

Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas

Title: Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas

Author: jdsampson aka Cynthia Boris

Rating: PG

Fandom: Supernatural.

Warnings: Spoilers for season 6.

Summary: A few days before Christmas, Dean gets a frantic call from Lisa who claims there's a ghost stalking Ben.

Author's Note: *I wrote this after The Third Man and before Mannequin 3: The Reckoning, so any similarities between this story and that one are purely a fangirl's mind working like a screenwriter. I hope you enjoy this flashback to the Supernatural past.*



Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas

When his phone rang, Dean figured it was Bobby because few people had his cell number and after a full year out of the business, even fewer people called it. He reached for the phone on the nightstand, not taking his eyes off the TV where Grace Kelly had Jimmy Stewart in a lip lock.

“The ultimate Hitchcock blonde,” he muttered.

Sam wasn't watching the movie. He was sitting on the other bed, mirroring Dean's position, back to the headboard but with his laptop open on his thighs. They weren't on a hunt, hadn't been on one in over two weeks, so he wasn't researching. Probably catching up with his so called “friends” on Facebook. Status update: had Chinese chicken salad at Denny's and I have my soul back.

Dean glanced down at the cell as his thumb hit the answer button. The ID registered as the call connected leaving him no time at all to collect himself.

“Hey.” Then for Sam’s benefit he added, “Lisa,” and his voice cracked. “Tell me what’s going on.” Dean started to pace in the small space between the bed and bathroom. Sam, who was still stretched out on the other bed, shot him a questioning glance but all he could do was shrug in answer.

“I’m sorry to call you. Are you driving or. . . you know. . . “

“It’s fine,” Dean said softly unable to get any more volume around the lump in his throat. “We’re just watchin’ a movie. It’s been quiet.” Then it hit him, the only reason she’d be calling. He pushed up to his feet, adrenaline wiping out the ache he’d felt at hearing her voice again. “Something’s wrong. What happened?”

“It’s probably nothing,” she said but he could tell she didn’t mean it. “It’s just. . . with everything. . . a couple of years ago I would have been sure it was just a bad dream.” She was getting breathless now as the tension rose in her voice.

“It started last week. Ben told me that he saw this man watching him when he came out of school. Then he saw him again when he was skateboarding with some friends but when he mentioned it, the other kids said they didn’t see the man and when he looked again, the guy was gone. Just like that.”

“Okay,” Dean said evenly.

“I thought it was just him being paranoid, you know, after everything that’s happened but this morning, he told me that he woke up during the night and the man was in his room.”

Dean stopped pacing, but his heart rate thundered on as if he’d just come in from a run.

“He was so scared that he laid there pretending to be asleep and when he got the courage to look again the man was gone. I told him it was just a nightmare, because he was thinking about the man and worrying, and I think he believed it but now he’s afraid to go to sleep and I am, too and I’m trying so hard not to let him see how scared I am, but Dean, I am. I’m so scared. I’m sorry to bother you with this but I didn’t know what else to do.”

“Hey, hey,” he soothed. “You did the right thing, okay? It doesn’t matter what’s going on on my end, I’m always here for you, honey, always.” He started to pace again. “Look, it’s probably exactly what you said, a nightmare but we’ll come check it out anyway. If we hit the road tonight, we should be there late tomorrow. In the meantime, you should do a couple of things, as a precaution.”

“Sure. Okay.”

“The symbols I painted on the floor, under the rugs in front of the front and back door. Are they still there?”

“I guess. I haven’t looked at them.”

“Check them, carefully. They have to be completely intact. If the paint is chipped, you need to fix it. Spray paint or use a brush but the circle can’t be broken at all. Then get some rock salt and pour it on all the window sills and around the doors and in front of the fireplace, too. Anywhere something could come in. “

Dean took a breath as he met Sam’s eyes. Now that he had his soul back there was genuine concern there. “I’ll start packing,” he mouthed / whispered and Dean nodded for him to go ahead.

“Lisa. Do you still have the gun I gave you?”

“Yes.”

He could hear the tears creeping into her voice.

“Load it and keep it with you but honestly, I don’t think you’ll need it.”

“No?”

“No. Worst case scenario, if Ben really did see this guy in his room, then whatever it was had an opportunity to hurt him and it didn’t. So maybe it’s a spirit trying to make contact. Did anyone around you die recently? A relative or neighbor?”

“No. No one. But ghost, yeah, that fits with everything he said. The way the guy kept disappearing and reappearing and how the other kids couldn’t see him.” She sounded like she was reassured by this idea and that proved how really jacked up their lives were. Other people would freak at the notion of a ghost in the house, but here it was the lesser of the evils. Literally.

“I really don’t think it’s anything to worry about but better safe than sorry. The traps and the salt should keep anything evil from entering the house. So stay inside if you can and stick together. I’ll check in with you from the road, or you call me. As often as you need to, okay?”

There was silence on her end.

“Okay?” Dean repeated.

“Yes.” Another pause. “I can’t believe I’m. . . “ She didn’t finish but she didn’t have to. He knew where she was going. ‘I can’t believe I’m going to let you back in the house.’ ‘I can’t believe I’m trusting you again.’

“Tell Ben not to worry. We’ll be there soon.”

“I will. Bye.” She disconnected the call.

Dean slumped back down to sitting on the bed, all the positive feelings he'd had over the last two weeks completely sucked out of him.

Sam came out of the bathroom with both of their shaving kits. "What's going on?" He asked as he packed the kits in an open duffel.

Dean repeated the story Lisa had told him after which Sam said, "do you really think it's nothing or did you just say that to calm her down?"

"I think it's something, but not necessarily a dangerous something. A demon wouldn't have left him alive to tell the story."

"Unless that was the plan."

"The plan?" Dean repeated.

"She called you and we're coming."

"You think this is some set up to get to us?"

"Could be." Sam zipped up the duffel then threw it at Dean who deflected it rather than catch it.

"Since when are we so hard to find that we have to be lured into a trap?"

"Maybe it's not so much about getting us there as having leverage."

"Meaning Lisa and Ben." Dean growled as he stood up. "I never should have gone to them, involved them. I knew it would turn out bad. I knew it because it always does. We don't get to be happy. I've come to terms with that, but now I've screwed their lives up, too."

Sam frowned then turned his back under the guise of double checking the motel room closet.

"What?" Dean demanded, already knowing where this was going.

"It's not your fault. It's mine. The trouble started because I came back. Before that, you were living the apple pie life."

"Well, not exactly—"

"I saw you, Dean!" Sam slammed the closet door then whirled around, a new fire in his eyes. "I saw you with Ben playing football on the lawn, that go-cart you built, the barbeques. . ."

"You saw all of that, really? Football was around Thanksgiving. The go-cart was in the spring. The barbeques in the summer. You saw all of that?" Dean bent down to pick up the packed duffel from the floor. "So, you weren't just back for a full year, you were actually stalking me. You were close enough to see me and still you let me think you were rotting in hell?"

“We’ve already gone over this.” Sam went back to his bed to shut down the laptop.

“Yeah, but the last time we talked about it, you didn’t have a soul, so you didn’t give a damn.”

“You looked happy. You had a woman who loved you, a son, a home. A life. Even if I’d had my soul back then, I wouldn’t have messed with that. If I’d had my soul, I would have stayed away. I pulled you back in because I didn’t have a soul, because I didn’t understand what you’d be giving up. It’s my fault that Lisa’s living in fear. Not just because I took you away but because of the whole vampire thing.”

Now that, Dean hadn’t seen coming.

“It’s not like I don’t remember what happened, Dean. I remember watching that vampire attack you. I remember thinking, this is a good thing. This is what we need. And then what happened? What happened when you went back to see Lisa after that? What did you do that scared her enough to push you out of her life?”

“I told you.”

“Not really and if we’re going back there, I need to know.”

Dean sighed as he dragged a hand over his face. “I was on the verge of turning and everything was heightened to the point where it was . . . painful. I wanted her so badly but after a few minutes I realized that if I took her, I’d hurt her, so I ran and Ben got in the way and I shoved him. I didn’t realize how strong I was and it freaked him and freaked her.” Dean reached for the whiskey bottle that he thought was on the nightstand before realizing that he’d finished it the night before. “It was because of Ben. I think if it was just her, she would have given me another chance.”

“She is giving you another chance.”

“Because she’s desperate, not because she trusts me or wants me back.”

“But it’s a chance and she’ll see that you’re fine and I’m better and. . .” Sam shoved the laptop into its case then slung the strap over his shoulder. “I only ever wanted you to be happy,” he mumbled.

“Which would be reasonable if we weren’t Winchester.” Dean turned off the TV, grabbed the duffel then followed Sam out of the room.

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It was after 9:00 at night when they turned into the neighborhood and every house on the block, except Lisa’s was a glow with a cacophony of holiday lights, inflatable roof creatures and lawn ornaments.

“Well, that sucks,” Dean said as he steered the Impala into the snow-dusted driveway. “As soon as we kill whatever this thing is, we’re putting up lights.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Way to prioritize.”

They climbed out of the car simultaneously and at the same time the front door flew open and Ben came barreling out of the house. He ran across the lawn heading straight for Dean but pulled up short at the last second. The sudden shift in the slushy snow sent his feet out from under him but Dean caught him by the arm before he toppled then turned the move into a half hug. He wanted to pull the boy closer, to lock him up in a suffocating embrace as his dad had done when they’d met up after all those agonizing months apart. Wanted to but didn’t.

“Thanks for coming,” Ben mumbled as he stepped back and squared his shoulders. He looked two inches taller and ten years wiser, puberty and knowing the truth about the darkness changing him from a boy to a man before Dean’s very eyes.

“Anytime, buddy. You need me. You call. I’ll be here as fast as I can.” Dean didn’t stop himself from giving the boy’s hair a toss. Then he saw Lisa in the doorway. She had her arms folded over her chest and even at this distance he could see the frown on her face. Not the welcome he had hoped for, but given the terms of his last visit. . .

“Hey, Ben,” said Sam. “Can you help me with the bags?”

“Sure,” the boy replied eagerly, obviously just as interested in avoiding this meeting as Sam was.

Leaving them to it, Dean walked up the path to the porch. As soon as he hit the first step, Lisa went inside and out of view. He followed, took a moment to stamp the wet off his boots, then lifted the area rug to check the symbol underneath. Part of the symbol was darker red than the rest indicating that it had been freshly painted.

“Just like you instructed.” Clipped and cold.

Dean replaced the rug then turned slowly to face her. She was in the living room, just standing there, arms still crossed, stoic expression darkening her eyes and flattening her lips. He’d seen that look plenty of times in their first few months together. Every time she’d caught him with a bottle or loading a gun. Every time he talked about leaving or trying to find a way to save Sam. Always with that face. That, I want to love you but you’re making it so hard, face.

“I know you don’t really want me here –“

“That’s not true!” She blurted out and he heard the pain in her voice. “I’ve always wanted you here, Dean. Since that day you showed up on my doorstep, I’ve wanted you here, in my life and Ben’s life and that’s why I was willing to step aside and let you go. . . which, makes no sense whatsoever, I know, but it’s the truth. And then you came here that night with whatever the heck was going on with you and you scared me to death. Dean, you scared me so much that I’m not

sure . . . “ Her words dissolved into a shrug and then a swing of her arms and a flip of her hair and he could tell that she was fighting to keep from crying.

“I’m so sorry, Lisa.” Good idea or not, he closed the gap between them and pulled her into his arms. He held her tight, not in the suffocating embrace he wanted for Ben, but gentle and fluid. His cheek to her temple, his hands caressing her back. He could feel bones. She’d lost weight and not in a healthy way. “I wish I hadn’t come here that night but I did and I know you can’t just forget—“

“But I want to forget, Dean.” Lisa leaned back so she could look up at him. “I want to forget everything except those last few months before your brother came back. I know they weren’t the happiest for you, but we were getting there. We were a family. For the first time in his life, Ben had a father he could look up to and trust but you threw it all away.” She wiggled out of his embrace then kept stepping back until there were a couple of arm’s lengths between them. “I so didn’t want to start this again,” she muttered, gaze dropping to the floor. “I shouldn’t have called you.”

The heavy stomp of boots on the floor made Dean turn around. Sam was there with Ben, both carrying large duffel bags.

“Why don’t you just leave those by the door for now,” Dean said after searching for a moment to find his voice.

Lisa whizzed past on her way to the kitchen. “I’ll put some coffee on and there’s leftover lasagna if you’re hungry.” She didn’t wait for a response.

Sam filled the awkward silence that followed. “Ben, why don’t we sit down and talk about what’s been going on.” He motioned for the boy to precede him into the living room.

Hunter mode. Dean was good with that.

Ben and Sam sat down on the couch, so Dean took the large chair across from them. It was his spot. The chair he sat in when they were watching TV or playing video games. Ben always beat him at the racing games, but Dean was the master at Donkey Kong and Super Mario. Would have been a champ at Call of Duty, but Lisa had banned the game the first time she saw Ben gleefully blow away an on-screen zombie.

Welcome to my world.

“Tell us about the man you’ve been seeing,” said Sam. “What did he look like?”

“He was old but not real old. Not like a grandpop. He was kinda bald and a full mustache, beard kind of thing. The beard was thin and a little pointy at the bottom.”

“He was solid?” Dean asked. “Or could you see through him, even a little?”

“No, he was solid. A real person, except that my friends couldn’t see him. Only me.”

“You were able to look right at him at the same time they said they couldn’t see him,” Sam clarified.

“Yeah, but only for a second. If I blinked or turned my head, he’d disappear.”

“And you saw him a couple of times,” Dean continued.

“First around school and then at the skate park and then in my room the other night.” At that mention, Ben’s chin began to tremble as he, like his mother earlier, tried to hold back the tears.

“It’s okay.” Dean moved to the couch nudging the boy over a cushion to make room. “We’re here now. He’s not going to get to you.”

“But what does he want? Why is he watching me?”

“He hasn’t spoken to you? Not even when he was in your room?”

“No. He just watches and it’s like he’s not happy. Not in a mad way, just not happy.”

Lisa came in with coffee and cookies on a tray. She set it on the coffee table then took the seat Dean had vacated.

“I told him what you said, about how he hasn’t tried to hurt him, so it’s probably just a ghost that’s latched on to him.”

“But I don’t want a ghost following me around,” Ben said as if he were complaining about a tagalong little brother. “You gotta make it stop.”

“We will. We just need to figure out who he is and what he wants,” said Dean. “In the meantime, you have to do what you normally do and if you see him again, you let me know.”

Ben shivered. “What I normally do? You mean I have to sleep in my room?”

“He stayed with me last night,” said Lisa.

Dean gripped the boy by the back of the neck and held him still, so he could look him straight in the eye. “I’ll stay in your room with you. I’ll bunk on the floor right by your bed, so if he shows up, I’ll be there.”

“What if he takes me? What if you’re asleep and he takes me like. . . what happened before.”

The changling mother. She had kidnapped Ben from his bedroom along with a half dozen other kids from the neighborhood shortly after Ben’s eighth birthday. Coincidentally, Dean had chosen that weekend to visit Lisa for the first time in so many years and though it seemed unlikely, he’d

always wondered if one thing had something to do with the other. In the year they had lived together, Ben had never once mentioned the incident in Dean's presence, so he was surprised to hear it come up now.

"Nothing is going to get to you, Ben. Not while I'm here. Sam and I will sleep in shifts so one of us will always be awake and watching. Okay?"

Ben nodded.

"Okay. Now. . . " Dean got up and went around the coffee table to the TV. He stooped to open the doors below the set to reveal a whole collection of video games. "Your pick. We play for one hour then up to bed."

"Need for Speed," said Ben and for the next hour they both pretended that life was normal.

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After beating Dean two games to one, Ben tried to wheedle him into going again. A chance to even the score, he said, but Dean wasn't having it.

"To bed. We've got a big day tomorrow. We're going to light this place up like Chevy Chase in Christmas Vacation."

"Huh?"

"Seriously?" Dean collected up the game controllers and shut down the unit. "Sounds like we're hitting Netflix, too. Your movie education is totally lacking." When he turned back around, Ben had crawled into the corner of the couch with a pillow in his lap and a look of pure dread on his face. "Hey. There's nothing to be afraid of. Whatever this thing is, I'm sure he's not here to hurt you. We just need to find a way to communicate with him, right?" Gently, he pried the pillow from Ben's lap then nudged him up with a push to the back of his head. "Come on. I'm beat."

"Sam's going to stay up?" Ben asked.

Sam, who had some time ago moved to the floor with his laptop looked up at the sound of his name. "I'll make the rounds every hour."

"Okay," Ben said begrudgingly. Dragging his feet, he went upstairs to his room with Dean right behind. Lisa was already there setting up an inflatable mattress beside the twin bed.

"I know this isn't the most comfortable place to sleep but it beats a blanket on the floor," she said as she unfurled a thin quilt over the works.

"I've slept in worse places." Dean meant it as a joke, but it brought a frown, not a smile to her lips.

“I guess you have,” she said softly. That done, she went to the dresser and pulled out pajamas for Ben. “You can skip the bath but wash up and brush your teeth. No skimping.” She tossed the clothes to him then he headed for the bathroom across the hall. Once he was gone, she glanced around the room looking for any place to put her eyes but on Dean. “Is there anything else you need?”

“Lisa—“

“That pillow’s kind of flat but it’s the only spare one I have.”

Which wasn’t true because there were two perfectly good, very new pillows on the bed they used to share.

“Lisa. I don’t want it to be like this. This tension. Can we just let it go until we solve this problem then I’ll be out of your way again.”

She tossed her head and for a moment her eyes raked over his body. “I don’t. . . you’re not in my way. It’s just. . . “

“What?” He closed the gap between them and had her in his arms before either of them could think too much about it.

“It’s hurts. Okay. I don’t know how else to say it but you’re ripping me up inside and I can’t —“ She stopped at the sound of the water going off in the bathroom. “It’s all very confusing for Ben. He can’t see us together like this. I don’t want him to think everything is fine because it’s not fine, Dean. It’s not. And I’m sorry.” She pulled away from him and made a dash for her own room before Ben could step out into the hall and see her crying.

Up to Dean to keep up the appearance, but truthfully, he was hurting, too. He hadn’t figured on how hard it would be to be back in this house, to be this close to Lisa and not be able to slide next to her in bed.

Hunter mode. That was his only saving grace.

With his mind firmly on the case at hand, Dean unloaded a few items from his duffel. The rock salt sawed-off went under the bed where he could easily retrieve it from his lower spot on the inflatable mattress. Next, he fired up the EMF detector and that was when Ben came back into the room.

“What’s that?”

It went against everything Dean had ever promised himself, but he explained about the meter anyway. Told himself it was all about making Ben feel safe. This way, if a spirit did show up while they were sleeping, the noise of the EMF detector would wake Dean instantly and yes, he was sure.

Ben climbed into bed but instead of closing his eyes, he laid on his back staring straight up.

“Gonna have to do better than that,” said Dean as he stripped down to his boxers and t-shirt. He was going to keep his jeans on but thought that would look too much like he was expecting trouble. With everything set, Dean gave Ben one more reassuring smile, then shut off the light on the bedside table. The darkness that followed wasn’t complete as a bright moon was shining just outside the window. The perfect nightlight.

Dean lay down on the mattress which crunched and whined until he settled; got the blanket pulled up to his chin then realized it was damned cold. There was a draft blowing across the floor and he couldn’t help but think about the soft, warm bed next door. He closed his eyes and his mind drifted to the last time he and Lisa had sex. It had started out a little frantic as he was still reeling from the whole ‘Sam’s back’ and the ‘djinn’ are after us thing. But after a few minutes, she had calmed him. She had that ability. Pulling him back so it was slow and intense — more about making love than having sex.

The thought warmed him and comforted him until he realized that he might be remembering the last time they’d ever be together. That was the thought that stayed with him as he fell into a light sleep.

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With Ben and Dean gone, Sam relocated himself back to the couch, the laptop open on the coffee table in front of him. He’d spent most of the last hour searching for signs of paranormal activity in the area but came up empty. No strange weather patterns. No unusual deaths. Boring town didn’t even have a local ghost legend.

After that, he’d moved on to CNN, a couple of tech blogs and finally Amazon. It was nice to flip through the new DVDs and CDs and dream about what he’d buy if they were a normal family.

Three years ago, they’d had a gas station Christmas which Sam had thrown together after Dean practically begged him to imbibe in some holiday cheer. After all, they expected it to be Dean’s last Christmas ever, but that didn’t turn out to be true. Last year they’d been a little too involved in averting the apocalypse to celebrate. But now, things were looking up. Sam had his soul back, Crowley was out of the picture and the only remaining loose end was Dean’s relationship with Lisa. Even 24: The Complete Series wasn’t going to be enough of a consolation prize if that didn’t work out. But there was that other thing. Something Sam had been carrying around with him since he’d had a chance to retrieve it from its hiding place in the Impala. In the event of his own death at the hands of Lucifer, he’d put it somewhere Dean would find it, but after moving in with Lisa, Dean had pretty much abandoned the car he loved so much and with it the secret surprise.

Maybe now though. . .

Sam shifted at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. It was Lisa. She was carrying a blanket and a thick pillow.

“I wasn’t sure if you were going sleep down here or stay up or what. . . “ She set the bundle on the arm of the couch.

“Thanks. I’m going to stay up for a while, but I’ll probably sleep here later when Dean gets up.”

“Well, it gets cold down here because if I turn the heater up it gets way too hot upstairs so I have to . . . keep it low. . you know. . save energy. So, I’m going to bed and Dean and Ben are already in their room so. . . good night.”

“For what it’s worth,” said Sam. “Sometimes I wish I hadn’t come back, too.”

He caught her off guard with that, then she blushed, obviously realizing he’d heard her earlier comments.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I know what you meant. And I get it. Dean was finally settling down and I screwed that up. It wasn’t my intention. I managed to stay clear of him for almost a year but when I saw he was in danger—“

“Wait? A year?”

“Yeah. I actually came back not long after Dean moved in here. I came that first day to tell him, but I saw him with you and Ben and I couldn’t. . . which would be really funny if you knew the whole story.”

“You could have ended this right then and there? You could have taken him out of here before my son got attached? Before my son let himself believe he’d always have a father to look up to?” Her fingers knotted in the pillow by her hand, squeezing it until the fabric bubbled up between her knuckles. “Before I fell so in love that I was physically sick when he left us for you? And what? I’m supposed to thank you for that?”

“I didn’t know what would happen later. I didn’t know that something would come for him.”

“You should have known!” And somehow she managed to shout it without actually raising her voice. “Just like you should have known that he’d choose you over us in a second!”

“No. He didn’t choose me over you. He chose hunting over being a father and husband, because it’s what he knows. It’s where he’s comfortable. You talk about Ben having a role model; well our role model didn’t teach us how to be a dad or a husband. He taught us how to be good hunters. That’s it. That’s all that ever matter to him, that we knew how to shoot straight and vanquish a ghost and track the kinds of monsters that other people only saw in their nightmares. That’s how we were raised. Sleeping in the car, stealing food, conning people for change. All the nights that we went to bed as kids, wondering if our father was ever coming back. And you think Dean and I are unnaturally attached to each other? “ Sam pushed up to his feet and took a breath, knew he should reign himself in but couldn’t – didn’t want to. “Ben doesn’t know how good he’s

got it. I would bet you that he got more love and attention in the past year from Dean than he and I got in a lifetime from our father. Ben's lucky. Damned lucky."

She was crying now and he was glad. So much for having a soul back.

"Dean loves you both so much and you have no idea how hard that it is for him, to let himself love like that. I know you're scared, and I know it sucks when he's gone, but he needs a home to come back to. He's earned it, and it's not right to punish him for my screw-ups."

"Punish him?" Lisa could barely choke the words out. "Let me tell you something. That first week after you disappeared, I thought I was going to come home from work and find him hanging from the ceiling fan. He did nothing but drink and cry and pound on the bricks of the house until his hands were bleeding. And when he was finally too exhausted to fight it anymore, he'd fall asleep and have nightmares so bad, the neighbors called the cops once because they thought someone was being murdered in our bedroom. My son was terrified, but I still didn't kick him out. I held him, and I rocked him and in the morning I cooked for him while Ben made idle conversation so we could feel normal. And even after that passed, he still drank too much, kept loaded guns all over the house, beat himself up constantly over his inability to be a good husband and father." She wasn't choking the words out now, now she was strengthened by her own fire. "You can blame that on your father if it makes you feel better, but it wasn't the lack of a role model that made him bad at it. It was fear. He was afraid to be normal, Sam. Afraid he might learn to love it or afraid that he'd hate it, I'm not sure which. But he was afraid. From the moment he turned up on my doorstep to the moment he saw you again – he was afraid and trying hard not to let it show. That's exhausting, even for the likes of Dean Winchester."

Beaten back by her unexpected response, Sam was at a loss for words. Lisa took a breath, dragged her hands through her hair then fully turned to face him. Obviously, she wasn't done.

"All I've ever wanted was for Dean to be happy and if that means he has to go back to hunting with you, then so be it. I was ready to accept that, and I told him so. "

Sam laughed softly. "That's all I want for him, too. For him to be happy, even if it means giving up hunting so he can be with you."

Lisa shook her head as a flat smile crossed her lips. "Dean's a lucky fellow, to have two people who love him so much, they're both willing to give him up. Good night, Sam."

"Good night."

* * *

The ghost was a no-show. Because of that, Ben slept through the night and Dean managed a few hours before Sam woke him shortly after dawn. Dean dressed quietly then went down to the kitchen to make coffee. As he gathered the items he needed from the cupboard, he realized how easily he'd slid back into the routine. It was like he'd never left, but then, he hadn't been away

that long. It just felt like it with Lisa avoiding his calls. At this point, he wasn't sure where they stood. Sure, she'd let him back in the house but that was for a specific purpose. Once they bagged the bad guy, would he be cast out and cut off? Surely not. Surely, she could see the change in him. He was better now, back in control with the brother he trusted at his side. He knew there was a chance that that could change again. That Death's wall could slip allowing the nightmare of the box to drive Sam mad. But that was for another day. Today was about making this the kind of holiday he has always wished for as a boy. Starting with lights! Kind of silly, seeing as Christmas was only a day away, but he and Ben had gone all out last year and he wanted that again. That ridiculously mundane chore that he'd never been able to do with his own father.

The lights were in the garage, inside a red and green storage box along with wreathes and window candles and other holiday geegaws. As soon as his mug was filled with steaming coffee, he braved the cold and went out to find them. Yes. This was going to be the best Christmas ever because this year, Sam was here, too.

Dean was back in the kitchen untangling and testing the lights when Lisa came down. She was dressed in jeans and a holiday sweater and for a moment it was just like the 300 plus other mornings they had shared over the past year.

"What's all this?" She asked as she helped herself to the brewed coffee.

"Ben and I are going to decorate the house."

"But it's Christmas Eve so you'll just have to pull them all down again in day or two."

"But it's what you do at Christmas," Dean said, undaunted. String number two, check.

"I put up the tree in the living room."

"It's plastic," said Dean. "And it's small."

"It's the same tree Ben and I have had since he was born. It's tradition."

"But last year, we bought a real tree."

"Well, you weren't here this year to help me lug in a real tree, so plastic it is. Anyway, Ben likes it. It's what he's used to."

Even though they were arguing, Dean felt the shift. This was normal husband and wife banter, not the 'you scare me to death' fighting of last night. Step in the right direction.

"I take it the man didn't show up last night?" Lisa asked as she began gathering the ingredients of a nutritious breakfast.

“Nope. All quiet.”

“What if it stays that way?”

Which was code for, how long are you going to stick around if this creature doesn't show and soon?

“Ben saw this guy three times in a week? He'll pop up again.”

“Not sure if I should be comforted or freaked out by that thought.”

Dean chose not to respond either way.

“I was thinking, “ Lisa said as she scrambled eggs. “Since you're going to be here, I thought I'd go out and finish my Christmas shopping. Would that be okay?”

Wasn't like he hadn't stayed home with Ben a hundred other times before, but there was that trust issue, so he could hardly quibble with the concern in her voice. “We'll be fine. You shop. We'll deck the halls and with a little luck, do some ghost busting while we're at it.”

Lisa shook her head and made a huffing noise as she divided the eggs on to two plates. “Still surprises me, how you can be so cavalier about this stuff.” She put one plate on the kitchen island then pushed it toward Dean. She ate her own eggs standing up, hips braced against the counter.

“Well, like I said. I don't think this guy's dangerous. So, no reason to dampen the holiday spirit.”

Lisa's eyebrows dipped but the frown didn't reach her lips. “I guess.” She finished her eggs then put the plate and fork in the sink. “I'm going to head out. Will you make sure Ben eats a decent breakfast?”

“Eggs, toast, juice and milk.”

“And.. . please be careful hanging the lights. He thinks he's more coordinated than he is and I don't need an emergency room visit on top of everything else.”

“We'll be careful.”

“Now you're just patronizing me.”

“No. I'm trying to reassure you. I know. . . .” Don't go there. “Keeping Ben safe is my number one priority. Supernatural or earthly – either way.”

The ticking holiday clock won out over mother's instinct and five minutes later Lisa was out the door and gone. As much as Dean hated to admit it, he was glad. Without her giving him the evil

eye, the tension level in the house dropped to zero which meant he could do his job and still have fun with Ben at the same time. Imagine that. Hunting and family. Maybe it was possible?

They started with the lights around the roof overhang. Dean climbed the ladder, Ben fed out the string of lights and Sam worked on getting it all electrified. By noon, the sun lost its battle with the clouds and a cold, wet wind drove them in doors for a soup and grilled cheese break.

Dean cooked as Ben filled him in on the latest news which included a science teacher fired for accidentally setting a classroom on fire, a skatepark that was about to get a new half pipe and a red-headed glee club star who told her friend, who told her friend, who told him, that the red-head thought he was cute.

“What do you think about her?” Dean asked as he flipped a golden-brown sandwich on to a plate.

“She’s okay. I mean. She’s pretty and all, but she’s so controlling. Always has to be the center of attention and I’m just not in to that.”

“I hear ya.” He delivered the next grilled cheese to Sam who smirked at him. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit. You’re dying to make a comment, like calling me Rachael Ray or some crack about how I’m getting an apron for Christmas.”

“No, really. No cracks. Seriously. It’s nice. It reminds me of the old days.” Sam leaned sideways and shoulder bumped Ben who was sitting next to him at the kitchen counter. “Dean used to cook for us all the time when we were kids because our dad was gone a lot. Spaghetti’s were a favorite until he learned how to make the box Mac and Cheese. Chicken and Stars soup with tons of Saltine crackers and . . .” Sam picked up his sandwich. “Grilled cheese. Sometimes we stayed in motels without kitchens, so Dean figured out how he could make a grilled cheese using an iron, right? It’s heavy and hot, kind of like a Panini maker, only he didn’t wrap the sandwich first, so the cheese squirted out and got all over the iron.”

“Which wouldn’t have been a big deal except that the next morning Dad tried to iron his shirt.”

“Oh yuck,” said Ben. “Did you get in trouble?”

“Oh yeah,” said Sam. “He made Dean iron every piece of clothing we owned including our socks and underwear.”

“The upside was discovering how nice freshly ironed sock felt on your feet when it was 10 below outside.”

“Freshly ironed undershorts,” said Sam, “Not so much.”

Ben laughed around a mouth full of food and it hit Dean hard. Seeing Ben and Sam side-by-side, he hadn't realized how much his relationship with Ben resembled the one he and Sam had shared when they were younger. Dean as the caretaker. The teacher. The constant source of fun and entertainment. He missed it. A lot.

"Enough yakking," Dean pushed out, hoping to sound stern instead of upset. "Eat. We've got to do the upper roof before your mother gets home."

"Totally," said Ben. "She'll have a cow if she sees me up there."

"That's why we're going to be extremely careful and not fall off because if you slip and break your arm, she'll break mine," said Dean then he began chowing down on his own sandwich.

"She can do it, too. She may look scrawny but when she's mad, she can snap the lid off a pickle jar."

And for some reason, they all three found that hysterically funny.

#

After lunch, they moved upstairs to string lights around the upper part of the house. Dean removed the screen from the window in Ben's room then used a broom to clear the slush away from a section of the roof. He and Sam then climbed out, but Dean insisted Ben stay in, much to the boy's dismay.

"Not you, too," Ben complained.

"Me, too, what?"

"Treating me like I'm five."

"I'm not treating you like you're five. I just need you to feed me the lights so they don't bang against the house and break." Which was only partially bull, so Dean didn't feel so bad.

They got to work, nailing the string around the roof line, then a second set around the bedroom window. The wind was really whipping up and Dean felt the cold piercing his clothes and sinking in to the bone.

"Freaking cold," Sam said, voicing his brother's thoughts, then he cupped his gloved hands around his nose and mouth and warmed himself with his own breath. "Let's get this done."

"Last touch. Ben, give me that wreath."

The boy disappeared for a moment then came back with a 12-inch round of plastic pine boughs and pinecones. He stuck one foot out the window so he could hand Dean the wreath but before they made the connection his eyes grew wide and he shouted, "behind you!"

Dean whirled and the man was there – right there – well inside the personal space limit and it startled him into stepping back. His boot landed on the hammer he'd been using to nail up the lights and that was all it took to throw off his balance. The slushy-wet roof did the rest. With his feet sliding out from under him, Dean's arms pinwheeled backwards and he felt hands grabbing hold of his wrist and jacket. Sam and Ben. But Sam was twisted at an awkward angle, because he had to grab the window frame with his other hand to keep from sliding off the roof himself.

Dean struggled to get control of his own body, but the slush and the slope kept working against him.

“Stop fighting,” Ben snapped. “Let me pull you up.”

The boy got both hands on Dean's collar and yanked causing the shirt to ride up under his arms exposing his flesh to the elements.

Sam was struggling, too. His face was red and he was flopping like a fish on the deck. “I can't hold you. My arm –“

“Let go,” said Ben. “I've got him.”

True or not, trust wasn't something that came easily to the Winchesters so Sam gave it one more try and ended up cursing in pain. He let go of Dean, which allowed him to untwist his body, relieving the strain on the arm that was holding him up.

“Hang on, Sam,” Ben said, then he put everything he had into pulling Dean up far enough so he could grab hold of the window frame. From there, Dean was able to haul himself in through the open window then he and Ben both latched on to Sam and pulled him in, too.

Sam came through head first then continued straight down to the bedroom floor where he lay panting with the exertion and pain. The man was there, standing beside Sam, looking down at him with a frown on his face.

“Oops,” said the spirit.

“Oops?” Dean repeated, as if he hadn't heard right.

The man vanished again, leaving all of them dazed and confused.

###

“Now that we know what he looks like, we should hit the newspaper archives at the library.” Sam rotated his shoulder for the hundredth time and for the hundredth time it brought a grimace of pain.

“Forget this we, stuff,” said Dean. “You need to fix that shoulder. Advil, some Bengay and relax. I can do the research.”

Sam pulled a face. “You are offering to do research?”

Ben came into the living room with a collection of bottles and tubes in his hands. “This is what we’ve got, but some of it’s been around a long time so I’m not so sure I’d use it.”

Dean checked the dates on a bottle of pain killers and found it was more than two years old. Not that he hadn’t made do with worse than this but those were under extreme conditions. This was far from extreme. “Toss that stuff. I’ll stop at the drug store after the library and if you behave yourself, I might bring you a coloring book and crayons.”

“Transformers, please,” said Sam as he snuggled down under a blanket on the couch. “None of that cutesy Disney stuff.”

Dean rolled his eyes and Ben laughed.

To Ben, Dean said, “do you think you can manage him while I’m gone? I’m not sure when your mom will be back and he’s a handful when he’s sick.”

“Hey, I saved your ass.”

Look from Dean.

“Butt. I saved your butt. If I hadn’t caught you, you’d both be laying here with broken legs or worse.”

“Totally true.” Dean gave the boy’s hair a toss. “Thanks, kiddo.”

“Now we’re even,” said Ben, all humor gone from his voice.

“Yeah. We are.” Dean turned the toss into a hug and he didn’t care who saw him or if Ben liked it or not. “I’m going to get going. You have my cell phone number, right? Anything happens, you call me.”

Now it was Sam’s turn to whine. “I just wrenched my shoulder. I think I can handle anything that might come up.”

Dean ignored his brother but winked at Ben. “Anything. Call me.” He whispered, and Ben nodded to say he would.

###

Content.

It wasn’t a word Sam often contemplated, but there it was, the perfect description for how he felt at the moment. Curled up on the couch under a soft blanket, snow falling outside, Christmas tree twinkling with lights and “It’s a Wonderful Life” on the TV. Sure there was a spirit to hunt, but

other than the startle factor, there was no real reason to rush the job, so content was here to stay, at least until morning.

He thought it couldn't get better until Ben handed him a cup of steaming cocoa with mini marshmallows floating on the top.

"Thanks."

"I didn't know if you liked hot chocolate, but then I thought, who doesn't." He set his own mug on the coffee table then flopped down in 'Dean's' chair. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Were you really dead?"

Sam had to think about that for a second. "I don't suppose I was. More like someplace in between life and death."

"Was it bad?"

"Probably. But I don't remember," Sam said truthfully.

"Dean really missed you. I was kinda afraid for him. You know?"

"I know." Sam shifted so he could look at the boy. "And I wanted to thank you and your mom for helping him get through it. I know it wasn't easy for any of you, but you worked it out."

Ben picked up his mug but instead of drinking he held it to his face and let the steam wash over him. "I didn't think he'd stay. I thought he'd go back to hunting and maybe someday, I'd go with him. I'm not you, but at least he wouldn't be alone. You guys weren't much older than me when you started hunting, right?"

"That's different," said Sam, seeing where this was going. "We didn't have a choice. You do."

"So maybe that's my choice and I don't know why everybody makes it sound like a bad thing. You save people's lives. You're like police officers or doctors. When that woman took me and my friends, I felt like a hero and I only helped a little. You guys found us and killed it but when I was helping those little kids out of that basement, it was like. . . ." He ended with a shrug.

"I know. It's a good feeling but those moments are few and far between. The rest of it is pain and blood and boredom, no friends, no fun and sometimes you have to do things you don't want to do."

"I still think I'd be good at it," Ben insisted.

"What's this?"

Lisa's voice startled the boy to the point of spilling a splash of hot chocolate on himself.

"Mom. I didn't hear you come in."

"I came through the kitchen. There are groceries in the car. Unload them please."

"Okay, but you won't believe what happened."

"It was nothing," Sam said, trying to cut the boy off before he got in too deep.

"The man showed up and Sam and Dean nearly fell off the roof, but I saved them."

"Did you?" Lisa asked, voice as cold as the air outside.

"It wasn't as dramatic as he's making it sound," said Sam.

"It was, too," Ben replied, not realizing that he was only making things worse.

"Groceries," said Lisa and this time Ben followed orders without any added information. Lisa stayed a moment longer. "You're hurt." A statement, not a question.

"Wrenched my shoulder. No big deal. I can help with the groceries."

"No. That's Ben's job. Where's Dean?"

"He went out to do some research and pick up a few things."

Lisa hesitated like she wanted to say one more thing, then left the room without bothering.

"Merry Christmas," Sam muttered then went back to watching TV.

###

Dean was gone for four hours. When he returned, he was laden down with shopping bags which he set down in front of the Christmas tree.

"How'd the research go?" Sam asked.

"It didn't. The library is closed until after New Years. I did go to the drug store."

"For four hours?"

Dean tossed a box and a bottle at Sam and he caught them both awkwardly with his chest and one hand. "I did some Christmas shopping, too." Dean got down on his knees and began unloading gifts from the bags. They were already wrapped, a couple of them neatly but the others looked like he'd done them on his lap in the Impala.

Sam came over to investigate this holiday miracle, but he was having trouble keeping a straight face. “How many gifts did you buy?”

Dean sat back on his heels and surveyed the collection. “Not that many. Considering.”

“Considering?” Sam picked up a small, flat square with his name on it. A CD no doubt. Dean snatched it away.

“Considering, you, Lisa, Ben. I had to get Ben a bunch of things and Lisa, too.” Dean’s eyebrows dipped in question then he took back a long box with a pink ribbon. “Victoria’s Secret. Probably shouldn’t let her open that one in front of Ben.”

“Or me,” said Sam.

“It was damned expensive so I’m hoping she’ll reciprocate with something more. . . physical. Like, she used to do this thing—”

“Dude!”

“What? Like you didn’t know she and I used to have sex?”

“I knew it, but I don’t need to hear about it, okay?” Sam picked up a badly wrapped lump, sure that he has misread the tag at a distance. “You bought a gift for Castiel?”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Dean.”

They both startled and turned and for Sam it was a move that sent a new wave of pain through his shoulder.

The angel stepped closer then laid his hands on the offending joint. “Allow me.” He closed his eyes and a glow of light emanated from his fingers. Ten seconds later he stepped back. “Merry Christmas, Sam.”

Sam rotated his shoulder and found that it was back to normal. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I’m surprised you’re here,” said Dean as he stuffed the now empty bags into one large shopping bag. “I figured you’d be busy seeing as it’s your boss’ son’s birthday and all. I’m guessing the office party is already in full swing?”

“Actually, Jesus was born during the summer by your current calendar. December 25th was merely chosen to appease the Pagans because it fit into their Saturnalia festival which was traditionally celebrated with drunkenness and gifts.”

“Not a fan of Pagans, but drunkenness and gifts work for me.” Dean handed Castiel the badly wrapped, bumpy gift. “Merry Christmas, Cas.”

“I feel rather awkward as I did not bring you a present.”

“You’ve been a good friend. That’s enough for me.”

Lisa came into the room with Ben on her heels but she stopped still at the sight of Castiel. “There he is!” She whispered loudly, in case the others couldn’t actually see him.

“That’s not the man,” said Ben who skirted around his mother and continued into the room. “Look at all the gifts!” He dropped to his knees in front of the tree, way more interested in which packages had his name on them, than the stranger in the room.

“Lisa, Ben. This is Castiel.” Wait for it. “He’s an angel.”

“An angel,” Lisa repeated.

“Cool,” said Ben.

“He’s a little early for Christmas but since he’s here, I figured it would be okay if he opened his gift.”

“Can I open one, too?” asked Ben.

“Sure,” said Dean, then he pointed to a flat rectangle wrapped in blue snowflake paper. Then to Castiel he said, “open.”

Dutifully, Castiel opened the package by carefully removing each strip of tape. When he was done he was left with paper in one hand and an MP3 player in the other. He looked at both items and said, “I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do with this.”

“The trash, I’ll take,” said Lisa.

“It’s an MP3 player,” said Dean. “You use it to listen to music. I thought it would be good for those days where you’re standing on the side of the road . . . waiting. I have to load music on it though. I didn’t have time but if you leave it with me, I’ll fill it up with stuff you might like. Any requests?”

“I’ve heard that many people enjoy this Justin Bieber. “

Ben snickered then cheered as he pulled the wraps off Super Mario Galaxy 2. “Excellent!”

Castiel mimicked Ben’s expression as he waved the MP3 player in the air. “Excellent!”

“Oh!” Lisa gasped. “How about him?” She pointed to a tall, thin man who was now standing in front of the TV.

“That’s him,” Ben confirmed then went back to ripping the shrink wrap off his game.

“Nicholas!” Castiel pocketed the player then threw his arms around the apparition. “It’s been years!”

“213 to be exact. Remember Denmark?”

“I do indeed.” And then Castiel laughed and it sounded vaguely dirty.

“You know this guy,” said Dean. “And he is a . . . “

“Angel.” Castiel turned back to the man. “I’m very surprised to see you. I’d heard you retired.”

“Mostly. But I like to keep my hand in. Special cases, you know.” He nodded toward the group of humans.

“Wait,” said Sam. “Were you a Saint in your former life?”

“One of the best,” said Castiel. “That’s why he was rewarded in his afterlife. He’s a very revered angel, now. You should all feel honored to be in his presence.”

“I’m honored,” said Dean. “Confused but honored.”

Sam laughed. “Dean. He’s Saint Nicholas.”

“Santa Claus?” Lisa’s knees gave out and she landed on the arm of the couch.

“He’s not Santa Claus,” Dean protested. “Santa’s fat and jolly.”

“Actually,” said Castiel. “The image you have of Santa Claus was the work of Thomas Nast. He was a cartoonist in the mid-1800’s and it’s his vision that has been widely accepted, though it’s thought that the variation produced by the Coca-Cola company in the 1930’s went a long way to cementing this image as the one and true image of Santa Claus but given the dietary habits of his original era it makes no sense to me why anyone would ever imagine him to be fat.”

“Enough,” Dean snapped. “Quit harshing my holiday.”

Nicholas laughed and I’ll be damned if it didn’t have a deep ‘ho ho ho’ ring to it.

“Sorry about the roof, boys. I didn’t mean to startle you. Just wanted a good look at the man Ben’s been wishing for.”

“Me?” Ben asked, the game now abandoned.

“All he’s been thinking about for the past two weeks is having you here for Christmas, Dean. Last year was his best Christmas ever and he hated thinking about you and Sam being on the road alone. Christmas is for family – even if it’s not by blood.”

“But I don’t understand,” said Ben, daring to step a little closer. “Why did you keep showing up and disappearing like that? You scared the heck out of me and my mom.”

“It got Dean here, didn’t it? Now what is it they say?” He thought it through a second. “Mission accomplished.”

“Okay.” Lisa stood up, then shook her head sharply as if to shake water out of her ears. “I came in here to say that dinner is ready. I was only planning on serving four but I’m sure I can manage to make it six.”

“Not for me,” said Nicholas. “May not be a holiday for Castiel, but it is for me. Lots of stops to make. A few more families that need a little extra Christmas magic.”

“Well, it was good to see you, Nicholas.” Castiel gave the man a warm pat on the back. “Have a safe journey.”

Then the man was gone.

“I have nowhere to go,” said Castiel.

“Then we’ll set an extra place for dinner.” Dean pulled Lisa into his arms and she didn’t fight it. “Right, honey?”

She leaned closer and whispered. “Does he actually eat?”

“Oh yeah.” Dean turned his head and their lips met.

“Merry Christmas,” said Ben and to that, Sam agreed.

###

Dean came downstairs at quarter after two in the morning. He stood in front of the Christmas tree watching the lights twinkle in the nearly dark room. The other light came from the TV where the State of New York was declaring Kris Kringle to be the one and true Santa Claus.

“Guess we know better.”

“Guess we do,” said Sam.

“You’re awake.” Dean came over to sit in his chair.

“Kind of. I saw a drunken Mrs. Schellhammer saying she’d love to Santa Claus stay with her and then Natalie Wood was writing a letter to him. I think I missed something in between.”

“A little.”

Sam stretched his no-longer aching arm to switch on the table lamp beside the couch. They both blinked for a few seconds as their eyes readjusted to the change then Sam sat up and turned the sound down the TV. “So, did Victoria’s Secret do the trick?”

Dean smiled softly. “Actually, I think it was Castiel.”

“Excuse me?”

“Not like that. They had a talk while he was helping her with the dishes and she wouldn’t tell me exactly what he said, but whatever it was, it changed her mind. She’s not pissed at me or scared. It’s not like it was but it’s better.”

“Sounds like he had a Christmas gift for you after all. And I do, too.” Sam reached under his pillow and pulled out a small, slightly puffy package. “Merry Christmas, brother.”

Dean took it from him, carefully turning it over in his hands as if there might be a clue to the inside on the outside. “You want me to open this now? Why? Is it dirty?”

“No. It’s not dirty. It’s personal.”

Dean pulled a face at that. “Personal, huh?” He ripped off the wrapping and found a fold of tissue underneath. “In case I get a bad cold?”

“Just open it.”

More perplexed than ever, Dean unfolded the tissue, layer by layer until all that was left was a heavy horned-charm on a thin, leather cord. “How did you . . . is this. . .?”

“Yours. Yeah. I couldn’t stand to think of it in the trash, so I went back and got it. Back then, I knew it was a bad reminder, but I thought, someday, you’d want it, like. . . you know. . .after I was gone.”

“I thought of that.” Dean fingered the charm, reveling in the familiarity. “After you went to hell, there were plenty of days where I reached for it around my neck only to remember that I’d tossed it away.”

“Little did you know it was in the Impala the whole time. I put in that metal box with the family photos so you’d find it when I was gone.”

“Seriously? After that, I couldn’t bear to look at pictures. I could hardly stand to look at the car.”

“When I gave this to you, all those Christmases ago, I never imagined that our lives would turn out like this.”

“Sucky?”

Sam laughed. “I thought that as long as we stuck together, we’d be invincible.”

“You were right. The trouble is, we didn’t stick together. We let creatures and people and circumstances come between us but that’s not going to happen again.” Dean put the necklace on and nearly sighed at the feel of the weight against his chest.

“I understand what you’re saying, Dean. But I don’t want to take you from Lisa and Ben. Look at yesterday. You were a dad. A husband. A husband in the dog house, but it’s the stuff we only ever dreamed of.” Sam shifted on the couch, then pulled the blanket up around himself as a cold draft blew in through the fireplace. “I want you to grow old with grandkids on your knee.”

“Hey, I’m not even forty, don’t rush me.”

“But I want you to see forty and fifty and seventy—“

“Let’s stop there.”

Sam picked up the trashed wrapping paper then smushed it into a ball between his hands. “I’m just saying, if Lisa’s willing, then let’s give ‘having it all’ another try. We’ll still hunt, but we’ll also make sure that you get back here every couple of weeks. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds good.” Dean fingered the charm at the end of the necklace. “Thank you for this. It means more to me than I can say and frankly, it puts my ‘oh so clever’ Christmas gifts to shame.” Dean went over to the tree and picked out one gift. The one Sam had been checking out earlier. “Merry Christmas, brother.”

“Not shaving cream, that’s for sure.” Sam gave the package a shake. “Too small for skin mags.” He ripped and found a Beatles CD. “Hey Jude. Good stuff.”

“That was mom’s favorite song. She used to sing it to me before I went sleep every night and I’m sorry that you missed out on that. So. . . you know. . . “

“It’s perfect.”

Dean suddenly snatched up the remote control then turned the sound back up on the TV.

Faith is believing when common sense tells you not to...

“When I was a kid, I used to worry that if Santa actually came to our house, Dad would shoot him before he could leave any presents.”

“And we’re back,” Sam said, shaking his head. “Go to bed, Dean.”

“I’m going to bed.” Dean got up and walked around behind the couch. At the last second, he reached out and gave the back of Sam’s head a shove. “Best Christmas ever.”

“So far,” said Sam. “But we’ve still got a lot more to look forward to.”

And that was something neither of them had had for a very long time – hope.

The End and Merry Christmas

*** Fandom has always been like an extra special Christmas present for me. I hope this bit of holiday cheer gave you a little fannish tingle. Happy Holidays to everyone in the SPNFamily * *