to take your rifle and tie you up." Riddicker was at least as tall as Sam, got right up into his face which, given the general hygiene of the troops, wasn't likely all that pleasant. Think of swimming, Sammy, Dean thought.

"Uh," Sam grunted. "I promise not to shoot you?"

Riddicker didn't move an inch. "You'll have to do better than that."

"I'll use this weapon to protect you and your men," and that was getting nods, "and I won't run off at the first sign of the Union coming to kick your ass."

Loud friendly whoops. Dean grinned, surprised.

"Had something to eat, soldiers?" one of the others asked, poking the bacon with a bayonet.

Oh yeah, Beau, tell them about the roasted eggplant and zucchini sandwich. As a civilian in full farb gear, Dean was ignored, though Riddicker met his eyes once and nodded slightly. Sam sat on an overturned stump, asked aloud where their tent was. The men all laughed and Sam shut up.

Dean quietly slipped into the shadows, throwing a nod to Beau, who also drew away from the fire, but on the opposite side. Before he left, Dean glanced at the slightly cheerier Sam, noting that at least his brother had his rifle by his side – these idiots wouldn't actually try to take it from him, would they? – and walked a few feet into the woods. He wouldn't go far – shit, he'd seen what the dog had done to Tim – but he didn't want to be blinded by the fire, either. He could hear the fire chat behind him, heard Sam's voice join in. Slowly, his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. Sam's low voice rumbled something Dean didn't catch, and was followed by a burst of quick laughter all around.

That reminded him of something. He took out his cell phone and punched the speed dial. Not too far away, he heard the familiar refrain of the Battle Hymn of the Republic beeping out in dulcet ringtone. He started to laugh silently, imagining Sam's face.

He was about to hang up when he saw the glowing eyes in the underbrush across a short clearing, and the night turned cold. Maybe he shouldn't have walked quite this far. The connection on the other phone was made and Dean hissed a heartfelt, "Shit!" before dropping the phone and bringing up his pistol.

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Oh, he seems so happy, and Buttercup paused for a moment. It was the happy that stopped her, it was so unfamiliar. Hand on head, hunger. And happy. It's right there, girl. Just you go get it. Have yourself a good –

And she was fast now, gone was all the weight that had slowed her down before. She'd caught a squirrel just this morning and it had tasted as good as she'd always known it would. Fast enough that when the wiggly one finally looked up, she was already moving.

One leap, two, and he was under her, not so soft as all that, and strong, and so very mobile, but she was a squirrel-killer now, don't forget that, buster. So she twisted out of the way as the shot sailed past her right ear, close enough that she felt heat. Ah ha! Not so fucking quick now, are we? And found what she was looking for, in the damn pocket again, that would take some getting at. But like the squirrel, the catching of it was half the fun.

She went right for it, took a long deep bite, felt the blood oozing around her mouth, so warm and so alive, so full of possibility. Life all around her, nothing but wild, nothing but hunger and need and blood. Again it was right there, for goodness sake, in some kind of little wrapper now, but she was distracted by the blood and the fucking wiggling.

A hand came between her mouth and what her master asked her to get, and that was a very, very bad place for that hand to be. She knew what to do with a human hand, after all. She knew what to do with that shit.

And still, this fucker's trying to get her off. Can't blame him, really. There. Right there. Go for it, girl, a whisper in her ear and everything was going to be okay.

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Oh god, Sam thought, patting his clothing for wherever his brother – his fucking juvenile, asinine, miscreant, absent brother – had hidden his cell phone. He found it in Dean's bag among the water bottles. He couldn't even look at the other men, felt his face flush crimson. By all that was holy, he was going to kill Dean –

He snapped open the phone. "Shit!" was all that Sam heard before the sound of single gunshot rang out from the woods and the ghost of Jubal Garrett appeared next to the fire as solid as the hardtack Riddicker spat out as he came to his feet.

Jubal's eyes were on Sam and his blood ran cold; he could feel it as though his heart was suddenly pumping icewater. The Confederates by the fire all joined Riddicker, all brought their weapons up, even as Sam's fingers lingered on the barrel of his loaned Enfield. All pointed their fucking primed rifles at him. Oh god, Sam thought. They're going to kill me.

Above his thudding heart, he could hear the sounds of the dog, and one abbreviated human scream of pain. He had but one bullet, his brother, and he had used it and that dog wasn't stopping.

Beau's troops and the ghost beside them ceased to matter for Sam. Picking up his holy water-loaded rifle, he looked for Beau, couldn't find him. "Beau," he whispered harshly.

At the same moment, Beau burst into the circle around the fire and knocked Riddicker's gun barrel so it was pointing to the ground. Jubal disappeared in the instant between one blink and the next.

"To me!" Beau shouted, turning to the sound of the dog's snarls, and running towards them, long hair flying gold in the firelight. Sam was just behind him, ran fire-blinded into the woods, saw the edge of the ghost for a moment, wondered why the fucking dog hadn't come for him first.

And knew, of course. Fuck Dean, oh god, if he wasn't dead already, Sam was going to –

They converged at the same spot, he and Beau, to see Dean on the ground, his hands around the dog's neck, teeth snapping dangerously close to his face. The light was terrible, a cloudy night hazy with heat, and the dog was moving, twisting like it was being electrocuted. The sound of it was incredible.

Beau was fast, was a hunter like them, and was accustomed to running and shooting antique guns, did it every weekend. He lifted his rifle as though it were an extension of his arm, like an Olympic athlete pulling back a javelin, only he brought it up under his chin and fired.

Did not miss.

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Between my teeth for just a second, hard, bitter with gunpowder, but that did not matter, for it was also slick with blood. Fuck, but this guy's strong. They usually stopped wiggling if you ripped open their throat. Best try that, because there were benefits in terms of the blood. Hold fucking still, asshole. Just THERE. Fuck you, squirmy --

She never heard the shot that killed her.

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The adrenaline in his system was so extreme he actually sat up to push Buttercup off him, then got to his feet. He didn't feel a thing, only a ringing in his ears, and a strange electric current that buzzed along his nerve endings, like he'd been running for a long time, long enough to see spots and smash through the proverbial wall.

He stared down at the dog, lying on her side, nothing but skin and bones. Her muzzle was covered in foam and blood. Shit. He felt around for the bullet, tried to go for his pocket, but his hand wasn't working quite the way it ought to, and his pocket seemed torn to shreds. Oh, it wasn't just the pocket torn to shreds, great.

And promptly passed out.

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Sam caught him before he hit the ground. Between Beau and Riddicker, they carried Dean to the fireside, where he became alert enough to swear at them.

“For fuck’s sake, put me down! It was a dog, not a damn werewolf.” It was an indication of his diminished mental capacities that he was raving about werewolves in front of non-hunters, Sam noted.

“What? Just a flesh wound?” Sam said calmly. “Lie down, let me have a look.”

“Uh, actually,” Riddicker said at Sam’s shoulder, somewhat sheepishly, “I’m a doctor.”

“What?” Sam asked, head snapping up. “What, like a horse-surgeon? You do trepanning or something?” And an indication of how worried he was that he was sniping at someone who was a comrade, more or less. Less, if he counted the fact that Riddicker had pulled bead on him not five minutes ago.

“Nah, Yankee Doodle, an honest-to-god emergency room doctor. How the hell d’ya think I got into this in the first place?” Grinned through the animal beard. Sam shifted himself so he was by Dean’s head. Which was, all things considered, actually placing himself directly in the line of fire.

Still, he had something to say to Dean and wanted to get to it before Dean could start cracking wise.

“You kept the fucking bullet, didn’t you?” He watched the myriad signs that Dean was holding back a shrug: twitch of the shoulders, licked lips, quick blink. Instead of giving in to the shrug, Dean winced as Riddicker used his bacon-greased bayonet to slice open the jeans from ankle to fly.

“Bullet cartridge still there, Riddicker?” Dean asked. “Should be in my right pocket.”

Riddicker tossed a soggy paper cartridge, red with blood, onto Dean’s chest. “Today’s your lucky day, Winchester,” he replied. “A couple more inches and that mutt woulda had your femoral artery and we wouldn’t be having us this pleasant conversation.” He sighed. “You’ll need some stitches. I’m usually pretty hardcore about everything, but not this. God alone knows where that dog’s mouth’s been. And if it’s really rabid I have some particularly bad news about a series of inoculations you’re going to become acquainted with. Your hand’s been used as a chew toy, too. Wiggle your fingers for me?”

Dean waved at Riddicker, who grinned back.

“Super hardcore, pard.” Riddicker turned to Beau. “Sam’s got a phone in his bag there. Give 911 a call, would you? You gotta GPS on that thing as well as a pretty ringtone?” The century-switch was dizzying. Sam nodded, and heard Beau chatting calmly to an operator.

Riddicker asked one of the other men to bring some light over and a lantern was lit. The bearded man raised his eyebrows to Dean, who was laughing. “Permission to use 21st century medicine?”

“Hell, yes,” Sam answered for him, staring hard at Dean’s sly grin, wishing he could find something to wipe it away with.

“Lucky me,” Dean said, shifting his gaze to the cartridge. Riddicker mixed the contents of an envelope from the first aid kit into a bottle of purified water. As the field surgeon irrigated the deep slashes in Dean’s thigh, the grin faded and Sam felt a twinge of guilt. Dean swallowed audibly. “Hey, is thigh white meat or dark?”

Sam shook his head, didn't know whether he was angry or in awe. "Unsure. It all tastes like chicken though." And that made Dean laugh again, as was intended. "Want me to hold on to that?" Sam suggested lamely, pointing to the cartridge in his brother's hand.


"What? You're not the one who single-handedly fought off the rabid beast."

"Okay, why is it a family dog when I have to deal with it, but when you..."

Dean's mouth twisted in pain as Riddicker packed the wound with gauze, and Sam shut up. "My lucky bullet now," Dean whispered. "I'd like to see Jubal fuck-face Garrett try to take it away."

Oh just perfect. Dean now had a blood feud going with a ghost.

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a/n: This story wouldn't see the light of day without lemmypie and jmm0001 (over at Fanfic land). Or, it would, but it would read like this: "One day, Dean thot about tring to maek some bullits. Dint work awl that well. The End." And it wouldn't be funny. So you should all be as thankful as I am. One day, I'm going to publish the email correspondence we had about 'lucky pullets'. And Lemmypie? Saving the white meat for you.

## Chapter Seven - Buttercup Redux

Posted May 30th, 2006

Author: big\_pink



Rating: Adult, bad language galore – even the dog swears!

Category: Gen as all get out; funny enough with a detour though Angstville.

Spoilers: None, really. Set in summer before season 1 finale.

Warnings: References to scrapple, dead animals, and more Civil War battlefields than you'd probably be able to stomach if the Winchester boys weren't involved. WIP (but real close to being done).

Summary: Lunatic Civil War reenactors, a possessed golden lab, a Confederate ghost and the lucky bullet that happened to kill Stonewall Jackson all converge on Dean's thigh. You read that right. And I promised a twist last chapter, right? Bring it on...

a/n: First LJ community post, crossing this story over from ff.net land. Be kind, please rewind. Many thanks to the beta girls, lemmypie for inspired hilarity (and many Looney Tunes references) and jmm0001 for sheer balls and windyfontaine for making me believe I could actually work out how to post on lj. That said, all lj cockups are mine.

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The television was really loud: the iconic beep-beep followed by the sound of someone getting their tongue stuck in a Coke bottle – the Roadrunner giving Wile E. Coyote a raspberry. Dean had laughed and laughed at that when they were kids. Well, when Sam was a kid and Dean was way too old for it.

Sam grabbed one of the pillows and jammed it over his head, hoping to stifle the theme song at least. It had always bugged him: if the coyote had so much goddamned money, could order anything he damn well pleased from Acme Inc., why the hell didn't he go buy himself a big fat steak dinner? It made no sense.

"Dean," he groaned, realizing that he was, actually, awake. He hadn't gotten to sleep until five in the am, after spending the better part of the night in the Fredericksburg's emergency room benches while Dean had received stitches and staples and a hand splint and enough drugs to down an elephant. Beau's band of merry brothers had gone back to their weekday homes, the outing having ended on a high note, cause that dog was dead. Much dancing in the streets had ensued.

Even Beau had finally gone, had left Sam to recall Mira's description of his usual homecoming after a weekend with the boys. It was an imponderable and he had tried to distract himself by thumbing through vintage news magazines while ignoring the occasional drunk ("Hey, Yankee, I'm talking to you!") and various toddlers with ear infections (thankfully silent glares). The doctor who had treated Dean had looked amused when she'd come out to talk to Sam; apparently, Sam's brother was in fine form, was entertaining them all. Oh, and he didn't seem to be in too much pain. The vet at the dog pound had verified that the dog did not have rabies, so no shots, but he should have these antibiotics – dog bites were nothing to brush off.

You should see a good werewolf bite, Sam had held back, smiling good-naturedly all the while.

Dean had babbled about socks and underwear and being thirsty the whole way back to the motel. Sam had changed out of his Civil War gear and fallen into bed without taking off his socks.

Sam had no idea what time it was now, but he blearily tried to focus on the digital clock beaming red information from the nightstand. Nine o'clock. By all that was sweet and holy, why wasn't Dean sleeping?

He sat up and looked over at Dean's bed closer to the open door. The sheets were messed up and there were smears of pale blood on them. Great. They'd be long gone before any explaining was necessary, though. Remember to put the 'do not disturb' sign on the door handle, Sam thought, ideas lining up nicely as his head cleared.

He staggered out into the large paneled living room, expecting to see Dean lying on the couch. Now a different roadrunner cartoon – the one with the piano, don't play that note, it's wired to the dynamite stick, idiot – and no brother. He cast about the room looking for Dean in the same way he would a missing wallet or pair of sunglasses, as though his brother had been left carelessly under the table or fallen behind the microwave. The air conditioner slammed on with a rumble not unlike the Impala's, deep and guttural and meaningful, pushing lukewarm then coolish air around the room. The drapes were lined, the room so dark Sam had to remind himself of the time. Morning.

Was Dean in the bathroom? As he crossed the living room, Sam switched off the TV with an annoyed snap just as the coyote ran out of road and fell off another cliff. The little puff of dust when he made contact with the canyon floor was another thing Dean had always waited for, laughed out loud at the silent pause between the fall and the impact. The coyote always looked so resigned, too. Pathetic, really, to be outmaneuvered by a bird.

Save for a nasty but not unexpected pile of used bandages in the garbage pail, the bathroom was empty. Sam shook his head, pulled the curtain in the living room aside so he could see the parking lot. He knew where he'd parked the car earlier this gray morning, just as the streetlights had blinked off. As close as he could so that Dean wouldn't have too far to walk. He'd half carried him in, mostly because Dean was so fucked up from the drugs he'd been commenting on how loudly the birds were singing, tracking them with eyes that couldn't quite focus.

The Impala wasn't there. Damn. For one long moment, Sam wondered if Dean was back to his tomcat ways, if he'd roamed off for a sniff around the neighborhood, but where the hell was he going to pick up women at this hour? The local IHOP? Well, maybe. That actually wasn't so far fetched. Except that Dean shouldn't even be out of bed, let alone driving around an unfamiliar town when he could easily pass out at any minute and crash into the median, or roll right over an embankment.

Sam had no idea where their phones were at the moment; Dean had dropped his in the woods. Sam seemed to recall that Beau had returned his to him after calling 911. Goddamn Dean. He found his phone, dialed Dean's number. It rang and rang and Sam imagined it, sitting in some deep bushes on the Chancellorsville battle site. He left an obscene message, irate.

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Beau had mentioned the city pound; Dean had even seen the animal control truck, he thought, next to the ambulance. Not exactly remembering shit with a whole lot of clarity, though. Like where the hell his phone was. He could hear it ringing. Must be somewhere in the car, maybe in the trunk.

His leg hurt a little but wasn't slowing him down; he'd changed the bandages only because they'd soaked through while he'd been resting. Not too bloody, though, mostly the medicinal crap they'd soaked the cuts with. His hand, however, felt great, had an interesting buzzing along it, like he was holding it in a very mild electrical current. And the metal splint made a good sound as he smacked it against the steering

wheel to the final drum riff of whatever Eagles song this was playing on the radio. Don't know what he'd had against them before – these guys rocked.

He pulled in behind a large squat gray building that couldn't have been less attractive if it had put up iron bars and called itself Riker's. Easy enough to find in the phone book. Hours were noon to four, Monday to Friday, longer on Saturdays. Well, it was 9:15 according to the joker on the radio, giving Dean his morning rush hour traffic report – which was to say, fucking nothing of any importance – and Dean sure as hell wasn't going to be waiting around for the doors to open, like a little old lady outside the bingo hall. Right now was plenty fine. It's not as though he needed to talk to anyone.

He'd never been to a dog morgue before. Not sure what to expect, Dean pulled the Impala up to the back loading bay, picked the largely inadequate lock on the steel door and let himself in.

It smelled horrendous, reeked of feces and cat piss and death. He actually shuddered, smelling that. The dogs immediately put up a fuss, barking like they'd never seen a human being before. Hungry, Dean thought. They think I'm going to feed them. Dream on, suckers. He passed by a windowed door marked 'Cattery' in stenciled black paint. Jeez, one more location on Dean's long list of Places I Never Need to Go. Hated cats. Pointy little ears and sly glances. Way they'd bite your hand when you were scratching them behind the ears, even as they purred. Fucking indecisive little assholes.

Another door, this time stenciled 'Treatment Room'. That sounded a bit more promising. As he pushed open the swinging door, his hand gave an unpleasant twinge of pain, and Dean stopped for a second, felt the room shift and swing slightly, as though his body had been moving a little faster than his cerebral cortex. Stop. Let it catch up. Maybe I shoulda let Sam drive. Nah, he'd have tried to talk me out of this.

The vet had ruled out rabies – and for crying out loud, Dean could have told him that – but would likely be doing a full autopsy later on today. Yes, that's what the doctor had said, beaming. God, those rabies shots must be really horrific for everyone to be so damn happy he didn't need them.

Had been a busy night for roadkill in Fredericksburg VA, Dean mused, lifting the corner of a sheeted table and peering at the dead mongrel under it. Five bodies in the euphemistically named 'treatment room'. Nothing to treat these guys for, on account of they're all cold meat.

He knew which one was Buttercup before lifting the sheet. She smelled pretty bad, and it was a smell you didn't forget, especially when her slavering jaws were buried in your thigh, taking a nice long chew. She had smelled of blood, desperation and something like joy. But she was alone here and it was a cold table and a kid had loved her and he wasn't going to leave her here, not even for the length of time it would take the Farmer family to come down to pick her up.

Sam's going to be pissed, Dean thought about half an hour later, pulling into the parking spot next to the motel's back staircase, a shambling wrought iron and cement exit used only by those too turned around to find their way to the lobby. Sam's not going to understand.

He didn't have a room key, he realized, lifting his hand to knock, but Sam must have seen him through the window because he yanked the door open. Dean stood calmly, hand still raised. Smiled.

"Where the hell have you been?" Sam said, his voice about an octave higher than usual. Wow. Really pissed.

“Out and about, dude,” Dean said, brushing past him, heading straight for the fridge. “You were fast asleep.” He glanced over his shoulder, gave Sam a reassuring grin. “Snoring. Couldn’t sleep with that racket.”

Surveyed the contents of the fridge, which approximated the contents of every single fucking motel kitchenette’s fridge that they’d had since childhood: carton of high fat milk, carton of chocolate milk, package of processed cheese slices, a loaf of very white (yet highly fortified, modern packaging claimed) bread, and a jar of peanut butter, the kind with an animal on it. A happy fucking squirrel. He picked that up, grabbed a spoon and started eating straight from the jar, the fridge door still open, cooling his legs. Screw the bread, fortified with eleven essential nutrients. He’d give them fortified.

“Dean?” Sam asked, closing the motel room’s door. He looked as though he was going to say something else, but then thought better of it. “How’s the leg?”

Dean shrugged, leaned against the abbreviated counter top. Damn, but the peanut butter was good – cold though, so he warmed it against the roof of his mouth. “S’okay.” Took him a minute to swallow the stickiness. “Gotta job for us this morning. What time’d you say we’re meeting Mira at the dig?”

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She’d said seven. She’d bring Beau and the box of bones. She hadn’t asked what they were going to do, but Sam would have been surprised if Beau hadn’t told her. Dean had rolled his eyes at the timing, wanting to do everything right now.

A full day was good, though, gave them time to rest up. Except Dean didn’t seem too interested in rest, which defied all kinds of logic. Sam was having a hard time keeping his eyes open, only the little buzz of anger was keeping him going. He watched his brother eat half the jar of peanut butter before holding it out to him as though Sam would dig his finger in it. Worse than a monkey, he thought, turning out the lights in the bathroom and ignoring the offer.

At least Dean took the stairs slowly, even after Sam had pointed out that there was an elevator at the far end. Otherwise though, Dean didn’t seem too much debilitated. Must be great drugs, Sam thought, assuming they were going for breakfast. Then he saw what was lying in the back seat like the world’s worst throw rug.

“Goddammit, Dean!” he cried, not even opening the door. “Where did...what did...” and couldn’t even finish it. Stared at Dean over the Impala’s roof. “Did you go to the pound this morning?”

Dean’s face screwed up. “Yeah,” he replied, like Sam was thick. Where the hell else would he get the body of a possessed dog?

“So, Dean,” Sam said, recognizing the late arrival of his Reasonable Voice, the one that he’d developed for dealing with his brother and father when they were suggesting all sorts of folly, everything from taking on a pack of zombies unassisted to following a patently wrong road direction. Reasonable Voice was the immediate precursor to Yelling Man from Hell Voice. If Dean was keeping track with his Winchester Scorecard, he’d do well to note this vocal cue, Sam thought. “What are we doing this morning?”

“Returning Buttercup to little Tyler,” Dean said, getting into the car. Sam opened his door, unrolled the window. The smell made his eyes water.

Trouble was, little Tyler was none too happy to see Buttercup, especially in the state she was in. In fact, he didn't recognize Buttercup. Dean stood at the front door, the dog in his arms, like the least palatable FedEx guy ever, and Tyler took off screaming. Years of therapy in the making, Sam thought. Tyler's mother, who hadn't been home last time, didn't look much happier. Dean explained that they'd talked to Elliot, and they thought that they'd seen Buttercup at a reenactment event this weekend. But she'd gotten shot. Passive voice: gotta be good for something, Sam reasoned.

Dean eased Buttercup's body onto the tiling in the front hallway. Sam bent down to help his brother come to a stand, a smile tight on his mouth. He should never have consented to this. "Mrs. Farmer, we're terribly sorry. But I think this is your dog." Reasonable Voice again. Sam spotted Tyler's tear stained face peeking out from behind the kitchen door.

"Yeah," Dean said, and he held up his right hand. "Really did a number on my hand, but didn't sever any tendons or anything. A bunch of stitches, though. And you should see what she did to my thigh. Like fucking ground round, I tell ya."

Sam couldn't look, not at Dean, and not at nice Mrs. Farmer, who had on pink shoes not unlike a ballerina's. Those he could stare at. In the silence, he heard the sniff that Tyler gave, the shaky breath he took before starting to wail in earnest.

"Maybe we should be going," Sam said, Reasonable Voice completely gone. He didn't know what this voice of his was now.

"You know," Dean continued, and from the corner of his eye Sam saw him take a step forward toward Mrs. Farmer, who took a step back, like it was a dance, "she'd probably like to be buried under the begonias. Your husband said that she liked it there."

"Actually," Sam strangled out the words, opening the door and pulling Dean towards it, "I'd really recommend cremation. Really. Recommend it." And the door shut in their faces.

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"Gotta idea," Dean said as they walked to the car. Sam, not caring if he needed to wrestle Dean to the ground to get them, grabbed the keys from Dean's hands.

"Gotta better one. How about we go back to the motel –"

"Yeah," Dean interrupted, going to the passenger's side without complaint. "Go to the motel, grab our shorts, go for a swim? Damn, it's hot," and he scratched the side of his head. Sam laughed, because it was better than screaming.

"Dean," and Dean stared at him across the car. "Dean, you can't go swimming with your leg fucked up like that. You'll scare the kids."

And Dean looked disappointed, as though the trip to the candy store was off. Sam sighed, knowing that the drugs were doing the talking. He'd have to take a look at the prescription, see if there was something a little less potent in the first aid kit. Something with a damn sedative in it.

Dean slid into the car, which still smelled overpoweringly of decaying dog. "Well, what's your idea?"

“That we go back to the room and you have a nap,” which even Sam could admit didn’t sound as fun. It’s what they ended up doing, though.

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By four o’clock, Dean was up and practically bouncing from the walls. Sam tried to take a look at the prescription bottles that the doctor had sent them home with, but Dean had stashed them and Sam knew that his brother would clam up if he asked about it. So he just hung on to the keys and kept an eye on Dean so he wouldn’t run out into traffic.

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Jesus, but Sam was slow. Just slow in every way, walked slow, thought slow. Ate his damn sandwich slow. Couldn’t follow what Dean was saying, even. Had he always been this slow? How could Dean not have noticed that?

Sam was driving so lethargically into the Fredericksburg NPS battlefield parking lot that Dean thought momentarily about jumping out the open window and showing Sam he could run faster.

Damn, that sign for missing Buttercup was still on the post.

Shouldn’t they take that down? He should take that down. Hope they don’t cremate her. She’d want to be in the garden. Still, maybe Sam was right. He might be slow, but he was often right. Dean stole a glance at Sam, who was trying to find a parking spot in the shade. Good luck, Dean thought.

Sam hadn’t turned off the engine before Dean jumped out, just wanting to be out of the car and into the air. Except the air was pretty thick, dripped with humidity, was solid. “Pop the trunk,” he called to Sam as he shut the door. He waited for him to do it...jeez, Sam how long does it take to find the...finally, and searched the first level of trunk rubble. There was never any knowing what you might find in here. All kinds of crap...wasn’t that what he told Sam? So let’s see. Gun with lucky bullet, yes, that’s top of the fucking list. He’d loaded it this morning. Good to go.

Tucked it into his waistband, under his thin cotton shirt. Sam would likely want to carry it, but Dean wasn’t going to even talk about that. And his phone...he’d heard his phone this morning, hadn’t he? Oh, yeah, there it was. Beau must have found it, picked it up. Good job. Didn’t want it, somehow, didn’t want to carry it around. The gun was enough. But it was good to know where it was.

Dean knew he wasn’t himself, that he wasn’t well, per se, but he was managing perfectly fine, thanks very much. No need to scare the kid. Isn’t that what Sam had said? Don’t scare the kids. And Sam would talk about lying down and taking it easy and all sorts of other nonsense. Sam would want to finish things off by himself. Yeah, not in this lifetime, buster.

He leaned into the trunk just to see if there was anything else that he’d missed. God, he was hungry. Sweat from his forehead dropped onto the back of his hand, next to where an old towel covered an array of guns and knives. He picked up the towel and mopped his face just before Sam came round beside him.

Looked up at Sam, always looking up, and grinned a big sloppy grin. “I’m starving,” he said. “How about you check out the movie,” and he waved one hand vaguely at the visitor center, “and I’ll get some street meat?” A hotdog vendor had set up business to one side of the parking lot.

Sam’s eyes narrowed. “What? You want a hotdog?”

As they passed the pole, Dean snatched off the paper sign, screwed it up into a tiny ball and lobbed it towards the oil drum garbage bin beside the hotdog cart. He missed, only a result of his stupid splint. Sam bent to retrieve it, put it in. "Air conditioning," Sam promised, looking at the visitor center. "Still have two hours before Mira gets here."

Dean shrugged, sat at a picnic table.

Across the lawn, three young women walked together like a flock of long-legged birds, summer dresses catching the sluggish breeze, fine straight hair drifting over their shoulders like milkweed. Damn, Dean thought, immediately transfixed.

"Dean?" Sam interrupted and Dean wondered if he'd had to say it more than once.

"Hmm?" He didn't take his eyes off the girls.

Sam must have given up, because when Dean glanced back to him, Sam was already up the steps to the center, and not looking back. Oh well. He'll enjoy the movie. And the brochures. Maybe there's an interpretive guide who can answer a few of his questions. Hell, maybe there's a resource library on the second floor. He could be gone for hours.

One of the girls looked over, and Dean grinned hugely, not feeling anything but happy desire.

Turned out she was from out of state and her girlfriends, oh sorry one was her sister, wasn't about to let her wander off with a complete stranger. Dean kept the grin up, wondering what sisters would be like in – oh wait, shit, the hotdog vendor was closing up.

He bought five hotdogs and by the time he returned to the picnic table the girls were gone. Fine. He ate the first dog with relish and onions, the second one plain and the last three without the bun at all. There. Better.

A sudden scent of death lingered in the air, just faintly, like distant campfire smoke. Dean stared sharply at the hotdog vendor, who was looking at him a little strangely, right enough. No, not from him. The graveyard? The one up on the Marye's Heights.

Not bothering to think about it much, Dean got to his feet and followed his nose.

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Sam thought he'd broken the heritage window; he'd pulled so hard he heard a shearing crack, but it was only a layer of paint coming away. Then he was fairly certain he'd dislocated a shoulder. Ignoring both these things, he stuck his head out the lower half of the now open window that probably hadn't been opened in ten years and shouted, "Dean!"

Who turned, halfway across the lawn, heading for god alone knew where. Dean stood still for a moment, the sun beating down on him like a hammer, and then sauntered over like a lazy dog looking for scraps on his way back from fetching a ball. He looked up to the second story window, smiling, shading his eyes with the bandaged hand.

"Yeah?" he asked.

Sam snorted in disbelief. “Just wait there, would you?” Rubbing his shoulder while rotating it back and forth like a bullpen pitcher, Sam tried not to look at the shocked park guide who was putting books back on the shelves. Sam hadn’t intended on leaving Dean alone for any length of time, but he had become momentarily distracted by a sign that said he could look up his Fredericksburg Battle Civil War Ancestors – and he was going for Garrett, not Winchester – when he’d overheard female twitters in the staircase, going on about how cute he was, but did you see the hotdogs? Oh, look there he goes now – and Sam had looked out the window.

It didn’t get much better in the intervening hour or two that they waited, mostly because Dean didn’t want to wait, wanted to have a look around. They went up to the graveyard, where Dean had moved between the graves, eyes restlessly touching on the headstones, then the woods, then the swallows that had come out and were dipping across the lawns between the dead, picking off the first of the evening flies.

No one came to shoo them off; the visitor center closed, and the hotdog vendor was long gone – much to Dean’s stated dismay – but the park was relatively ‘open’, insomuch as visitors were still wandering around. They finally came to Mira’s dig, near the remnants of the wall, and Dean took a seat on a park bench, stretched his legs out in front of him.

Strangely, Sam was relieved, hoped the wound was bothering him; Dean had just spent a lot of time putting weight on his injured leg, moving around in a way that Sam had never associated with ordinary convalescents. He sighed. How often was Dean convalescing with anything approximating good humor?

“Right from over there,” Dean murmured, and Sam sat next to him. This was more than drugs, this was something else and Sam didn’t like it.

“What?” he asked quietly, watching Dean’s fingers dance along the back of the bench seat, splint playing out taptaptap like a drum roll.

“Thought you’d be able to feel it if anyone could,” Dean returned. “You know. Dead freaky people. All over the place.” His voice dropped almost too low to hear. “They were so scared.”

Oh god, Sam thought. What is Dean tapping into?

“Funny, it wasn’t the same at Gettysburg. Though it’s too pretty as well, looks like a fucking theme park. The rocks, though. You can’t do much about stone. It stays the same. Wonder what the pyramids are like, if they feel the same way? Can’t change rock.”

“Dean.” Sam realized what this feeling was; he was scared. Didn’t happen too often. “Dean, is Jubal Garrett around?”

Dean wasn’t looking at him, was still staring out across the empty fields, eyes roaming from moving thing to moving thing – flag, bird, insect, person on the far meadow, another bird. He licked his lips, but didn’t answer Sam’s question, didn’t even seem to hear him. “Dad just dropped me off. Like a piece of mail that had come to the wrong house.”

There was nothing to say; or if there was, Sam couldn’t say it. He didn’t want to say it. Tell me a story, Dean.

“Just said, ‘Pay attention to Beau’ and that was that. Hey, is that blue jay?” And half came out of his seat, before settling down once more. “Don’t see ‘em much this time of year. So I paid attention.”

“You did,” Sam agreed, trying to keep his voice calm.

“Said the Lost Cause wasn’t so lost.”

“Dad?”

“No, Beau.” Idiot. “Said that all those guys died to protect their families and their land.” And Dean turned, his eyes bright, brighter than they ought to be, in Sam’s opinion. “What do you reckon? Is that what they were fighting for? I told him he was full of shit, that they were fighting to keep their slaves. Man, Beau and I got into it. Dad got so pissed. Sent me back.”

“Sent you back?” Sam said, but unevenly, stumbling over unfamiliar concrete in the dark.

“Hell, yes. Said I had to apologize.” Dean turned again, a wide smile on his face, straight white teeth such a blessing in a nomadic childhood. “And Dad? He was like, really hard to find that time. But he sent me back. Always sent me back. You know what he’s like.”

Indeed, Sam thought, the simmering fear coming to a full boil. “Maybe we ought to…”

“Always just his dog, you know? Like a pointer, he pulls the trigger and down goes the grouse, then it’s all – go on, son. Go get it. And off I go. Or a fucking bloodhound, happy as hell just to be given some lame piece of someone’s clothing. Please, let me find that for you. Pit bull thrown in the ring. Fuck. So he sent me back to find out about bullets and hang out with guys with one foot in the century before last, like that’s a normal thing for anyone’s son to do. Beau said sorry first.” Dean stared straight up at the sky. “You know, he thinks about the past more than anyone I know.”

“Beau?” Sam said, surprised. Surprised and dismayed and shit what was he going to do about –

Dean shook his head, but his attention was fixed on the bushes about twenty feet to Sam’s left, so intent that Sam knew he was seeing something. Dean still shook his head, a little more firmly. “No,” he said softly, and Sam didn’t know if that was in response to his question or not.

“Dean?” Sam turned to Dean, put both hands on his shoulders, but still Dean didn’t look at him. That was when Sam suddenly realized it was cold. “Dean?” and he gave his brother a shake. “Where’s the bullet, Dean?”

A crunch of gravel and the day became warmer again. Sam heard his name being called and turned to see Mira across the bright lawns, Beau trailing behind her, a cardboard box in his arms, a rifle slung across his back, despite his civilian gear – Adidas, shorts, a tank top from Mazatlan. Reluctantly, Sam let go of his brother.

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Shit. Jubal wasn’t even pretending to hide anymore. He was confused, that much Dean understood, confused by what they looked like and what was happening around him, aware that everything was both the same and different from what he remembered. Occasionally, Dean heard the sounds of men moaning in pain and the sharp report of gunfire. Jubal had smiled at him, had seen him in a fundamental way that left Dean’s blood running cold.

Then Sam had sat beside him and they’d talked a little and Dean had told him a story, because that’s what he did. It felt good. He missed it.

He wished he could take the stupid splint off because it was really getting in the way of doing stuff, like taking out the gun. He could feel the metal of the loaded weapon pressed against his lower back, too hard to be comfortable in the traditional sense of the word, but a relief to have it there all the same. Jubal knew it was there, was dancing around asking for it. Dean knew it was coming, could feel the question like an oncoming headache. First time would be a request, he was sure. Second time? Mine, asshole.

And here was Beau and Mira. And wasn't Mira looking lovely tonight? All soft hair and glowing skin, smelled like summer and earth. And hey, they had a box full of bones, and those smelled like gunpowder death, no meat, no flesh, but something that filled Dean with a longing, the whiff of cinnamon in the air.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder as she bent down and Dean noticed the thin sliver of sunburn between the strap of her tank top and the smooth whiteness of the place between back and shoulder and arm. Smelled the same as butterflies.

"Easy," Beau said, his arm drifting around Mira's waist and Dean jerked back, tried to stop smelling. God. The bones rolled out of the box with a sound like Indonesian percussion instruments and Sam – thank god for Sam – had remembered a lighter and a box of salt. Tumbled skull, thin sticks of ribs, little nubs of knuckles. So little, really, that makes a man. Beau brought out a bottle of Jack Daniels and poured it over the pile of bones.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Mira said, then noticed Dean's stare. "Are you all right, Dean?"

"Pardon?" Dean said, realizing his mouth had filled with saliva. He swallowed, suddenly cold. "I'm sorry."

Sam was standing beside Beau, and they were looking at him. Talking about him, probably. He should have been paying attention, would have been able to hear what they were saying, but the butterflies had distracted him. Now Mira was looking at him strangely.

Fine looking woman, a voice said softly in his ear. Dean took a deep breath, both understanding what was going on and denying it all at the same time. What you need that bullet for anyway? Not yours, is it? You better hand it over. Good boy.

Dean whirled around, his hand going for the gun, drawing it back, pointing at what he knew would be there.

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Mira had a loud laugh and a louder scream.

Sam tore his concentration from Beau – who still carried the holy-water loaded rifle on his shoulder like a urban hunter – and watched as Dean held the old pistol awkwardly in his left hand. Goddamn it, of course he had it on him. My bullet, now, he'd said last night.

With a long scrape of sulfur against grit, Sam tossed a lit match onto the pile of bones, and stepped back as they exhaled into a nice little fire. Black smoke immediately plumed up. He waited, watching Dean's arms begin to shake as he stared at whatever it was he was pointing that damn gun at. Jubal. Must be. Crazy shine to Dean's eyes, wild, looking for something to kill. Loaded gun in his hand. Walk-in freezer cold now.

Beside him, he heard a click, the soft sound of a rifle's hammer being drawn back. Sam turned, and it was like being stuck in satanic molasses, like the worse manifestation of a nighttime horror, but Beau – who never missed – lifted his rifle to his shoulder, barrel directed at Dean. Who was as dangerous as Buttercup now, a dog with a loaded gun. At this range, there's no way Beau could miss, and there was no way, no matter where on Dean he was aiming, that he wasn't going to inflict massive damage. Beau was only being careful, was doing what any hunter would do – what their father would do, for god's sake.

“No!” Sam screamed, grabbing the rifle's barrel and pushing it towards the ground. Mira used the moment to scramble behind what remained of the stone wall.

Dean made a sound, and Sam had no idea what it meant, but it wasn't a sound he'd ever heard from a human being before, and Sam had heard plenty of strange things in his twenty-two years.

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Oh, fella, this is a lot of trouble you're going to. Such order they put on things, don't you think? All this – and Jubal waved an arm around, indicating the flowers and the lawns and the painted buildings pristine as layer cakes in a bakery window. It's not real. It don't matter. Not like what's come before.

Dean couldn't take his eyes off Jubal, didn't know what might happen, what might get loose if he did, but he wanted to let Sam know what was going on, because his brother probably thought he was fucking out of his mind. Hey, you getting this Sam? Cause I'm having a fucking conversation with a ghost, man! And the burning bones crap? How often did that work with spooks like this? Worth a shot, of course, but --

“What trouble?” he asked instead, and his arms were shaking so badly he had to drop the gun, though he held on to it as hard as he could. This was a damn convincing motherfucker, but there was no way that gun – his bullet -- was going anywhere. Not for a fucking ghost. “It's mine.” There, he'd said it.

Jubal shook his head, more real right now than Sam and Beau standing behind him; they were afraid, or Sam was. Dean could smell the fear, the sharp tang of bile and lemon. Beau? Nope, Beau was getting ready to shoot him. Didn't need eyes in the back of his head to tell him that.

Jubal continued to smile, eyes light and roving, coming back to rest on the gun, always on the gun. That boy there, the one out of uniform? He's fixing to kill you. Wants the bullet back. Gave it to you. Lucky.

“Lucky?” Oh, it was going to be repeat and bait. Okay, he knew this one. Good. Something was familiar. “Your fucking luck got Stonewall Jackson killed. Chew on that, asshole.”

Something shifted in Jubal, two screens sliding against each other, causing patterns to appear. Dean felt momentarily faint.

“Dean?” Sam's voice, so calm and so afraid, coming closer.

“Stay back, Sammy,” Dean said, but it came out gargled, like his tongue had been numbed.

Wants it, too. Jubal said, taking a few steps to the bushes. Brotherhood don't mean much here. It's not what we're fighting for. You know that. He'll take it. One of them will.

“It's mine,” Dean whispered, repeating himself. That was the game, wasn't it?

Then you better run, boy. Jubal came close enough that Dean could smell his sorrow and his need and his ancient blood, the same scent as dried flowers.

So he did.

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a/n: Most of this was written under the influence of a LOT of painkillers (I just had dental work done). But you know – didn't do it any harm, I don't think. Plus, it's crazy hot. So I'm in the 'possessed by a fucked up dog' zone. Also, shout out to my brother, who actually had to get a series of rabies shots in the stomach when a chipmunk bit him and he let go (like any normal person would) and it ran off into the woods to go live its happy rabid life. Man, my brother sure doesn't like chipmunks anymore.

## Chapter Eight - – Hallowed Ground

Posted June 5, 2006

Author: Big Pink

Rating: PG13 - Violence, modern and historically accurate cursing!

Category: Gen, with a detour though a particularly weird suburb of Angstville.

Summary: Lunatic Civil War reenactors, a possessed golden lab, a Confederate ghost and a lucky bullet – did I mention the Winchester boys? Sweaty?

We're almost at the end -- this chapter will be followed (soon) by the epilogue. Previous chapters can be found on my LJ memories page.

Disclaimer: In a fit of megalomania, I have decided that, yes, I do own it all. Kiss my ass, Kripke. My invoice is in the mail.

Warning: This chapter has turned into a complete and utter exercise in angst-o-rama. There might be one or two funny lines, but all that 'humor' stuff? This chapter, not so much.

Apology: Last chapter I may have inadvertently implied that you had to be possessed by the spirit of a rabid dog to actually enjoy listening to the Eagles. The implication was meant to be overt. Sorry if anyone missed it.

STF: Well, okay, it's been a week since the last chapter, so maybe you forgot that Dean's been possessed by a dog. No? Did you remember that he's run off into the woods at the Fredericksburg National Park Service Battlefield? It's all coming back to you, isn't it? So, Dean's got the lucky bullet, right, and it's loaded into his gun and the ghost (Jubal Garrett) wants it. Sam's trying really hard to figure out how to repo Dean and how to get rid of Jubal Garrett. So now you're up-to-date.

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Shitshitshitshit. He should have seen this coming a mile off. Dean was so good at shadowing into the dark, had been doing it for half their lives, more than half, and now weren't they just screwed?

Mira, Beau and Sam, three people sweating around a charred pile of bones in the twilight of an ancient battleground, not even a ghost to cool things down. The evening was so close and still, and mosquitoes fed on Sam mercilessly, like they'd suddenly discovered their own private wet bar. Miles off, the rumble of summer thunder posing as real weather, insignificant and dry.

Sam couldn't hear Dean anymore – for the first five seconds, maybe, he thought he'd heard his footsteps, unnaturally stealthy given the wound, but Dean could be a mile off by now. Or watching them from the bushes. Sam didn't think so, though. He'd seen the look in Dean's eyes, that sudden atavistic need to just run. So he was running, not watching, and that fucking Jubal Garrett was with him.

“Sam,” Beau said, standing still and alert at Sam's elbow. “That was a mighty dumb thing to do.”

“Which thing?” Sam sighed, tension wound round quiet like a compressed curl of sprung metal. Beau wouldn't recognize this quiet, this solitude that surfaced when Sam was performing cold fusion between 'plan' and 'remorse'. “Not letting you kill him? Or not knowing he had the bullet on him?”

Beau slapped away a bug, the cheery margarita glasses on his tank top actually glowing slightly, their phosphorescent design faintly etched despite a multitude of washes, spelling out Siesta Time! “Both,” Beau said matter-of-factly. “And I was aiming for his arm.”

“A minié ball to his arm? At this range?” Sam raised his eyebrows, gave the appearance of calm.

“Well, yeah, he might have shaken hands funny for the rest of his natural, but...” Sam held up his hand, not wanting to hear about Beau’s thoughtful plan to maim his brother. He would have blown Dean’s arm clean off at this distance. Beau slung the rifle over his shoulder, looked to Mira, who was surveying what remained of the bone fire and not listening to them. Beau took a step in Sam’s direction, and in the dying glow of firelight, Sam could see his mouth work, rubbing words together like sticks to make flame. “He’s a danger, Sam. You know that. And I don’t think he’s looking for a peaceful way out, if you know what I mean. That ghost is wicked powerful.”

“Yeah? You think Dean isn’t?” In his own ornery way. Talking about blue jays and their father in the same fucking breath.

Beau laughed, but it wasn’t really with any humor. “Sam, I have watched your brother march through fly infested swamps for four days without complaint and without anything that you might consider real food. He outshot me and all of my old regiment at three different shooting competitions and there were some mighty impressive sharpshooters in that outfit. And he throws better bullets than most smiths twice his age. So, yeah, I have some idea about how wicked powerful your brother can be. Which is why I’m worried.”

Sam drew breath, though he wasn’t clear what he was about to say. Luckily, he was interrupted.

“Your burning of the bones?” Mira interjected smoothly, attention likely caught by what had just come into their voices. She wiped her hands against her shorts and came to a stand. She was remarkably steady and Sam admired that; she’d been pretty unshakeable at the Wilderness reenactment, too. Practical, unflappable, level. Just what was needed. “It didn’t seem to work all that well.” Except for that pointing out the obvious thing.

The bones were powder now; Mira had moved them around with a stick. Salt. Benediction. Flame. Hadn’t fazed Jubal Garrett in the slightest. Wasn’t helping Dean at all. Get rid of the ghost, and Dean would be okay. Sam was sure of that. Almost sure. Had no idea, actually. Didn’t have a better theory, though. Not the first time he’d rolled craps with Dean’s life hanging in the balance.

“Nope. Didn’t work at all. There must be more holding him here than just his bones.” He walked over to Mira, observed the dry ash, still smoldering.

Beau sucked his teeth for a second before guessing. “The bullet? Hate? Just plumb contrary, in death as in life? We rebels are a feisty bunch.” And Sam was so fucking close to smacking Beau that he had to literally count to ten before the feeling passed.

He took a breath when he got to twelve. “What happens if he just gives Jubal the bullet?” he mused aloud.

Mira weighed in, shifted her stance, and Sam could almost hear her thinking her way through the problem at hand as though it were a particularly complex chain of chemical compounds. “Depends how he does it, I would think.” Beau nodded his head in consideration, and Sam started to realize, perhaps for the first time in his life, that supernatural weirdness + logical thought + women (didn’t necessarily) = impossible.

“Yeah?” Sam asked uncertainly.

“Yeah,” she said. “If he’s wanting to destroy him, and makes the motions...”

“If you commit to killing him with his own luck,” Sam rephrased. “Then he’s gone.” Conjecture. Pure theory. “And if he gives Jubal what he wants? If he just hands over the bullet?”

“Think it makes the fucking ghost stronger,” Beau responded, resting the rifle on his shoulder, looking like every cowboy in every movie Sam had ever seen, if you discounted the tourist wear. “Gives him another anchor in this world. He’s throwing out grappling hooks, this one.”

Oh, yes. Building attachments, like an incoming ship throws lines to the dock. The bullet. Bones. The dog. Dean?

Sam nodded, heart thudding faster. “You’re right, both of you. Jubal Garrett’s not looking to be put to rest. But why didn’t burning the bones work? It should have worked, if he didn’t have the bullet and the dog was dead, don’t you think?” Don’t think of Dean, not like that, not as an anchor, because if that were true, he didn’t see how they were coming out the other side. “Okay, what are we missing?”

Mira cleared her throat. “What, other than a femur?” And both Sam and Beau turned. The archaeology student’s smile was white in the gloom. “The skeleton wasn’t complete, you know.”

“But,” Sam choked, trying to remember. They’d been standing almost in this very spot. And Dean had been looking across the field and it had been too beautiful for his liking. “I thought you said that you found the body as he’d fallen – didn’t you say that?”

“Well, yeah. That’s how we found him.” Mira threw her stick into the bushes, and it made a noise that caused Sam to glance around nervously. “But—“

“But the bones were disturbed.” Oh, hell, how could he have forgotten that? It’s what had led them here in the first place: the dog, Buttercup. Chew marks consistent with a large canine, that’s what she’d said.

“The next day, we found everything but the right femur.” She was speaking softly now, because even though she was right, she was also aware of what was still raw in Sam’s voice. “I didn’t know it would be important. Or I would have said something.”

Wasn’t her fault, though. He should have been thinking it through, should have realized or asked. “Beau,” he said quietly, after a long moment of mental alchemy, “I’ll give you the Farmer family’s address – they just live down the hill. Dig up the begonia bed in front. Dog apparently buried all kinds of crap there. Mira, would you be able to identify a human femur?”

She crossed her arms in front of her chest and cocked her head to the side, let her stance color her next words with barely concealed sarcasm. “Four years, osteoarchaeology. What do you think?”

Sam grimaced, but he reckoned the night was too dark for her to see. “Good. Find it, then Beau will drop you someplace safe. We’ll burn it and that will be that.” He hoped, but did not know. It was something, though, slender as it was. “I’ll stay here in case Dean comes back. Let’s get this over with.”

There wasn’t much more to say or do, except one thing, and Beau did it. “It’s loaded and the trigger’s a might stiff, so squeeze hard. Pulls a little to the left. Don’t go after your brother alone.” He lowered his voice, glanced over his shoulder at Mira, who held his now empty hand. Glowing blue eyes, dark now,

more serious than Sam could ever recall him. A warrior. A hunter. With the nineteenth century facial hair and the accent and the not-insignificant rest, it was sometimes easy to forget. “You sure, Samuel?”

And that might mean so many things, but Sam just nodded in the indigo gloom, not trusting his voice anymore. Two brothers, a battlefield. It didn’t seem trite, or a cliché, not when it was in your face. They parted without further talk, no words of comfort, none of caution. As men might do before battle.

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Think, dammit. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Twenty gravemarkers to a row. Thirty-five rows. At least twenty sections. That makes...fuck, what does that make? A lot. A lot of dead guys. Federals. Way more than Confederates, didn’t bury them together. They were dying down the hill and Dean could hear them, the unholy moan and it was so cold, December cold, and they were freezing down on the field before the wall. Shattered like ice falling from a rooftop, all directions.

Again. One through ten still okay. Started to get weird around twelve, when numbers changed their spots, went all teen-y. Thirteen, dangerous fucking age. The police had brought him home drunk at thirteen and Dad hadn’t been happy about that. Remembered the look on his face. The look on Sammy’s even worse. Good. Remember that.

Up to twenty again. Better. Smell of old bones, rust. Acrid sulfur, and iron. Wasn’t iron supposed to be good? Goddamn, would they just shut up down there? Can’t help, sorry. You’re not real. But the evidence to the contrary was in front of him, row upon row.

“Oh, we’re real, all right.” Jubal leaned against the gravestone next to Dean. Instantly alert, Dean gripped the gun in his left hand more tightly. He wasn’t a bad shot with his left hand; he’d been made to practice both ways, just in case. Hand goes here, son, feel it in the palm first. Pleased. Pleased that a nine-year-old could shoot that straight with his non-dominant hand. Pleasure in the dark eyes. Something Sam had recently inherited, that dancing gleam of divided joy. One, two, three –

Jubal adjusted the sit of his haversack, slung crosswise from his shoulder, hair long and unkempt, eyes curiously light in the darkness. “I am going to have it. You’ll give it to me.”

“I’m not giving it to you,” Dean couldn’t even look at him. But that was dangerous, was a stupid thing, not looking at something because you wanted it to disappear. Sam had done that. Sam had not looked at him for years, all that time in California, and for months prior, when he’d gone deep, making his plans in cloaked silence. Dean forced his eyes to meet Jubal’s and they were as clear and as present as the stone between them. That didn’t change. The stone didn’t change. Aw fuck, those guys were hollering again, that weird yipping banshee yowl. Jubal smiled, heard it too.

“Scairt those Yankees halfway to kingdom come with that yell. Air, that’s all. And flesh. The things that don’t last.” Held out his hand, and Dean’s jerked in response, the gun coming up an inch. And fuck, fuck, was it to protect himself, or was it to shoot this sonofabitch, or was it to give him his goddamn bullet, because Dean sure as hell didn’t know. That scared him badly and he was plenty scared already.

He swallowed, a wedge of fear stuck there, felt the pain in his leg finally, some tie with the ghost severed or made, hard to tell – was this a good development, the pain? “You need to rest,” he said, but midway through the admonition he lost track of who he was talking to. Himself? Who the hell else was here?

Oh, I don’t know, only about five thousand dead guys, Dean. God, I’m so hungry. If the fucking ghost offers me a hotdog for the bullet, he’s gotta deal. I shouldn’t be waving this around, it’s a gun. I

could...oh, Sam. Where was he? Where'd he go? I could give it to Sam. Jesus Christ, I can't give it to Sam. I gotta finish this.

I could give it to the fucking ghost, hotdog or no hotdog, just to have it over with. Except. Except that's what he wants, and I'm not about giving evil fucking spirits what they want. My leg hurts. Would those guys just shut the fuck up –

He sat down on the old grave, pulled the gun across his lap. He tried to stretch his fingers on his right hand, wondered if he could untape the splint, but would have to let go of the gun to do it and...pale fingers touched his shoulder, and Dean turned his head. He felt the weight of the hand. Felt it. Not good, feeling what a ghost was doing. A profoundly bad sign; he knew that. Jubal's nose was about five inches from his face.

"You'll do damage with this," Jubal said, a promise in the night. Something new was in his voice, not need, nor fear. Longing. War was here, was right here and if Dean would just embrace it, just go toward it, a lover waiting in the night --

Dean laughed, and it was full of blood. "I always do damage," he replied, believing it. "That's what I do. That's what I'm for." And it didn't feel good, not at all, saying that. They weren't even his words, not really. Had been given to him in the same way some people got tattoos, which was to say permanently and not without pain. He'd been thirteen, and drunk, and man Dad wasn't pleased. Gun in hand, pleased. Out of control, not pleased. Inflicting damage consistently and on demand, pleased. Fuck, was that normal?

Started counting again, until he realized Jubal was counting with him, as though it were a game. Not even that. A prayer. So many things required a count: one rip cartridge, two powder down the barrel, three in goes the ball, four ram it down, five up to shoulder, six find your sight, seven squeeze the girl, eight shoot a man dead. Counting: number of seconds between the volleys from the Union troops, number of heartbeats between when the artillery let loose and when you charged forward, that rebel yell tearing from your throat as though you could answer every harm with this one sound.

And. Other reasons. Oh, please, there had to be other reasons. One potato, two potato, three potato, four...your turn to salt the windows, Sammy. Better.

Shaking with the effort, and slowly, Dean got to his feet. Mine, he said softly, holding the gun to his chest.

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Even the gun barrel was warm, that's how hot it was, still, even though it was fully dark and Sam could see the distant flash of lightning, though the thunder grumbled much later. Moving away from them, or crosswise. They'd be getting rain in Richmond soon. The air smelled of ozone, thick, expectant.

What if they can't find it? What if Buttercup didn't bury the bone there? What if burning it had no effect at all on the ghost? What if the ghost disappeared and the possession was still in effect? Dean was possessed by a dog, for fuck's sake. What were the rules to that?

Sam knew what would have to happen then, unfortunately.

Think it through, Sammy. You're a smart boy. His father's voice, no matter how hard he tried to will it away. Straws were few, and hard to grasp. Holy water. Maybe holy water thrown on Dean would work.

He'd send Beau back for some, because Sam sure as hell wasn't going to leave Beau alone with a gun when Dean was running around, crazy as batshit. Because Beau was a hunter and he knew exactly what to do: shoot the possessed person. Even if they died, it was a kindness. Sam had seen their father do it, more than once.

This was different. For him, at least. And if John Winchester was capable of pulling the trigger under these circumstances, Sam didn't want to know it. Screw you, Dad.

There were other options, surely. A nice little exorcism, some Latin sprinkled like confetti over a bride. Even as he thought it, Sam knew Jubal was too strong, there was too much death around them and it had been around far too long. Still, maybe worth a try if the bone burning thing didn't turn out well.

Trouble was, how many chances were they going to get before Dean did something...well, what was Dean likely to do? He wasn't going to rip out anyone's throat with his bare teeth. Probably. He wasn't going to shoot anyone with the bullet – the bullet was the point, wasn't it? He had watched Dean re-make that bullet, seen how he'd poured it into the mold, struck it like you would a bell. Was it really Garret's bullet anymore?

Okay, that was some sort of progress, something that worked against Jubal Garrett's making anchors out of things. Dean had a lot of reasons to keep the bullet, not the least of which was he was a stubborn asshole.

Sam took in a deep breath of night air, didn't know if he wanted it to rain or not. Alone on a bloody battlefield with nothing but a ghost, his crazy brother and an old gun loaded with a holy water filled bullet that wouldn't shoot more than a hundred feet. It would likely kill Dean, but the possession would be over. It had worked on Buttercup; Dean had known that. One less thing to hold Jubal Garrett to this world. And Sam couldn't bear to think of his brother as an anchor, or a hook, or any sort of weight to hold evil to this world.

So instead, Sam turned to what Dean had said earlier, which had cut Sam to the core. Between tracking birds and thinking about food, Dean had let other things slip, and they were hard to hear. He thinks about the past more than anyone else I know. Dad. Add Sam, who had been trying so hard to see 'future' as an option. Sam wasn't a fool; he'd known, had always known, what his going away had cost Dean. And it wasn't that he didn't care, because he did.

And Dean, just present. Just there. True as...true as a good dog, and Sam couldn't think about this any more than he could think about Dean as an anchor. He was running out of metaphors to describe his brother, because all of them were right, all of them fit, and every one would break your heart on any given day.

Past, and present, and future, altogether. Time conflated for Sam, standing there with a rifle that he was thinking – oh, admit you're thinking about it – that he was thinking about killing his brother with. Convenient notions of time collapsed into themselves like one of those demolition demonstrations where they blow up a building from within and it just falls.

A noise behind him, and Sam turned sharply, precisely, the gun ready. Sam, not so ready, not really. He swallowed as he heard Beau's quick whistle. Friendly. A moment later, Beau trotted back into the space between the dig pit and the remaining stone wall, a second rifle in one hand and a bone in the other.

"Pard, we hit pay dirt," Beau said, holding the femur up. "Mira said there were at least three different CW bodies there. Left her on the Farmer's front lawn; she called the archaeology branch. Those folks are not

altogether pleased to have their posies dug up again.” Saw Sam’s face, maybe, what was on it. Straightened up. “Luckily, this was on top.” He tossed the bone over, and Sam felt its weight. Dense, despite the fact it was almost a century and a half old.

“You sure?” Another mistake would cost Sam more than he could pay.

Beau nodded, and Sam didn’t miss the quick grin. “Mira says so.” In Beau’s world, what Mira said carried the same weight as words from Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davies, which was saying something.

“Beau,” he said over his shoulder as he went back to the bone ashes, poured the remainder of the bourbon over it, not thinking it a waste at all. “Promise me you won’t shoot Dean.”

Beau said nothing, so Sam glanced up. The gunsmith stood very still, image of Custer, vigilante weird. Waco weird. Great. “I won’t let you shoot him,” Sam clarified, just in case there was any doubt.

“Better if you do it,” Beau nodded. “A bullet delivered with love is what it needs. Don’t want Dean haunting my ass. He’d be a bitch of ghost. He won’t hold it against you, but he would me.”

Oh, fuck, he was not getting it at all. “No one is shooting my brother.” And he was fairly sure he was telling himself that, not Beau. He had a lighter in one hand, because he didn’t know where he’d put the box of matches. One bone, lighter would do. So he lit the bone, and it flared blue in the night and as he came to a stand, the borrowed rifle resting between the ground and his fingertips, he looked across the wall.

Jubal Garrett leaned against it, something smile-like playing on his face, about a hundred times more present and solid than he’d ever appeared before. He had a rifle with a bayonet fixed to its muzzle, and a pistol tucked into his belt. But not Dean’s gun; Sam checked, because if it were Dean’s gun that meant it was over.

“That’s it,” Sam breathed, looking down at the crumbling bone ash, and then back up to the supersolid Jubal Garrett, aware that Beau was now beside his shoulder.

Not aware that Beau was aiming to shoot.

The blast from the rifle not two feet away from his ear was astonishing, and Sam flinched, taken utterly by surprise. Jubal Garrett didn’t startle, didn’t move. Didn’t dissipate into shimmering smoke as the holy-water bullet passed harmlessly through him, joining all the other spent lead on this contested ground.

He came off the wall, though, brought his rifle up to his shoulder, aimed directly at Sam, whose heart came up into his throat. Then he heard it: thin peal of viperous laughter, brittle as bent bones.

The ghost’s eyes met Sam’s and a jolt of understanding passed between them: he’s going after both, bullet and brother. Jubal grinned and flickered away into nothingness.

“Sweet Jesus,” Beau murmured as the air around them returned to summer.

“We have to find Dean,” Sam said, lifting his rifle. Might have added: before it’s too late. Too late was a future he could not begin to imagine.

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Okay, even making it to ten was getting harder, and that had always been fucking simple. One, two, just say boo. Three four, beware the door. Five six, ghosts with tricks. Seven eight, hell's own gate. And? What came next, huh? He held on to the gravestone now, didn't know how much longer he'd be able to keep standing. It seemed important to be ready. Important to try, somehow.

He had always thought of himself as a half full kinda guy. That jar of peanut butter was still in the fridge, half full. Dean spat to one side, his mouth watering. Ooooh, this is not good. Think. Garrett's got a hold on me. I got the bullet. He wants the bullet. Not gonna get it. Keep the bullet, Dean. Keep it. Sam'll figure out a way to get rid of the ghost. Just hang in there, man. All you gotta do is keep the bullet.

But what if you can't? What if – oh, shut up, you wailing, dying guys down there. Just shut the fu—okay. Give the bullet to the ghost. Get something to eat, rest up. All okay. No, wait. That wasn't right.

See?

Goddamn. Keep the bullet. One sure way to do that.

Cold again, smell of violence, hot in the same way horseradish is hot, filling every nasal passage, almost painful. And there that bastard is, nodding his head, as if I had been talking to – shit. Yeah, okay, so I've been talking out loud, haven't I?

“Shut up,” he said, sure that his vocal chords were still working. “You just shut up.” Who you talking to, Dean? “Shut up,” he said again, loud. Finally, the only thing he could do, the only sound he was able to hang on to, “Shut up! Shut up! SHUT UP!”

--

They both heard it; up on the ridge, in the cemetery. Don't assess – yeah, but he sounds all kinds of nuts, never heard him sound so – don't think about it, just get to him. And your plan, Sam? What is that again?

ShutupshutupSHUTUP.

Running through all sorts of brush, up the small embankment, not thinking, not planning, just running.

They burst into the boneyard with their rifles, only one of the guns ready to go: the one in Sam's hands, and he lifted it slightly, unsure what he was arranging to do. His eyes flitted around, but soon found the mark, guided by whispers from a voice too hoarse to keep shouting.

Dean leaned heavily against a white marker, his face paler than the stone, that and the bandage on his right hand. The other cradled the gun against his chest. His face angled away from them, toward the ground.

As Sam came closer, quietly, but not sneaking up, not doing that, don't surprise him, he could see Dean's lips moving. Counting?

“Dean?” He called the name softly, though he'd been meaning to shout it, snap him out of it. Dean's murmurs didn't cease, soft comforting noises, sounds from childhood. Halfway between awake and sleeping, naming nighttime horrors in numerical order, making Sam laugh through his sleepy protests. Am not scared, Dean. No, I know you're not, that's because I'm being friggin' hilarious. Still not scared, Dean. I know, Sammy, I know. Oh god, Sam thought, remembering.

Sam circled around the gravestones in front of his brother, and between two markers, saw the ghost, sitting a little distance away from them, his back against a tree, the long rifle held slackly in his grip. Waiting. Jubal tipped his head in greeting as Sam and Beau came forward, Sam careful to put his body between the ghost and his brother. It seemed right; maybe his body could somehow block the ghost's influence. You don't get to keep him. Mine, asshole.

Beau held back a little, moving to one side. He had more cartridges in his bag and could load in under five seconds, he'd told Sam. Getting a clear fucking shot, if needed, despite the fact that Sam had told him otherwise. Damn. Sam took a step to the left, but he didn't think he could keep his own body between both the ghost and Dean and Beau and Dean.

One second, Jubal was sitting on the ground. The next he was standing, some ghost trick, a flicker of light and ether. As soon as he did it, Sam raised his rifle, and heard the thin laugh again. Heard halting steps coming through the gravel and the grass behind him.

"Hey," Sam said, glancing momentarily to his left, where Dean now stood a little more than an arm's length away. He couldn't tell if Dean was walking towards him, or towards the ghost. Sam tried to move again, get himself between Dean and Beau's sharp eyes, but he was afraid of spooking Dean, and he was almost close enough to touch, which would have to be enough.

Dean was quiet and Sam didn't know what that meant, was trying to keep his eyes on about five different variables. "I don't want to be here," Dean said, very faintly.

Sam took a deep breath, turned to Dean. Who had the gun pointed. At him. At Sam.

Sam blinked. "I know you don't."

The hand that held the gun was remarkably steady, as steady as Sam's voice had been. Inside, though. Sam looked at his brother, saw him, for maybe the first time in years. Inside, unprepared for what was there, in both of them. Don't take your eyes off him, Sam counseled himself.

The moon had come out, the thunder moved along northeast, and Dean's eyes gleamed. He was breathing hard. "Hallowed ground, consecrated." He closed his eyes for a second, then looked to where Sam supposed Jubal must be standing. In the open, nothing between the ghost and Dean. And Sam didn't know what was more dangerous: Beau's fast bullet, or Jubal's pull.

Dean spoke, and he was talking to Jubal and for the longest moment, Sam had no idea whether he'd guessed right. "'The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.'"

Shit. The Gettysburg Address? Oh man.

Two could play that game. Fire with fire. Sam cleared his throat. His memory was nothing if not good under pressure. Lots of practice. "'The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract.' Living and dead, Dean. Remember? You're part of the living. It matters, what you do. Here. Right now."

Oh, just look at me, Dean, just look.

Still the gun did not move. "I don't want to be here," Dean repeated, like a thin wire was threaded through him, choking, eyes still on something Sam wasn't going to turn to see. Turning to see the ghost would

mean taking his eyes off his brother and he couldn't do that. It had nothing to do with the gun. Dean, please, just look at me.

"None of us wants to be here," Sam tried to reason.

"Just end it. Please, just..." and Dean's voice drifted into nothingness. Sam did not recognize the expression on his brother's face.

"Dean," Sam said, a little more firmly. "It's Sam."

Slowly, glacially, Dean turned his head. Their eyes met. Dean looked at him and his face contorted in amused disdain, a thankfully known expression. "Shit, man. I'm not stupid. I know that."

Sam's attention drifted down to the gun still pointed at him. Steady as she goes. "Okay." Lifted his eyebrows so they disappeared into his shaggy hair. "So?" Glanced at the gun again, brought his stare up to lock with Dean's. Incrementally, so as not to cause alarm, he lowered his rifle. There was no way he'd shoot Dean, not ever, not if it was in his control. The rifle slid to the ground.

"Bullet like this wreaks havoc," Dean tried it out, his eyes darting away, beyond Sam for a minute, staring past him into the configuration of tombstones, probably at Beau, but Sam couldn't risk checking over his shoulder. "But not the bullet, really. Not the bullet. Not the gun. Person who pulls the trigger."

But Dean's gun didn't move. His eyes did though, and Sam saw the struggle in the way Dean's right eyebrow tensed. Dean shook his head, nostrils flaring as though needing extra oxygen. He's trying to clear his head. "I always seem to be killing things, Sammy," he said, almost conversationally, scattershot attention finally back to him. "I'm really good at it." Looked away before Sam could agree or argue. Voice dropped into the dark, a pebble disappearing beneath a still lake. "Dad always said I was good at it."

"It's your bullet," Sam whispered, and it drew Dean's concentration again. God, that gun was steady, though everything else about Dean was not – his eyes, the sweat shining on his brow, the hard breaths he was taking. Everything an effort, except the one thing he didn't want.

Dean gave a little half nod. "I know that."

"Can you shoot him?" Time was now; Sam didn't know how much more any of them would be able to take.

Dean wrestled his mouth into a smile, but it was quick. "You know, I'm trying to do that right now."

Sam laughed, but it snagged on something sharp. "Well, you're doing a crap job of it, Dean." And watched as Dean closed his eyes again, and the gun finally shook in his hands. Try, Dean. It really is your bullet, and it will kill that sonofabitch.

"Sorry." Dean said, glaring at the ghost beyond Sam's narrow focus. "You shut the fuck up. Shoot you. Why the fuck would I shoot you? I'm not giving it to you, I already said." Swallowed, was shaking all over now. Had finished, apparently, having conversation with the ghost, turned back to his brother as though he'd just been interrupted in the middle of a sentence.

"And, Dad said I could kill anything, with a gift like mine. Shitty gift." Paused to blink, because the sweat was running into his eyes. "Don't think he'll let me kill him, Sammy."

Sam bit the inside of his mouth, hard. Won't let me. How much control did Dean still have? Dean's next words were soft, pleading. "He says he needs it. I don't want to be here. I just want this to be over. Tell me what to do."

And behind him, Sam heard the sound of paper being ripped open, the spit of it to the ground. Beau was loading his rifle.

Sam had five seconds, tops.

He nodded, trying for calm. "That bullet's yours," he whispered, truly frightened now, now that the cold was so strong his fingers were numb. He found himself counting. One Mississippi, two Missi--

"It is," Dean agreed and turned the gun quickly, so it rested under his own chin.

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There was that time when Sam had fallen off a bike, a bike borrowed from some kid who'd lived three trailers over, and it had been too big and Sam's hands too small to work the brakes, which he probably hadn't even known were brakes anyway, and it had all ended badly. Dean had watched, then tried to move, in slow motion, as the bike had come tearing down the hill and Sam had gone ass over tea kettle, sailing across the handlebars into an ancient and rusting barbeque. Dean hadn't made it off the trailer's steps before Sam was curled in a ball beside the picnic table, the bike falling on top of him, adding insult to injury.

He'd howled with pain, broken his collarbone.

But that sensation, of one thing moving fast and the other very, very slow, was enough to make Dean want to throw up. Right now, his own thoughts, his own hand, his own sense of what was reliable, well they were moving fucking fast. And Sam? Well, this time, Sam was the one moving slow.

The bullet was his. Jubal was standing right there and his hand was out, waiting for the gun and Dean knew that there was only one way he could give this bullet away and that was along the length of the barrel. And with the gun pointed at Sam, that was, on every conceivable level, just not acceptable.

Okay, fine. There was one thing he could do to keep it and keep it safe. So he brought the gun round to himself. Where it belonged. This was the single path left to him, since all the others he just wasn't going to take. If this was the deal, it was fine.

He would miss it all, would miss hunting things down with Sam, would miss stealing a swim in a found lake, would even miss the brutal heat of the Impala in mid-summer, but Jubal was holding his hand out and Dean didn't know how much longer he'd be able to say no.

Met Sam's eyes. Did not need to see anything else. One, two just say --

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Only an arm's length, and god alone knew how fast Dean could be when he wanted to be, but this was his left hand, and he was wounded and was so out of his mind that he was --

For a split second, so fast he almost missed it, Sam saw resolution in his brother's expression, but it wasn't resolve to pull the trigger, it was something else. A lucid thought surfaced among all the muddled crap: Take it. For once in his life, Sam didn't think it through. There wasn't time. He just moved.

And Dean allowed Sam to remove the gun from its killing angle, allowed him to do something else with it.

Sam took the gun into his own hand, pivoted on the balls of his feet, heard the crack of Beau's rifle, and didn't hesitate: he shot Jubal Garrett in the face with what had once been his lucky bullet. It wasn't his bullet anymore, though. It was Dean's, and Garrett's luck had run out the minute Dean had recast the slug.

The ghost vibrated for a moment, like the thunder had, but closer, the bang before an earthquake, when it felt like a truck had hit the house, a thud to the heart. The lucky bullet passed right through, just as the holy water one had before. Right through, hit the tree behind with a splintering yowl.

Jubal looked surprised.

Here's the fucking bullet, Sam thought. Good luck with it.

And then Jubal Garrett fell apart. Or, rather, shattered like safety glass, a million bright bits in the soft Virginia night, a second death on this battlefield, nothing left to hang onto this time, no bones, no battle, no collective hate. On ground hallowed by memory, which was all that mattered.

After the flash of gunpowder and scattered ghost, the first sound Sam heard was his own blood in his ears, because that gun was loud. He didn't want to turn. Oh god, he didn't want to turn, but he had to. Beau didn't miss and Dean had been holding a gun to Sam's chest. And then, and then...and Sam couldn't conjure the image of that final look in Dean's eyes, because that had been goodbye and he hadn't been ready for it.

So he turned. And Dean was on the ground, all the lights out. Sam just stared, and Beau came up behind him, the smell of spent gunpowder so strong that Sam could barely conceive of much else.

"Pulled my shot," Beau said, breathless and smiling. "Clean over his head. Soon as you grabbed the gun, pulled my shot high. It's the least I could do for bringing this down on him."

And Dean lifted his head before laying it back down on the hard dirt of a Yankee grave. His eyes blinking away the reflection of stars, his left hand drifted up, then lay on his chest. "Sam?" he whispered, and Sam dropped the pistol and fell to his knees.

"Hey," he said, almost as though he'd just run into him at the dollar store. "Hey. So."

"Help me up," Dean said, made it sound as though Sam had forgotten to do something obvious. He made it as far as a sit, collapsed against the headstone. Glanced at Sam, then away. "Nice shot."

Sam shrugged, giddiness creeping towards out-and-out nausea. "He was pretty close, Dean. An old lady could have hit him with her handbag."

"Yeah. Like I said, grandma. Nice shot."

Sam laid one hand on Dean's knee, patted it once, but that felt...kinda like he was congratulating a dog, so he pulled away. "I'm going to ask you if you're okay. Don't freak out, all right?"

Beau was by the tree, and he had out a bayonet. First, he ran his hands across the trunk's bumps and lesions, then found what he was looking for. Sam followed Dean's stare.

"I'm just dandy," Dean deadpanned, holding up his bandaged hand. "I pointed a loaded gun at your chest, Sam, how the fuck do you think I'm doing?"

Oh, please, don't neglect to mention that the last place that barrel had been pointing was your own head, Dean. "Well, you were possessed by a dog, so I won't hold it against you."

"I was not possessed by a dog, jerk. Who the fuck gets possessed by a dog?"

Beau walked slowly back to them, threw a chunk of lead onto Dean's lap with a smile. "Well, I'd say its definitely your bullet now, pard."

And Dean smiled, but didn't say anything else.

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TBC – there's still the epilogue to come! And it'll tie up all sorts of loose ends and be funny and a little angsty, so don't take Old Rebel Yeller off your radar just yet...it's not DONE, okay?

a/n: Okay, the betas each get one of my kids. Seriously. Except one's actually the antichrist, so maybe that's not such a great reward. Lemmypie is so incredibly supportive and joyful it makes writing this more fun than a barrelful of monkeys on acid. jmm0001 told me to take my feet off the pedals and just ride. Which is what every beta reading this should turn around and say to their writer. Go dog go.

## Epilogue - Antebellum

Posted June 9, 2006

Rating: PG13 - Violence, modern and historically accurate cursing!

Category: Gen, with a detour though a particularly weird suburb of Angstville.

Summary: Lunatic Civil War reenactors, a Confederate ghost and a lucky bullet. Ooh, and Winchesters, of course. And lots of soul-searching about the nature of being possessed by a dog.

Disclaimer: "Oh, I'm a good old rebel, that's what I am. I won't be reconstructed, and I don't give a damn." Innes Randolph, A Good Old Rebel, 1870

Warning: "You wanna get out, you come to me." The Road Warrior

STF: Truly, you're not starting at the end, are you? One of these days, I'll do the recap in emoticons. And that will be the day you can wrap me in the soft suit with long arms. So for latecomers, or those who forgot: Possessed dog? Nope, she's gone. Civil War era ghost? Him too. Bullet? You bet.

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The only thing Dean conceded was that his leg was too stiff to drive. Which hadn't stopped him earlier in the week when he'd hauled ass to the dog pound, but the days that came in between then and now had been different. Dean wasn't about to say, 'I'm sore as shit because I'm not juiced up on doggie amphetamines,' but that's exactly what Sam understood and he tried very, very hard not to crack canine around his brother.

With mixed success, of course.

The interceding days had cooled, thank god, and come Friday, the sun was clear and high, breeze-buffed. Although Dean had stated, repeatedly and with true feeling, that he'd rather jam a fork into his right hand than visit one more battlefield, Sam had insisted. If any residual crap from either Buttercup or Jubal was going to surface, better to know sooner than later.

And besides, Beau was fixing to leave on his annual Civil Wargasm and wanted to say goodbye properly.

According to the Beau's somewhat garbled phone message, and followed up by a much more coherent one from Mira, that meant the Bloody Angle on the Spotsylvania Courthouse battlefield, the first stop on this year's Gasm. One week, thirty battlefields, countless hundreds of miles apart. Beau McBean and Harry Riddicker, a lot of coffee, chewing tobacco and 1860s reproduction diaries. All from the front seat of a speeding car. The car was a concession to the 21st century, apparently.

Sam still didn't fully understand what drove Beau to this passion: connecting with his ancestors, living a romanticized version of reality, or redressing past wrongs – he might say yes to any of those. Easier to find reenactors to make impressions of Confederates than to march as Yankees. Rebels, patriots, long hair, threadbare clothes, starvation good looks. The stuff of folktales. The past was a foreign country, and men like Beau were reinventing it in their own image.

If he ever did understand it, maybe he'd be lost to it as well. Probably just as well they were pushing on.

Sam had known yesterday that it was their last night in Fredericksburg. Dean had been getting that antsy way he got when he was healed enough for adventure and when adventure hadn't received the advance

notice. Then, finally, Sam had found a reference to a mysterious series of deaths in an online journal from upstate New York that he thought might interest his brother. Found it well before it occurred to Dean that many chicks dug stitches almost as much as they did scars.

Spotsylvania was fifteen minutes away, even with the so-called morning rush. Driving the Impala past fast marts and realtors' signs, Sam was impressed by the sheer forward motion of human nature: Dean had told him that between Chancellorsville, Wilderness, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania Courthouse, these ten square miles of Virginia had seen 100,000 deaths over two years. And yet, new houses obliterated the historic landscape, cluttering up old sacrifices with housing tracts, car lots and skin rash prolific strip malls. The only ostensible signs of the Civil War were the...signs.

They passed by the Stonewall Video Arcade with a blaring neon Confederate flag. Then a housing development featuring 'Antebellum plantation-style mansions' suitable for a 'king'. Don't suppose they come with slave quarters, Sam thought. Street signs flashed by: Longstreet Road. Appomattox Lane, Burnside Street, Jackson Boulevard. A golf course and Sam wondered if the dead haunted it, their bodies bloated in the sand traps.

All around them, signs of life proceeding obliviously. If it wasn't so exhilarating, it would be depressing.

It was familiar, this understanding that death existed in the midst of life. Usually Sam would insert the word 'monsters' instead of 'death'. Here, though, on the edge of the Fawn Lake Country Club, memories haunted, not ghosts.

"Man, trust your American entrepreneur to pave over a graveyard without thinking about it," he said after a longish period of silence.

Dean was squirming, trying to find a comfortable position without bending at the hips. He leaned plank-like across the seat and Sam bit back a smile.

After a minute of this, Dean shrugged, shifted himself into an equally preposterous accommodation to his dog bite discomfort. "I don't know. Maybe it's better this way. Don't the living deserve it? Isn't it what these guys all died for?"

Sam's brows crooked together in amazement. "They died to protect urban sprawl, environmental destruction and the conspicuous over-consumption of the American lifestyle?" he asked incredulously.

The quiet stretched a little as box superstores flashed by. "Can't live in the past, Sammy. It's gotta go on. So, yeah, they died so there'd be a future." He might have continued, but both were momentarily distracted by a neon sign that flicked on and off in sequence to suggest a cannonball leaving the muzzle of a heavy artillery piece. Dixie Cannon Pizzeria, god help them.

"Bet they weren't counting on that," Sam concluded.

"You don't get to decide the future," Dean returned, but softly. "You just make sure it happens. The dead don't own the future. They don't even own today. And with guys like Beau around, they don't even own the past."

The words mirrored a little of what Sam had been thinking, and it cheered him considerably, imagining that he and Dean might actually be on the same page, even if it was only for a few miles.

At Spotsylvania, the Bloody Angle was well marked; they shot past the exhibition shelter on Grant Drive and ended up at the parking lot ingenuously identified as 'Tour Route Stop 14: The Bloody Angle'. No grand Visitor Center with tour pamphlets and movies and snack bars to get distracted by here. Despite this, Sam watched Dean muster enough energy to get out of the car; with the sun beating down, even the breeze wasn't going to be enough to make it anything other than an Easybake oven on overdrive. Though the dog smell had dissipated, the driver's seat was currently held together with duct tape and Sam knew it pained Dean just to look at it.

Several visitors milled about gently easing earthworks, all that remained of the trenches the Confederate troops had installed themselves in during May of 1864. As at the other NPS battlefields, the Bloody Angle was illustrated by a reproduction of a battlefield painting, part of the interpretive signage that littered vast swathes of this part of Virginia. The painting captured the hand-to-hand combat in lurid, spectacular detail. Who the hell goes to art school to make this? Sam thought.

The gravel path wasn't very arduous, which was a good thing because Sam didn't think Dean would be able to walk very far – or, rather, he shouldn't walk very far – and that had been precisely why Beau had selected this site for the start of his whirlwind Civil War tour. A different kind of memorializing, this. A witnessing, of sorts.

They were doing it for Tim, this year, Mira had said. Meet us at the Bloody Angle.

As usual, they heard Beau before they saw him.

"Goldurned farbs! Get the fuck off the earthworks! Y'think the signs are for someone other than you?" Sam hoped Beau didn't have a gun, but that was like hoping the Acme anvil wasn't going to squash the coyote into an accordion. At best, he could hope the gun wasn't loaded.

"Really, he's harmless," they then heard Mira's calming voice, as though describing a runaway dog at a park. "But the earthworks are fragile." Enough steel there that Sam could well imagine the wayward tourists jumping with alacrity.

The path came onto the cleared fields, and Sam was struck by how little had probably changed. Sure, the earthworks were slowly wearing away, but the open fields seemed moonscape-y, barren, a little ominous. It's that sucky painting, he thought. Power of suggestion. Even so, different from the still and constructed beauty of the other sites, more ominous. Maybe because of Jubal Garrett, Sam admitted to himself. Real men had fought here, in this ditch, their bodies laid so thick you could walk on them. Dean had told him that, after Sam had told them today's destination. Goddamn storyteller.

To their left, Beau raised his hand, waved with a kepi between his fingers. In the ditch, Riddicker was on his back demonstrating his bloating technique for an appreciative audience of boy scouts. Watching from the relative anonymity of a planked footbridge crossing the earthworks, Mira raised a hand and smiled at the brothers.

She had proved adept at keeping things under wraps, a veritable CSI worker in the clean up department. After staying up late at the Farmer place with Archaeology Branch, she'd phoned Sam (Beau not investing in the trappings of the 21st century so far as to get a cell phone), found out what had happened with the ghost, and gone back to the dig early the next morning: somebody's got to get rid of the ashes, she'd said. She'd disposed of the box, too, said that it would probably be years before anyone in the lab figured out that it was missing. Happened all the time. Missing stuff.

I don't lose shit like that, Sam thought, feeling the familiar weight of Dean's keys in his hand. Beau had soldered a little ring to Dean's squashed bullet, his dug lead, and the slug now hung in its usual place. Funny, it didn't seem awkward, or heavier for all that Sam now knew about it. And Dean didn't seem to mind letting Sam carry it; he seemed more concerned over Sam driving the Impala. And locating a replacement seat cushion.

Sam proceeded towards Mira slowly, more for Dean than for himself. Dean was stiff, and sore, so sore he had consented to swallowing some plain acetaminophen after admitting that he had no idea what he'd done with the hospital painkillers. Sam wasn't truly worried about him; he was bitching and moaning, both of which were good signs.

Buttercup's love bite was healing up nicely, no sign of infection, despite the fact that the antibiotics were also in Dean's Mystery Land of Dog Possession, along with the painkillers and, inexplicably, one black t-shirt. Dean was feeling well enough to slap Sam on the back of his head when he'd suggested digging up the Farmer's flowerbed to see if Dean had buried them there.

I might give shit away, or use it for something else, but I don't lose it.

If he offered a friendly, assisting arm to Dean -- who was staring at the steps down to the bridge as though they led to a particularly unpleasant circle of hell -- Dean might just chew it off. That made Sam grin, though he hid it behind his hand.

"How're you doing?" he asked quietly instead. "No rebel yells? No dead guys begging you to shoot them?" Swallowed once, hard. "You aren't going to pee against a tree, are you? Hump someone's --"

And Dean shouldered him out of the way as he went past, face set in a grimace that Sam recognized from their first night on the Wilderness battlefield, when Sam had realized that they were going to hang out with reenactors. Dean's old buddies. Cringe-worthy.

"Keep it up, Sammy..." Dean whispered, "...and I may need to mention..." But the dog thing didn't hold water any more, because that fucking dog had had issues. So Sam followed Dean down, saw how he jolted gracelessly from step to step like a heavy ball. Baiting Dean was the only way to find out how he was feeling. Comeback, okay. Silence, probably not so okay. Jabbering on about squirrels, their father and blue jays? Time to get out the holy water.

Beau bounded up the planks, his hobnailed boots making a racket that could wake the dead. Figuratively, Sam revised. I mean that figuratively.

"Hey there, boys," he drawled, light eyes flitting from one to the other. "Beautiful day to start our journey. Are you sure you don't want to come?" And Sam could just imagine what the next week would be like, crammed in an eighties-era Cortina with nothing but cassette tapes, Shelby Foote history tomes, and woolen socks in mid-summer.

Dean shook his head, a smile ghosting for a moment before glancing at Sam. "Beau, I'd love to. But I need to heal up some before doing it justice. Sam though --"

Might just be serious. "Uh," Sam blurted, totally unhelpfully.

"Just the thing while I'm flat on my back at the Gray and Blue. He's got a real appreciation of the conflict now," Dean continued.

“But we’re on our way to New York –“ Sam said quickly, almost panicking.

Beau’s face furrowed in a complex rendering of appalled disgust. “Dean, your brother is a farb of the heart.”

Dean only nodded.

“Still, he is a mighty fine shot,” and Beau winked because – really – it was the guts to pull the trigger and not the aim that had mattered, “and he is welcome back any time.”

Riddicker shouldered in. “Could teach him to bloat. Skinny enough to make a fine Confederate...”

“Don’t forget the hair,” Dean murmured, not looking at Sam, not having to.

“Yes, young Winchester. Always was the problem with you in uniform. The hair.”

Beau shook Sam’s hand, avoided the metal and plaster contraption immobilizing Dean’s. As they shook, Beau nodded his head, sulfurous blond hair blazing in the sun. “You do know Custer was a Yankee?” And Beau smiled. Even with the teeth that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a caveman, that smile was genuine and it was for Sam, not Dean.

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Beau and Riddicker only stayed long enough to jot down the first entry in their diary: 9:30 am – Spotsylvania, Bloody Angle. Bloated for scouts. Goodbye to Wchtrs. Then they crammed themselves into the decrepit Cortina, offering a ride to a pair of German backpackers who looked as though they’d rather march barefoot to Atlanta than get into that car.

The Wargasm started with the ten mile battlefield crawl, from there to Harper’s Ferry, Antietam, Gettysburg, Manassas, Cold Harbor, Petersburg. Might even get out to Shiloh this year, a pilgrimage to one of the more far-flung parts of the conflict. The two hardcores had grinned at that, eyes shining with an unholy light. Then they were gone in a cloud of rapidly dissipating blue exhaust fumes.

“I’ll pull the car up,” Sam offered, assessing the way Dean was keeping all his weight on his left leg, what his color was paling away to. Mira waved goodbye to Sam, gave him a peck on the cheek before walking back to where Dean waited grumpily against the stair railing.

Dean watched Sam go, knew his unstated concern, fucking readable as one of his stupid books. Turned to Mira, who was also giving him a readable look. In the bright sunlight, her skin glowed and her loose hair lifted in the shifting air. She pushed it back, away from her eyes.

“Beau’s lucky,” he said without any irony or sarcasm, now that Sam was out of earshot. “Doesn’t need any bullet for that.”

Mira nodded. “He needs something in his life that isn’t always about the past.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” and he laughed. “You take care.” He took a deep breath and stared at the stairs, but avoided counting them because he’d had enough of that. That was what crazy people did when they wanted the world to stop freaking them out.

“Want a hand?” she asked, and he allowed it.

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"I fucking hate this shit," Dean said, loudly, above the wind and some emo-wailing college band that Sam had found on the radio.

"Want me to quote chapter and verse on shotgun and cakeholes?" Sam didn't look. "You could hang your head out the window if it makes you happier."

Dean squinted at him. "Pardon me?"

Sam kept solemn on his face for awhile. "We could go to the park, throw a Frisbee around..." Lifted his fingers from the wheel, sheer willpower keeping the smile from breaking through. "It'd be interesting, with your hand out of commission, maybe you'd find a new way to catch it." His teeth clicked together suggestively.

A moment, not looking, just feeling the simmer from the passenger seat. Payback's a bitch, Dean.

"You should stop mumbling, Sam. I just can't hear you," Dean said loudly, above the wind and big bright piano. Sam reached over, turned down the radio a little. But it wasn't a capitulation, not at all.

"You're not a dog, Dean." He said it seriously, meant for it to be taken seriously. Glanced over, watched as Dean kept very still.

"Shit," Dean said after a minute. "I know that. What? You think I'm going to start eating leftovers from garbage cans? Chase around a few squirrels?"

Maybe he remembered, and maybe he didn't, but that was as close as Dean was going to get to it, and Sam knew it.

"That's not what I meant," he tried again after a few minutes.

"Sure it's what you meant," Dean reiterated, because if that's what it was, Dean could manage the dog jokes. But if they were going to bring up anything about their father and about how he was, how he'd been – well, that wasn't going to happen. Dean didn't have to say it.

Unwritten rule: No soul-oozing. Addendum: Unless you were possessed by a dog.

"Wonder what it was like for them, in 1860, just before it all started," Sam mused, more to circumvent Dean trying to find a classic rock station or, worse yet, discovering that Sam had put the box of cassettes in the trunk. Under a really heavy bag of firearms.

Dean made a noise, not quite a question. But interested. Tell me more so I don't have to ask.

"I mean," Sam continued, sufficiently encouraged. "Did they know it was coming? Did they know it was going to be as bad as it was?"

Some guy moaned about ticking clocks while Sam waited. But Dean was thinking about it, Sam could tell.

Finally, he said, “I don’t think so. Shit like that’s on the horizon – you can’t know the risks, what it might cost you. The Northerners, they all thought it was going to be fucking cake. Was going to be fun, just racing around, cracking a few heads, and then all back to normal. Home again.”

Home again.

Sam considered the road, because it was easy: you stayed on it and you got someplace. But the Antebellum, the period before the war, had quite simply ceased to exist once the first shots had been fired on Fort Sumter. Had set brother against brother. Father against son. You don’t see that kind of shit coming. Cause if you did, you’d take the first train to Mexico.

“You know,” and Sam heard the weary in Dean’s voice, leaden and heavy as atomic water, sleep perhaps not far away. “I never want to see another fucking battlefield as long as I live.”

And although Sam seconded the feeling, those words struck him as strange, because all they seemed to do was look for battlefields, look for war. One day, they’d find it, and Sam wasn’t too sure if he wanted to know what it would look like. He’d always kept his eye on the future before and now the future scared him. He wondered if it scared Dean, if he even planned beyond his next meal, and Sam thought maybe after what they’d been through he’d earned the right to ask.

But Dean was asleep, so Sam just drove.

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a/n: And that’s it, folks. Swear to god, I’ll never have those Winchester boys do Civil War reenactments again. As always, undying thanks goes to the betas, [lemmypie](#) and [jmm0001](#), and also to alleged and [beluga](#) and all the readers who insist that I haven’t bored them to tears. Remember to read Tony Horwitz’s *Confederates in the Attic* – honestly, couldn’t have done it without him, either.