

# Potomac

*by kodiak*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door?  
Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

## Chapter One

*Chapter 1 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

Potomac

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Disclaimer: I do not own these characters and am not making any money from this story. Fortunately, JK Rowling has expressed amused tolerance of fan fiction.

Chapter One

The setting sun brought a warm glow to the amber fire in his glass as Dr. Samuel Crane reclined on his private deck to enjoy the early Montana summer. The Scotch was old, smooth, and burned away his frustration in a fiery path down his throat. Damn whinging, sniveling patients! The ones who could afford his program led pampered public lives. They complained about pressure... Crane could tell them about pressure... No, none of that. Let it go. Peace. There was no grief, no past, nothing but the Potomac Valley and his own personal sunset.

And the crunch of boots on gravel. Damn! Should have locked the gate before turning off the phone *Leave me alone.*

"Samuel! Robert's been ringing your mobile for thirty minutes. Are you hiding?"

"Clearly not well enough."

The dying light warmed the pale blond hair and crisp white shirt as Troy Phelps trod the steps to steal the sunset from Samuel. The young man cautiously stepped back as Samuel curled his fingers possessively around the decanter of his finest scotch.

"Fine, don't share."

"Are you not 'on duty'?"

The only reply was an eye roll, and Samuel was perversely pleased with the thought that fine breeding had not endowed the youth with perfect manners. Oh, Troy, what would your father say?

The silent treatment worked as well on proteges as patients, and Troy explained that the school principal was trying to contact him for advice regarding a young member of the 4H club.

"She didn't realize that her lamb would be sold at the fair. He's concerned that she'll be traumatized."

Samuel cocked his eyebrow at this declaration. Troy should know better than anyone, well almost anyone, that Samuel did not coddle people. Or approve of others doing the coddling. "The world is a hard, cold place. Better she learns that now." Much as Troy might protest, that was Samuel's final statement on that matter.

He steered the conversation to Troy's recent 'calls' and paid lip service to the young man's desire for more challenging and interesting medical emergencies. He truly held no interest in drama. If the injuries were severe enough for Troy to find them diverting, Samuel himself would undoubtedly be called into the fray, and he'd seen enough excitement in his life already.

It was time to quietly oversee the recovery of the drug-addicted rich and watch for the single perfect sunset.

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Saturday had been quiet, the benefit of having a well trained staff. They took care of the daily essentials, and Samuel spent his time and talents healing wounded minds and the occasional broken heart. The last patient file on his desk now closed, and dreading his own thoughts of loneliness and alienation, he tried to focus on the image of still water.

He welcomed the pounding on his door as a respite from his inner demons, until he opened it to find one standing on his doorstep.

"Wolfe." If his tone was disagreeable, it was necessary to protect his own sanity from the desperation in the other man's dull brown eyes. "This had better be urgent and unavoidable."

John Wolfe was bending under the weight of the bundle of tattered brown robes that he clutched tightly to his body. "Se- Samuel, please. We found their last rabbit hole. Caught them both napping. It's over, finally. I promise I'll make it right, but just now I need your help. They had her, downstairs... they... we... Look, I know that you can help her. Please."

Samuel fought to grasp the tempered steel of his self control. John was eroding his will, always could. He wanted to say 'No' on principle, and then John shifted the woman slightly, balancing her weight and the cloak slid away from her bare foot. Milky white skin peeked out from layers of grime, dust, and what looked suspiciously like dried blood. His last resistance melted away. "This is for her, not you." He turned his back on both the man and the pain as he pulled his phone to summon Troy.

If John was surprised that Samuel kept a well-stocked trauma room in his basement, he made no comment. The psychiatrist refused to look at John's face lest he give away anything more than he had already. Focus on the patient. Follow diagnostic procedure, deal with the acute, boss Troy around (handy tool, displacement), and then press John for more details. Power, control, he needed to keep both for himself this time around.

"Hold this." Samuel pulled John next to the bed and thrust the IV bag into his hands. "Higher, or it won't flow." That was good. He could use the authority of his title to keep John off balance, keep control of the situation, then send the man on his way before he made concessions he would later regret. It was the wolf's own fault that he hadn't any idea that the IV stand was only two feet away. This way Samuel could focus on lab tests, diagnose and treat the body, then worry about the shattered mind. But he found he couldn't wait. "How long?" He didn't like hearing the rough edge in his own voice, the weakness it revealed.

He liked the answer even less. "She was missing for nineteen days. We think they grabbed her..."

"Just the facts, Wolfe. What have they admitted to?"

The list was grotesque, but contained nothing unexpected until the last. "...and CruciatuS." Damnation. That complicated things. He barked a few orders at Troy, scribbled notes in a new chart labeled 'Doe, Jane', grabbed the IV from John and placed it on the silver tree attached to 'Jane's' bed, and snarled one last command at the man. "My office. Now."

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Samuel made an elaborate show of sitting behind his large desk (overcompensation, he knew, but for the moment he would use any tactic in his arsenal). When he made eye contact with John, the man winced in a way that made him wonder if the wolf could actually hear the pounding of his headache. He knew he'd have to tread very carefully, but there was nothing for it. If the Muggle girl had suffered magical torture, he would need John's help to coax her back to sanity. Nineteen days with Yaxley and Macnair; Christ Almighty, it might be too late already.

He summoned his most professional voice, authoritative and calm. "As you've no doubt surmised, CruciatuS complicates things greatly. You were right to come to me. Standard psychiatric treatments yield dubious results even in cases of Muggle torture. Add magic to the mix with an unsuspecting victim... What?"

"You are correct that she's a Muggle, but she knows about magic, dating a wizard..."

"Stop. Don't twist the blade. There's no way around this. I will help her as I can, but you will have to stay. You will be her support, the familiar face of reassurance." He held up his hand to stave off Wolfe's objection. The man hadn't planned to drop the woman at his door and leave, had he? The nerve! Maybe this wasn't John's girlfriend after all. "You will help me with daily household chores. I will do what is necessary to help her heal. You will not undermine my decisions regarding her treatment, and you will leave our history in the past where it belongs. Am I understood?"

Later, as Samuel finally succumbed to exhaustion, he heard muffled sounds that could only be John raiding the liquor cabinet. Perhaps this was painful for the wolf after all. When he caught himself smirking, Samuel had the grace to blush.

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The scent of frying bacon brought a smile to Samuel's face. He could hear Remus humming in the kitchen, feel the softness of expensive sheets. Albus must be picking up the hotel tab for these stolen moments; normally the bedding was coarse and breakfast consisted of take-away.

And then reality returned with conscious thought. Albus was gone. The pain in his chest left him gasping for air. No. no. The man taking over his kitchen was no longer his Remus, no more his haven from violence and pain. John Wolfe would act as his shield, buffer him from the vengeance of angry saviors, let him start a new life, but never forgive. So be it. This would be his last act of penance. The wolf would absolve him or not, and they would part ways for good. Samuel would make sure of it.

He bypassed his dressing robe for chinos and an oxford shirt. Samuel normally never wore shoes for Sunday morning breakfast in his own home, one more layer between himself and the comfortable life he'd finally found, so he reached for his softest leather loafers and savored the confidence they lent him. The more he could insulate himself from Wolfe, the less heartache he would suffer later.

He focused his mind to remember what was stocked in the pantry. There were some fresh rolls and fruit that Robert delivered after his weekly trip to town. That would do. *Walk right into the kitchen like you own the place, Samuel, 'cause you do. Grab a roll and an apple; proceed directly to your office. Do not talk to the wolf; do not pass go; do not collect two hundred dollars. Snort. That's better, you have work to do. Now get moving.*

He'd timed his entrance perfectly. Wolfe was wholly focused on the skillet he was tending. Samuel had made it through the room and to the door before he heard, "You aren't trying to avoid me, perhaps?"

Dammit. "Why ever would you think that? Patient to check on, schedules to plan, busy day."

He hadn't turned around so he was surprised to feel the hand firmly locked around his elbow. "Troy sent Cathy home at nine. Jill is due after Sunday services. You know

he's very capable; Amanda is in excellent hands. You have time to eat with me." Samuel cursed his traitorous body as he allowed himself to be muscled into a straight backed chair and sighed at the aroma of a perfect bacon and Swiss scramble.

This wasn't wise. He was certain they would both bleed before the end. Yet the eggs tasted as perfect as they smelled, and the warm sensation in his stomach had less to do with the hot food than the feeling of belonging to someone. How nice it had been to know that one person in the world believed the best of him. How far to fall the day he didn't. And now they were together again, a hand's breadth away at a tiny kitchen table, but for the doubt and alienation between them it might as well be a chasm.

When Samuel rose abruptly from his chair, he saw Wolfe stiffen; hurt and anger flashed across his face. "Look, there are things that I must see to. Today. You need to acquire Amanda's full medical records by any means possible. And the paramour perhaps seeing him will help build her trust in us."

"What happened to 'you will help me with daily household chores'? We're going to have to deal with each other sooner or later, you know."

"No, we aren't. Damn. Damn damn damn." He'd invited Robert and his wife for dinner. It was too late to politely cancel. He was going to need Wolfe's help after all. Fortunately the shopping had already been done, and the man was an excellent cook.

So forty minutes later, when he had finally locked himself in his office, Samuel realized that he had never held the balance or control. As soon as John had crossed the threshold of his life, Samuel was doomed. Doomed. Maudlin and melancholy, he picked up the phone and rang through to his mentor.

"Hey, Jack. I hope I'm not interrupting, I can call back if there's a better time." And before he knew it, he had opened his soul to the intuitive man in New York. Yes, he remembered the grief and pain of losing Remus. Yes, he knew this was a very bad idea, and that he was likely, scratch that, certainly in over his head, but did Jack realize that no other psychiatrist would have any understanding of what this girl has suffered? Samuel might be the only person alive and outside of a desolate North Sea prison to know the full capacity of evil within those men. John had been right to bring her here.

And though he was reminded again that Jack knew Samuel was in over his head, Samuel hung up the phone knowing that his mentor cared for him, and would help him weather even the storms of his own bad decisions. And would need a ride from the airport on Thursday, because even very intuitive mentors could do only so much from two thousand miles away.

That left him three days to get his proverbial shit together because as much as Jack supported him, he would certainly do what was right for Samuel's patients as well. And Samuel refused to entertain the thought of losing his career over old heartaches.

## Chapter Two

*Chapter 2 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers

### Chapter Two

Samuel decided that he could call the evening a moderate success. Troy may be drinking his scotch with impunity, but Robert and Mary seemed to be having a good time, and Wolfe hadn't called him the wrong name even once.

He'd set the table on the deck with his best china and stemware. Mary gave him a soft smile when she looked at the table, but thankfully didn't comment. Wolfe had grilled the steaks to medium-rare perfection, and the wine was perfectly chilled. Samuel would not have tried to serve steak with any white wine under any circumstance, but John was right as usual; this pairing was exquisite. He wondered idly where the man had learned about fine food and wine.

Wolfe and Crane, he thought, still moved together like a well oiled machine, then immediately stepped away from John. He dared to hope that no one had noticed until Robert joined him in loading the dishwasher.

"Mary's taking John to see the animals." She was proud of the students' hard work raising livestock every year and showed them off to anyone she could drag down to the paddocks. "Will it be very hard to see him every day?"

Samuel decided that hope was lost when he sputtered over his denial. As much as he might insist that everything was fine, Robert continued to wear the knowing expression.

This business of having close friends was becoming rather a bother. Bad enough to answer to Jack, now that 'Mother Mary' was in the know... *Stop that right now. Your friends care about you.*

He looked up at Robert again and gave a sad shake of his head. "I truly doubt this can go anywhere positive. Too much pain, too many old debts."

Much later, when the house was quiet and Samuel had puzzled out his plans for Amanda's awakening, he slid on silent feet down the hall to his bedroom.

He paused when he glimpsed the hunched shadow sipping scotch in farthest corner of the darkened den. Not my problem, he tried to tell himself, but his heart wouldn't listen and kept him tossing throughout the night.

Monday was as frantic as he had imagined. Transitioning Amanda's prescriptions paired with two new intakes at the clinic, one by order of Judge Bradley, had taken his entire day. He barely had time to nod his thanks to John for the dinner plate that was slipped onto his desk before the phone rang again, and he spent another hour on the phone with His Honor, working out the finer points of the courts' expectations so the young heiress might be reunited with her children.

Therefore, Samuel was not prepared for the angry whirlwind of John, searching every cabinet for alcohol.

"What are you trying to say? I'm not one of your clients, and I planned to pay for the bloody scotch!"

"Dammit, Wolfe, am I meant to ignore addictive behavior in my own home?" Shouting at the end was definitely the wrong tactic. Merlin on a bloody mustang, why couldn't he keep his cool? He'd guided a spoiled, resistant brat to decide to cooperate with treatments that very afternoon, yet with John, he wasn't a respected psychiatrist, he was a desperate ex-lover who couldn't control his own temper. Okay, if you can't be calm, play calm.

He tried again. "I'm sorry. I was wrong to shout. I've tried to forget, you know. Tried to forget you. Tried to forget us. Tried to forget what it felt like to belong.

"I can't do it. I can't live here in this house with you and pretend that we were only ever adversaries. I keep wondering who you've been cooking for, where you learned how to bring out the best of a fine steak with a sweet white wine."

"Samuel.."

"No, wait, I'm not finished yet. I might not be able to keep my professional distance with you, but I still know an alcoholic when he's staggering through my home."

"Sev, I'm not an —"

"Remus, don't try that with me. Things are different now. I'm stronger than I was. So if you need to drink yourself to oblivion to sleep through the night... or is it being around me that drives you to hard drinking? Either way, you can go home and do whatever you please. If you stay, you have to quit."

The silence was terrifying. Had he just burned his last bridge?

Samuel watched the color drain from John's face.

"I'm not a drunk."

"Then it won't be a problem to stop drinking."

"When did you get so bossy?"

"Does that mean you'll stay?"

Samuel told himself that he'd never hoped for more than a sullen nod in answer, but couldn't avoid a touch of sadness.

"Just so you understand that I'm not an alcoholic."

Samuel kept his spine stiff. "Fine. Prove it." Then decided it was time for an olive branch. "Let's go see if Bess has any pie left at the diner."

Bess housed her kitchen in a very modest shack that shared its roof with a gas station and convenience store. The sign in the window simply read 'Diner'. John raised an eyebrow when Samuel asked for a table in the corner, and Bess walked them past the bar to a room with windows so large that they filled the entire wall, but he didn't comment. Samuel quietly shared that the pie was certainly not as inspiring as the tiramisu John had served on Sunday, and the man finally smiled.

The twilight offered them very little to see beyond the brightly lit patio, and John snorted when he saw the large metal contraption holding the lid down on the garbage can.

"Has someone been stealing trash?"

"Do you remember what I told you about bears?" And somehow they could talk about wildlife as though the last five years had never happened. John was amused by stories of persistent raccoons, and even Bess joined in, telling stories of silly questions that tourists ask season after season.

"Please tell me you made that up. How could anyone think that deer turn into elk?" John seemed genuinely shocked.

"That's nothing. My cousin works the North Gate in Yellowstone Park, and he is constantly explaining that the animals do not sleep in kennels, and no one knows for certain where the wolves will be each day." Bess shook her head. "I think they just don't realize how artificial everything is in the cities."

Samuel waited until they were outside in the moonlight to ask, "Have you made any progress in contacting your 'wizard friend' about Amanda?"

There was a long pause. "I'm not sure if that's such a good idea."

"If housing is your concern, it needn't be. Bess houses short term boarders for the clinic quite regularly." And then it was Samuel's turn to snort as John was startled by a huge black dog barreling out of the bushes. "My god, man. I would have thought you could smell the difference between a dog and a bear. Hercules, down."

By then John was laughing too. "Maybe once I've smelled a bear, I'll have some basis of comparison."

"Have no fear, bears are pungent. When you wonder what that stench might be, start looking for the bear." The camaraderie was back as the big Newfoundland walked with them in the late Montana twilight.

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Samuel found he couldn't hold on to his equanimity the next day. Much as he had anticipated and prepared for Amanda's abject horror, the alternating shrieking and sobbing was wearing him down. Then in a single breath she was chillingly silent. She remained terrified, evidenced by her racing pulse, but as Samuel watched, she forcibly slowed her breathing and made eye contact.

"No more games." Her raspy whisper was unexpectedly firm. If she thought this was simply a continuation of her torment, he wouldn't be able to help her. It was time to regroup, so Samuel followed the only plan that came to mind. He fled.

"Look, Wolfe, just bring the bloody bastard here. Kicking and screaming if necessary. She needs someone she trusts." He turned on his heel before the man could argue and beat a hasty retreat to the clinic.

He was not surprised when Cathy told him that Mr. Wolfe had two young guests waiting at his home to speak with him. He spilled his coffee on his new Persian rug when he saw who was sipping tea with John.

## Chapter Three

*Chapter 3 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Three

He was tucked into the comfortably stuffed, olive reading chair beside his bed when John found him. "Do you think turning the rug will sufficiently hide the spot?"

He scowled when John snorted at him. "I assure you that your rug is once again stain-free. Can we get back to the issue of helping Amanda?"

"I now understand your reluctance in getting those two involved. I'll find another way. They may both leave."

John was not that easily dissuaded. He reasoned and coaxed, cajoled and argued, but Samuel refused to be manipulated. It was bad enough that he was expected to clean up yet another of the Ministry's blunders. Tolerating Potter and Weasley in his home for another minute was beyond the pale.

"Did you leave those two delinquents alone? I've seen first hand the destruction Potter can bring upon an office." Dark eyes locked with toffee brown for a moment before Samuel looked down at the hand resting casually on his arm. He glared at Wolfe until the hand was removed.

Wolfe looked abashed as he stood slowly from his seat on the bed. "Having those two men know that they owe you might bring certain tactical advantages. Don't toss this aside because of old grudges." And then, looking resigned and saddened, he left.

Samuel reached for the nearest item to hurl against the wall. The smooth pottery felt heavy in his hand, and the sound of the shattering vase would be deeply satisfying. But soft words from the door stopped him cold.

"That looks expensive." Potter's voice was so unexpectedly calm that Samuel found himself pointing to the other chair.

"And irreplaceable. Mary sold her pottery wheel last fall."

"You're still an arrogant arse."

"You remain ignorant and sanctimonious."

"The Ministry thinks you're dead." The words were factual and the tone flat. Potter sank into the chair as though defeated.

"Why would they believe such a thing?" Samuel needed to make sense of a world suddenly gone mad.

"Lupin asked me to call off the dogs. I trust him, so I lied. Shall I go back and set the record straight?" Ah, yes. This was the Potter he knew and dispised.

"Are you threatening me?"

"Amazingly, no. Now that Yaxley and Macnair are in custody, we could bring the whole truth to light. Clear your name." When Samuel looked up, Potter's emerald eyes were free of deception. The blighter wanted to offer a deal.

Samuel snorted. "Which name did you have in mind to clear?" Silence followed. "Hmm? I have a comfortable life here. After five years, I'm respected and well compensated. What did I have to show for fifteen years of teaching brats like you?"

"So don't come back. But if you ever wanted to, the slate would be clean. When have I ever offered you anything like this? Merlin, is it money you want? I'll pay your standard patient fees "

"Do you truly believe that this is about anything as banal as money? Tell me, Potter, how will you feel when Amanda states clearly, in her own voice, that she wants a fresh start? How will Weasley deal with that rejection?"

"I don't think that will happen."

"No? How many victims of sexual assault have you coaxed back into what passes for a productive life? None? What about survivors of physical abuse? Thirty-six percent of my patients turned to drugs because they couldn't deal with those feelings of helplessness. What about magical abuse? She's suffered all three. We don't know what she'll decide she wants when she steps out of her terror or if she will ever make that step. Is that what you want for Weasley? Spend a weekend with the Longbottoms before you make up your mind." He was livid. The golden boy was out of his element, had no idea that life might give him less than he demanded of it.

"I'll admit that losing Hermione was devastating for Ron. But he's stronger now, and I have faith that he'll do what's right for Amanda. Just finding her alive gave him hope; then Remus told us that she is convinced that she's still a prisoner, that you need our help to convince her that she'll be safe. Now you're telling me to leave?"

Samuel raised a hand to speak, but Potter ranted right over his objection. "I know about your success rates, and I have a fair idea of how you get through to your more resistant clients. I don't care. I think you're the only person who can help Amanda, and I'll beg if it'll make a difference."

"Be it on your own head, Potter, when this whole thing goes arse over teakettle."

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Less than ten minutes later, Samuel watched as Potter approached Amanda's side. Her eyes were closed in fitful slumber, but at the sound of his voice, her heart rate slowed and her eyelids fluttered. He let them both cry together for a time and then stepped to Amanda's other side and held her fingers firmly.

She accepted him this time, controlled her breathing and made eye contact. "You're really going to help me? After the horrible scene I made before?"

At that moment Weasley pushed through the door. "Amanda, hey, I can't believe it. I'm so happy to see you... What's wrong?"

Her fingers tightened painfully on Samuel's hand as all her vitals spiked. "Wolfe, take care of Weasley." Thankfully, John pulled the horrified young man out of the room. Samuel fumbled through his pocket for the syringe of sedative, found it, and removed the cap. Practiced as the motion was, it still felt odd with his left hand. He could feel her grip loosen as liquid calm entered her bloodstream.

To his credit, Potter never let go of her hand, despite the anguished sobs from the hall. The sounds drifted further away, and Samuel silently thanked John for handling the young man's very vocal grief. "Can you remove your hand? She's sleeping for now. Perhaps we should discuss what has just transpired."

Potter shook his head. "Maybe you should be the one to talk with Ron. I'll sit with Amanda."

And so it was Samuel who found Wolfe's note leading him to the diner.

"What do you mean, you won't serve us?"

Oh, crap. Weasley was about to make a scene at the bar, and John had clearly discovered 'the list'. Bess was honoring the deal she had made with Samuel by not serving alcohol to Wolfe; Weasley was a serendipitous inclusion by virtue of sitting with the man.

Irritation flashed in John's eyes. The game was up, and there would be hell to pay, but right now he needed to focus on the younger man. Hopefully the wolf would let him. He spat one word to John, "Later," and turned his focus to Weasley the whiner. "Bess is only following my request that she not sell spirits to my guests. You know the

purpose of my clinic; no doubt you can see the wisdom of such an arrangement."

"You're here to vouch for us now. I need something strong to calm my nerves." The whelp was trying to force his hand. Fine. That allowed Samuel to take issue with Weasley's escapism.

"I don't think it's wise for you to imbibe tonight, Mr. Weasley. Alcohol is a mild depressant, and you hardly need to add fuel to that emotion right now. We can discuss this further in my office." *Focus on the boy; save your displeasure with Wolfe for later.*

And in less than twenty minutes, Weasley had agreed to seek solace with his parents for a time. Molly might act like a mother hen, but that would likely work to her son's advantage in this instance. And Samuel could always have John check on the boy in a day or so. If John was still speaking to him.

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"...can't believe you don't trust me! For God's sake, Crane, I was mortified. Just call me a drunk in front of Ron and Harry " Wolfe had given up the pretense of sitting and was pacing the floor like a Jackal in too small a cage. Samuel finished his second recitation of the Hippocratic Oath, and he found his temper was at its farthest end.

"If you'll recall, I covered for your sorry arse with Weasley. I already regret that decision. A bar was the last place that boy belonged, and you know very well how quickly drinking took over your own life. Who better to explain than you? And now you've no one to blame but yourself if Potter hears you raving like a maniac, shouting things you would rather keep between us."

"Of course I'm shouting. I'm angry, furious, livid. I can't believe you told Bess. Who else have you told behind my back? Does this entire town know? Have you sent an owl to Skeeter? Christ Almighty, it's my life. Let me choose who and when to tell. Are we going to draw little charts with stair steps now, push me to find religion, make me tell all my friends?"

Three timid knocks sounded on the door. "Remus, I already knew," said a tired looking Potter. "After we lost Albus, it was hard to miss. I just didn't know how to help without making you mad."

Samuel snorted as he sank back into his chair. "Clearly I have no better idea, as he's angry, furious, and livid with me."

"Better you than me. Um, no offense."

"Harry, thank you for the reality check, but I really need to hash this out with, um, Samuel. I'll talk with you tomorrow." The angry fire remained in John's eyes, but at least now he didn't seem quite as explosive.

Potter closed the door quietly, and Samuel braced himself for another tirade. "You know very well that I haven't pushed you into any twelve step program. And I've been very patient until now, but I must tell you, you're acting like an arse." Take the bait, take the bait, take the bait.

"You're right; you haven't pushed me into a program. As a matter of fact you haven't pushed me at all. Do you even care why this all started? Do you know how horrible it was to feel you slip away, to wonder if you'd maintained your cover? To know that you could never come home, even if it all went to hell?"

He was pacing a tight circle, and one carefully timed step placed Samuel directly in his path. Crane yielded to the shove, but at the last moment, Wolfe wrapped his fingers around fabric and pulled him back sharply by his shirt. Samuel steadied them both with one hand on John's chest.

"We did it for Harry and Troy, remember? We all knew the price, and as adults we chose to buy them a few more moments of innocence. Neither child a murderer... Can you begrudge that for either boy?"

"I know, I'm sorry..." John's voice cracked.

"In a way, he saved us both as well."

"Sherbet lemon?" The chuckle was decidedly bitter.

"You are well aware that I can't stand the flavor. Too cloyingly sweet, but I don't suppose I've ever told you that I keep a handful in my desk for the scent alone."

"I would never have suspected a respected psychiatrist to do something so mental."

"We all have our foibles. Which brings me to the very pointed question of what you will now employ as a coping strategy while you continue to grieve for Albus." And soon he was behind his desk again, skirting the line between lover and councilor, guiding John carefully to one single realization.

"I can't do this with you."

"Which part?"

"I don't know about the rest, but therapy for certain."

"Thank God you noticed. Now can I refer you without hurting your pride?" Samuel knew he was holding his breath, but couldn't risk tipping the scales of this delicate balance.

"Fine, who and when?" And the uneasiness between them abated somewhat.

But Samuel held up his hand as John followed to his bedroom door. "Can we revisit this moment after you've spoken with Alan? I'd like to get my feet back solidly into the grey instead of the blatantly unethical."

As he watched John walk desolately down the hall, Samuel reminded himself of the problems with blurring the lines between lover and 'shrink'. When he pushed the door closed, it felt as though three grown men were pushing against him.

## Chapter Four

*Chapter 4 of 28*

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## Chapter Four

They drove to Missoula in silence. Samuel, trying not to look at the man brooding in the passenger seat, and John, pretending to focus on the scenery. Thirty minutes seemed to drag on for hours.

Then, finally, they were passing the houses and lumber mill of Bonner and on through East Missoula... each mile marker they passed prompting a small celebration in Samuel's mind. The feeling was clearly mutual because as soon as he'd pulled into the parking place, John had the door open and was sliding out of the Bronco.

Samuel caught John by the elbow and pointed to the coffee house up the street. "I'll settle in at Illusions in an hour. You can meet me there whenever you're ready."

"A session only lasts fifty minutes, right?" The hesitation in John's voice was amusing, but Samuel felt fragile enough himself to know he'd be better served by not laughing.

"You may want some time to yourself when you conclude with Alan. Take as long as you need. I can wait." And he turned before he let too much slip. "The office is one street over... There, that building on the second floor. Are you okay from here?"

And then he was alone in a town he tried to avoid whenever possible. The shops held little interest; he would undoubtedly be spending some time at Illusions later as John would be dealing with some powerful emotions and would likely need some space to compose himself, and he didn't like the squealing children that gathered around the carousel. That left the park, under the bridge.

He turned right when he reached the bridge, following the stairs down toward the river, and found himself staring at three giant trout (salmon?), well... big fish. The sculpture boasted clean lines and avoided the types of abstractions that tended to curl Samuel's hair. In a strange way, he liked it. So he found a spot nearby to sit and watch the heron and egrets fish along the bank.

He decided that he still had enough time to explore the tiny bookstore next to the coffee house and was soon the proud owner of a paperback mystery novel and a very bad cup of coffee. He'd barely turned the page and begun chapter five when he noticed a familiar pair of brown pants beside his elbow.

"How's the mystery?" asked John, as though they did this everyday.

"Compelling."

"Clearly, what's it about?"

"There was a dead person, and some foolish sheriff is... I don't really know, okay?"

John had the temerity to laugh. "Why are you nervous? I can assure you I'm not about to 'throw you over.'"

Samuel forced himself to feign indifference. "Oh, what did you decide then?"

"To meet weekly for now. If you teach me to drive, I can save you the trip."

"And I will likely spend as much time in the car either way..."

"Did you know there's a cafe down the street that serves crepes? And it's almost time for lunch."

Somehow Samuel kept himself from asking any more about what was discussed with Alan. He wouldn't mind staying out of the loop if this was Potter he'd referred out, but it was different precisely because this was John. And now he was getting a sour taste of what he assumed most parents and spouses experience when a loved one 'hits the couch.'

He didn't like it. At all.

Samuel's insecurities aside, John seemed open and upbeat, filling the back of the Bronco with groceries they certainly wouldn't find in Potomac's small convenience store and pressing Samuel for details covering what Jack would like to eat (Samuel had never made a point to know) to what time the man would want to turn in for the evening (with a two hour time difference to overcome, likely very early).

By the time they had put away all the groceries and said good bye to Potter, Samuel was confused enough to welcome the opportunity to look in on Amanda. He was glad to note that color was returning to her face, the ghastly grey tone under her eyes was fading, and she would willingly participate in casual conversations. It was still too early to force her into more structured counseling, but perhaps he could coax her out of her glorified hospital room.

"John said that he will serve lasagna at six... Well, I'll be in my office if you need me." There was a look of longing in her eyes that gave him hope enough to set the table for three.

And she was there at six, in clothes that Potter, no doubt, had brought for her. John took his cue flawlessly from Samuel and served Amanda as though her joining the dinner table was a common event.

They chatted easily about favorite foods and popular songs and Samuel felt a lightness in his chest when Amanda smiled as she bit into a warm, garlicky roll. Maybe this could work. *Keep the focus on the present tense, and help her form a group of friends... Don't dig into the emotions too quickly; build her confidence in both of them, a foundation to work from.* She would let him know when she was ready.

He wondered if she might be ready before he was.

Later, it was as if someone threw a switch with Amanda. They were clearing dishes, and Samuel clicked on the evening news, and when he looked back Amanda had 'checked out.' She was staring at her shoes, holding tightly to the silverware, and refused to respond to him.

He swore internally, both for pushing her past her limits and for missing the trigger. It could have been a word, a motion... who knew. If he mined her thoughts for the cause, he would likely set her off again. Stupid, rookie mistake, with the only solace being that she was allowing John to take the cutlery and guide her back to bed. *At least she still trusts one of us.*

Samuel spent the rest of the evening brooding. He truly tried to listen to the evening news, but kept finding himself stewing over their setback. Would John believe that he could find more effective help elsewhere? Would he take Amanda and leave, never look back, just when Samuel had begun to hope for more between them?

The maelstrom of his thoughts only made it more difficult to look up as Wolfe returned and joined him on the couch.

"You're supposed to tell me that we were expecting that, it's completely understandable, and you're not giving up just because she had a bad episode." Samuel didn't even want to respond. "And then you would do well to let me remind you that I chose to bring her here because I know that even though this will be very difficult, you won't give up or back off."

"You think I need a 'pep-talk'? What gives you the right to have unwavering faith in me now?"

"We talked at length about how difficult this was going to be for you and for me."

"What?"

"You've been itching all evening to ask me what it is that I discussed with Alan. He spent most of the session helping me prepare for what's to come; adaptive problems that plague survivors for the rest of their lives, the nightmares, the stress this will place on you. It must be terribly difficult for you to have no idea what's being discussed with a colleague who holds you in such high esteem."

"Discussed that too, did you?" Samuel asked darkly.

"I could puzzle that out for myself. I'm not a complete idiot, and I know you quite well."

"Perhaps too well."

"I never wanted it to be this way between us. Let me..."

"Please, John, not right now. I can't deal with this on top of the other."

"When do you think you'll be ready to deal with 'this'?" Samuel winced at John's sharp tone.

He knew that 'perhaps never' was not a wise answer, so he settled for a shrug. "I need to arrange a ride for Jack." Then he escaped down the hall to call Troy.

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Samuel thought back to their early days in New York. Both he and Troy had new names to answer to, false lives to memorize, and a new culture in which to become immersed. It was truly a whirlwind after spending three months in Owshead, Maine, keeping to themselves with Samuel frantically pouring over books to gain the necessary knowledge to back-up false credentials.

Jack was their first contact, personal or professional. He knew their names were false, but he believed that they had fallen in with an extremist faction in the IRA and had needed to fake their deaths to get out. Jack had sharp eyes and a mind to match; he had run Samuel through every challenge he could devise to be sure that the title and credentials were deserved, no matter how Samuel may have acquired them.

But he had become so much more than fierce protector of the common good and faithful keeper of deadly secrets. He had pushed Samuel out of his solitary existence, pulled him through his days of deep depression, and drove him to accept clients who could keep him wearing Armani. Without those contacts there would be no clinic.

Jack connected with Troy on a level that, even now, Samuel couldn't reach. The haunted and desolate youth had become a confident man with modest goals but a solid work ethic. While Samuel's credentials may not have been earned by conventional means, Troy's were entirely above board. In short, they both owed their new lives to Jack Brown.

Troy would enjoy the time spent on the road with Jack; that would buy Samuel a little more time to find composure. This was a very bad time to fall apart. Thankfully, Troy had agreed to co-operate.

But Samuel was almost out of time, and no closer to equanimity than when he had sat down an hour ago.

Perhaps Troy could stop in Missoula for smoked ribs. That would make a nice lunch, eat up a little more time, and give Samuel a venue to convince Jack that he was fine, not mental at all.

The mobile sounded a tinny ring and then connected.

"Troy," he charged in, "John wanted to try that new barbecue restaurant. Since you're already in Missoula, would you..."

The fool laughed at him. "Sorry, Samuel, we're already in town. Be at your house in two minutes. Bye."

He cursed every deity he could remember. Then cursed his pajamas for good measure and scrambled into respectable clothes to be wearing in the early afternoon.

He found John in the kitchen and, with a pleading look, began a quick list of things best left unsaid. "...and by Merlin's purple night light, please don't mention... oh, hi, Jack. You're already here."

Samuel didn't like the silence in the kitchen as Troy and John stared at him like fish and Jack gave him a cool assessing look starting with the short, combed hair that he had managed and ending with the shoes that he hadn't.

"Samuel, I'd like a private word."

*Oh crap.*

## Chapter Five

*Chapter 5 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Five

"It occurs to me that your problems seem to center on one basic theme." Dr. Jack Brown leaned back behind Samuel's desk.

"I thought problems were more accurately labeled opportunities."

"Cut the crap, Crane. You are allowing your opportunities to become problems. How long do you plan to dance around the main issue in your life?"



"So you're telling me that I won't be able to fully win Amanda's trust until I learn to trust Wolfe. That ship has sailed. How am I supposed to trust the person who turned his back on me in the very darkest moment of my life?"

"You told me back then that he had good reason to doubt your motives, even though the actions were planned. You came to me knowing that you had deliberately pushed John away. What's changed?"

"Five years ago, he handed me a new identity and a plane ticket and sent me off to sink or swim on my own. I believed he was gone for good. And I could live with that. Now he's here, in my home, my kitchen, in my face, trying to get in my bed... Can you forget that I said that?"

"Samuel, the issue isn't what is or isn't happening in your bed, but what it's doing to your head."

"I do not like green eggs and ham, I do not like them, Sam I am."

"I wonder if you would have liked that book as much as a child, if you had actually been 'Sam' at the time... Now stop trying to avoid this conversation. What would you tell a client?"

"Trust with your 'ex' is too big a hurdle to take on first thing. Start with a simple issue or a less pivotal relationship."

"And how can you apply that to your own circumstance?"

"Troy..."

"Yes, perhaps the four calls that I know about this morning, and the five others I suspect you made, were a bit excessive. No?"

"I..." But there was really nothing to say to that. He was wrong to push his insecurities onto Troy.

"Samuel, I didn't clear my schedule and fly to the edge of civilization to pass judgment on your life. Will you stop trying to cover your butt and let me help you?" Yet another test of his trust.

Jack continued, "Yes, I know. It's been the crux for you as long as we've known each other. Troy offered to take me riding this afternoon, but I'd rather take a nap. Maybe you could make use of a saddled horse and captive audience."

-----  
Dusty, saddle sore, and emotionally raw, Samuel found his way into the dining room as Jack was setting the table. "Did you enjoy your nap?"

"I completely forgot about the nap, but cooking with John is quite enjoyable."

"You set me up, you old coot." But there was no heat behind the words. "Do I have time to clean up?"

Jack wrinkled his nose. "Please, take all the time you need. Troy said it would take him a few minutes as well."

Samuel paused to look at the table. It was set for four. "Amanda?"

"She's taking the night off, but I'll have a plate ready for her in a few minutes. Do you want to take it in?"

Five minutes later he was in clean clothes with his hair still damp from the shower. "I don't like being managed, old man."

"Think of it as a friendly kick in the pants. There's more chicken if she wants and lots of green beans."

Amanda was definitely subdued that evening, but thankfully, she responded to questions and looked Samuel in the eye when she thanked him for the plate. He thought briefly of the discussion the night before.

"Would you like to join us in the den after dinner? Troy keeps an unusually large assortment of music in his car. I'm sure he would like to debate the talents of modern musicians with you."

"Stuffy much?"

"Are you offering a reward for that missing verb?"

"Touche. I'll think about it." And she gave a tiny smile.

"The money or the company?"

"Both."

"Acceptable. I'll see you after dinner either way."

And by the time they had loaded the dishwasher, light was spilling out of the den. Amanda had chosen a chair in the corner and one of his dusty tomes by Forrester. Samuel couldn't tell if she was actually reading or just hiding behind the book.

Troy had taken a quiet suggestion, bringing in a small stack of silver music disks and tinkering with the stereo.

"Samuel, did you know that you can adjust the balance to these speakers? You can also... oh, never mind, just leave it where I'm setting it."

Samuel wondered then why he hardly ever played the stereo. It lent a warm serenity to the room. Maybe he would have a reason to use the fireplace as well this winter.

John settled on the couch with Samuel, folding the newspaper open to the crossword, and Jack brought in a large travel bag that he settled between his feet.

Samuel snorted. "Is that the same sweater from two years ago?"

"I knit to enjoy the fiber; I'm not in a race."

Amanda's eyes popped up over the top of the book, and she continued watching Jack with rapt attention as he slowly moved soft brown yarn from one needle to the other.

The four men chatted easily as the evening wore on, but as Amanda continued to watch Jack's hands, she set the book aside, and Samuel noticed that her fingers were moving along sympathetically.

When Jack followed Samuel's gaze to Amanda, his face lit with pleasure. "Amanda, do you knit?"

The nod was tiny, and then she was looking at her shoes, reaching for the discarded book full of very dry prose. But Jack was already digging into his bag and pulling out a ball of pale gold yarn and a pair of wooden needles.

"I always bring more projects than I can possibly work on." And the lure of soft wool and sticks drew Amanda out of the corner.

Samuel was used to Jack's slow, steady knitting whenever the man could just sit and listen. But this seemed to be a new experience for John. He watched, enthralled, as the cloth grew with each added stitch and by Amanda's intense focus as she drew the yarn over her fingers thoughtfully.

Samuel was more interested in the motion and flexibility of her hands than her infatuation with the fiber. Her brows were pinched together in concentration, and she moved with the careful focus of one trying to execute a once familiar task. She seemed confused about how she wanted to hold the yarn, switching it from one hand to the other, but with each pass, the motion gained fluidity, and soon she had the yarn threaded through her fingers, and her hands seemed to fly through a motion as comfortable to her as breathing.

Samuel realized that he was as mesmerized as everyone else. The strip growing from her needles reminded him of some of the more intricate sailor's knot work he had once seen in a lighthouse museum. With no instructions to work from, Amanda must have been calculating this design in her mind. She smiled as she studied the results, and Samuel reminded himself to breathe. He had the beginning of an idea, but he wanted to watch events unfold in the next few hours.

Troy said goodnight as the sun was setting, and Samuel was shocked to realize it was almost ten. Jack yawned and shuffled off to bed, and Amanda slipped off to the room next to John's.

Suddenly he was alone with the man he'd been trying to avoid all day.

"I don't remember you ever being this patient." The brown eyes were serious, but the tone was playful.

"Yes, many impatient people can brew a potion over an entire moon cycle," Samuel scathed.

"I meant with people, and I do mean it to be a compliment. I'm so glad that Amanda feels safe here."

"Amazing what I can accomplish with a pharmacy at my disposal. You do understand that I don't want to medicate her indefinitely?"

"You know I trust you completely. Samuel, please look at me. Is that what's bothering you? You think I didn't trust you?"

"Intent. You know there had to be intent."

"You're right. But I knew, even then, that you had no other acceptable options."

"I should have died for my friend." The howl of his grief echoed in the den.

"No! You promised me that you would live. You promised. I'm glad that you're alive. Even if you never open up to me again, I have the satisfaction of knowing that you're free to chase your goals, settle down in a little town, find someone to make you happy. If it's not me, that's okay."

"Why would I want anyone else? You haunt me, Wolfe. I can barely sleep knowing that you're here, sleeping under my roof, just down the hall. I want..." But he couldn't say anything more as John was pressing him against the back of the couch in a possessive kiss. He found himself surrendering to five years of grief and loss and need. And when they pulled apart, gasping for air, Samuel felt tears in his eyes.

"Just one thing, John. You don't call all the shots this time."

"I noticed as much."

"I won't be anyone's scapegoat. Not anymore."

The eight steps down the hall felt vaguely surreal. After five years of longing, familiar hands were tracing familiar paths along his back. Samuel could feel his pulse kicking faster as two fingers found their way up the back of his neck and circled behind his ear, and the hand wrapped around his hip threatened to be his undoing. His shoulder brushed against the door frame, and Samuel realized that they were standing outside his room.

This time he didn't turn John away.

## Chapter Six

*Chapter 6 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Six

The pink light of dawn painted the room as Samuel opened his eyes to the sound of running water. He found his back pressed firmly to the wall. John had clearly hogged the bulk of the king sized bed, but Samuel felt so very refreshed that he couldn't rally even the smallest touch of irritation.

The shower stopped, and soon John was sitting on the edge of his bed, reaching over to ruffle Samuel's hair and offer breakfast. With no need to spite his own stomach, Samuel hurried in the shower.

Hot food in front of him, there was no further excuse to postpone discussing Amanda's care. He worried briefly that John would resent pushing the girl in any fashion, but it couldn't be helped. He folded the napkin carefully in his lap, picked up his fork, and outlined his concerns.

"I'm not sure, Samuel. Can't you leave her a few days of peace?"

"Shall we revisit the definition of 'I trust you completely'?" Good morning, Jack. I hope we didn't wake you." And they were saved from uncomfortable topics by the mundane ebb and flow of breakfast and house guests. But after the last pancake was gone, Samuel pushed forward again. "John, don't give her time to fret about it. Just bring Amanda to my office after lunch."

Jack couldn't seem to stay out of the fray either. "Are you certain... Samuel, really, I know you have the best of intentions, but the poor girl barely has her feet..."

"You both trust me so completely that you'll argue with my decisions?" He turned toward Jack and raised an eyebrow in challenge. "The road to insanity is paved with perfectly valid coping strategies. The girl has found an activity which offers comfort and distraction. This is precisely the time to press forward and put it to good use."

"Samuel, have you taken time to carefully examine your reasons for pushing her so early..."

"Don't finish that thought, Jack. Do you truly think I'm pushing this to feed my own morbid curiosity? Do you remember why I turned up in your office five years ago? How I couldn't discuss what it was I had fled?" As he paused to breathe, John's fingers twined firmly in his hair and gave a subtle, painful tug. Resentfully, Samuel accepted the silent rebuke for the moment and made a quick excuse to Jack.

If John wanted a private word, Samuel would happily give him several behind closed doors. The den was dark and deserted, and the barest of motions ensured it would stay that way until they were finished. John's hand remained firmly wrapped in Samuel's hair and his angry attempt to throw it off ended with Samuel pressed hard against the wall.

"You're not the only one with a temper, Crane. Don't blow your cover with Dr. Brown at any cost." The wolf was whispering in his ear. But some things had changed in the last five years. Samuel felt the exact moment when John shifted his weight and drove his own forward as well, knocking them both off their feet. On the floor the men frantically wrestled for dominance with Samuel landing finally on top.

"I told you that I would not be bullied."

"Well fought, Samuel. You've clearly been working out, and your technique is almost flawless." And then the insufferable wolf rocked him in the one direction he wasn't balanced. Samuel couldn't correct, hit the ground hard, and felt his arm being pinned behind his back. Then a soft caress across the back of his ear. "Almost flawless." And this time it didn't sound complimentary so much as gloating.

Damn, he didn't want to have this conversation with John sitting on his back. Things typically did not play out to his advantage when the wolf was involved. "John, you know I'm right. You and Jack can speculate about how those men would break someone, but I know in the first person."

"But..."

"When you said that you trust me, did you lie?"

No, John hadn't lied. And Samuel had known that from the first. The couch was more conducive to discussion than the floor, and they came to an uneasy understanding: John, that Samuel had truly become the best in his field, and Samuel that John knew something of Amanda as a person, and could offer valid insight as well.

And if they left the den without resolving the issue of dominance, they had decided that sorting it out might be enjoyable after all.

-----  
Samuel found that he didn't resent being trapped behind his desk through the rest of the morning. He spoke calmly with the heiress while she complained about the color of the clinic's towels, spent some time on the phone with Judge Bradly, again, and filtered though the little details that continually needed his attention.

When Cathy knocked on his door, he realized that he had worked through lunch. She apologized for interrupting him, and asked for a decision that only he could make.

She seemed shocked when he calmly thought for a minute and gave her an answer. "You don't need me to come back after you've given it some thought? Aren't you in a good mood today."

He had been. But her glib smirk and tone caused him to scowl at her.

"Never mind, I'll get right on that. Thanks for your time."

"Oh, Cathy, if Dr. West calls again, please impart that I have no interest in bringing in a partner at this time."

She left with a nod. He would have to be very careful about who saw the kinder, gentler Dr. Crane. It wouldn't do to have his staff speculating on his love life.

After a late lunch at home and a brief, heated argument with Jack, Samuel decided to trust his instincts. Settling into his home office, he asked John to send Amanda in. It was time to take the next step.

She spoke haltingly, staring at the yarn passing through her hands, until Samuel realized what was bothering him. Stepping around the desk, he lifted several feet of finished scarf off the floor. He compared the length to what he remembered from the night before and began asking pointed questions.

"Do you knit even faster when you are alone?"

"Not really, why?"

"This scarf is at least twice as long as it should be, given the amount of free time you've had since last night."

Her fingers stopped completely as she stared at her feet.

"Amanda, did you sleep at all?" The head shake was barely noticeable. "Why not?"

"... Nightmares..." John had been right. She looked as though she might actually break if he pushed too hard. Samuel would need to read her reactions very carefully.

"I can help you banish your nightmares tonight. I do want you to sleep, but for the long term, we will need to help you face them. Can we agree on that?"

"I don't want to deal with any of it."

"Nevertheless..."

She clenched her jaw as she looked away from him. But this silence, clearly born of stubbornness, he could live with. Actually, it indicated that her will was intact. That was a good sign. He didn't argue when she stood to go.

Samuel steepled his hands in front of his tired eyes and shifted his focus from fingertips to the weather vane on top of the barn. After a few transitions his eyes felt more relaxed, and the twinge of pain eased inside his skull. How was he going to get through to Amanda?

Picking up the phone, he smiled as he jotted down the addresses supplied by directory assistance. A soft knock on the door interrupted his thoughts, and he invited John in, mainly because the man was offering a cup of rich, Italian roast. He savored the aroma with the first mouthful. Merlin, coffee was amazing.

John smirked at him and Samuel knew his attention was lost. He might as well enjoy the company, so he gestured to the chair. And stood abruptly when John picked up a ball of pale gold yarn, two needles and miles of unfinished scarf.

Samuel felt something icy cold twist in his stomach.

# Chapter Seven

Chapter 7 of 28

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

## Chapter Seven

Samuel cursed himself for a fool. It did not bode well for Amanda's frame of mind that she had abandoned the activity that seemed to offer the most comfort. Storming down the hall he realized he was frightening John, the man was a sickly white color, trailing after him frantically asking for an explanation.

Samuel couldn't name his fear. Wouldn't name his fear. That would make it too real. Right now he was riding a wave of detachment and disbelief.

He didn't know if he knocked on her door or just shouldered on through, but he was suddenly standing in Amanda's room, staring at the handfuls of chestnut hair strewn around her chair. The mirror reflected glazed, haunted eyes surrounded by the worst butchery of a haircut that Samuel had seen on anyone over the age of ten.

When John tried to step past, Samuel grabbed his arm and pushed him out the door. She was still holding the kitchen shears and startling her would not be a good idea.

"Hand me the scissors. Now." Thank Merlin he could control his voice; it was calm and commanding. Clearly the girl thought so too because she carefully placed them, handle first, in his outstretched hand. *Okay, breathe, Samuel. Good. Now start dealing with the fallout one step at a time.* "Mr. Wolfe, will you help Amanda clear this mess? And John, don't let her out of your sight."

Alone at the kitchen table, Samuel restructured the evening. Mary would be happy to see what she could do with Amanda's remaining hair. Robert agreed to pick up supper for five from the diner. And Troy would be willing to take Jack to dinner at the steakhouse in Helena, by the scenic route. Now Samuel needed only to prepare himself for his part in the evening.

He was amazed that Mary was able to salvage a cute, if very short, hairstyle from the refugee look that Amanda had created. Even so, dinner was a somber event, and Robert and Mary had the dishwasher loaded before Samuel even noticed that his plate had been cleared. He could not say what he had eaten or if it was even edible.

After quick goodbyes, Samuel was alone again with John and Amanda. He swept them both into his office and settled Amanda into the chair. Glaring a challenge at Wolfe, he tore into his locked cabinet and transferred the rack of empty vials to his desk after palming a syringe into his pocket.

He took an extra moment to center his mind before he made eye contact with the girl. He intended to convey an easy competence. Alarming her would only make the process more difficult, so he began with something she would be expecting.

"I need to run some follow-up blood work." He indicated the vials. He didn't want to make her feel bullied, nor did he want her to feel free to decline, so he was already rolling up her sleeve as he asked, "May I?"

It worked. She nodded consent without hesitation. The routine blood work was not strictly necessary, but it did allow a nice segue for the true purpose of this cozy little gathering.

Having finished drawing blood, Samuel pulled the sedative from his pocket and chose a vein. "This will make the last test a bit easier." Easier for Samuel, but he didn't need to share that with her. Keeping his hand on Amanda's arm, he waited to feel the drug start to work. "John, can you slip this into the stand?"

John's face went quite grey as he closed his hand around the tube of still warm blood. Samuel snatched it back without letting go. "Wolfe," he barked at the swooning man, "Sit in my chair, put your head between your knees, and for pity sake, don't forget to breathe." For the love of Pete, the man was about to faint. "John, what are you doing?"

"God, Sev, I'm trying to do what you asked. Is it necessary to yell at me?" Even as he settled into the chair, irritation was staining his cheeks. Good. Pissy was better than unconscious, and now he could focus completely on Amanda.

He felt her muscles going slack as her eyes drifted closed. After a count of five, Samuel spoke firmly. "Open your eyes." She complied easily, and a silent spell later, her mind was open to him.

He had prepared himself for hell. If what he found was less frightening, it was definitely more disturbing. He saw her sitting on the sand at the shore, the sun high in the sky. She was sorting through textbooks in a small dingy room. A young, round Amanda was flying over the handlebars of her bike, then crying over the bleeding scrape on her knee. None of it was what Crane was looking for.

He tried directing the flow of ideas, but only felt himself pushed aside against a giant curtain, the dark fabric woven with the giant image of a tree. And then she was walking through London with Weasley, holding hands and chattering about University. Samuel had seen quite enough. He broke the bond.

"John, there are two vials on the corner of my desk. Can you hand me the red one without dropping it?"

John snarled about ungrateful bastards and warm blood, but he carefully placed the potion in Samuel's hand. It took a few moments for the headache to recede, then Samuel stood and retrieved the other potion.

After tucking Amanda into her bed with a healthy dose of Dreamless Sleep, Samuel returned to the kitchen with John following in his wake.

He'd deal with the kitchen counters later, right now he was busy filling a pasta bowl with praline and rocky road ice cream, several bananas, caramel and hot fudge. He was licking his thumb when he saw John's smirk. It couldn't be helped, so he held out a second spoon and shrugged when John took it.

The kitchen table was as far as Samuel wished to go, and they were scraping the last of the caramel from the bottom of the bowl before he was ready to share his thoughts.

"I don't know, John. They're locked up tight. Maybe she won't speak of the events because she doesn't have access to those memories. Or maybe she's just keeping them from me. Regardless, I have no idea what prompted that little scene this afternoon. And until I do, we're going to have to keep a very close eye on the girl."

"She wasn't suicidal when I brought her here."

"She was catatonic, Wolfe. And she isn't technically suicidal now, I'm simply proceeding with caution."

"Do you think I blame you? Stop right there. I just don't know how all of this works. Allen said I should expect things to get worse before they get better, but I never

imagined that she might harm herself."

Samuel sniffed in response.

"Hey, I'm sorry, okay? This is the blasted Ministry's fault. They should have been more focused on tracking down those animals. She disappeared in broad daylight, from Diagon Alley."

"I don't need to be protected. By you or bloody Potter."

"I just can't help but think that I could have prevented all of this, if I'd brought facts to light right away."

"John! Save it for your priest or your shrink. I can't deal with your misplaced guilt as well as my own. But for what it's worth, I wouldn't have gone back. I still won't. Let Potter and Shackbolt sort it out."

"Samuel..."

"No. It was wrong for me to bark at you. I'm sorry."

"Pardon? I must have misunderstood."

"Oh, shut it, you great poof. I'm not going to say it again."

"Not even if I...." As John whispered the rest in his ear, Samuel felt his face grow hot. The kitchen suddenly seemed quite small, but moving to the deck didn't seem to help either. John still knew all the right buttons to push to leave Samuel breathless and dizzy.

"Maybe. Perhaps you should find out," Samuel said even as he shifted out of John's reach and stepped to the rail.

"You're a bloody tease, Samuel Crane."

"Says the man who was just offering to trade favors for a repeated apology." But he was already turning back to John. "I'm really making an arse of myself, aren't I?"

The man was little more than a shadow in the dying light. "You once told me that 'mind magic' left you with a niffler in your skull. I'm sorry you had to do that again." The shadow was guiding him to sit on the bench and firm hands began working the knotted muscles between his shoulders.

"Hurts at the base of my skull, C1, or C2 I think..." Pain was making him whine like Weasley. God, Samuel, shut up.

"Shh... Do you feel how much tension you're carrying? Relax your arms and shoulders. I'll get to your neck soon enough." As the warmth of the fingers worked through the knots and cut through years of resentment, suddenly it was easier to accept that he was lost. Lost from the carefully constructed distance that protected him from the hard, cold world. Lost from the ruthlessly controlled facade he projected to the masses. And lost from the need to protect himself from John. "Let's move somewhere that you can lie down. Hmm?"

"Wouldn't be so tense if you would do this every night." The words were out before he could stop himself. He could feel his muscles tightening again with his cringe.  
*damn...*

"I'm sure we can work something out. Come on now, let's get you to bed. We've got an early drive to Missoula in the morning." And Samuel forgot to be annoyed.

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That night, he woke in a cold sweat to the silver light of the growing moon. He couldn't breathe and his heart was racing as his past weighed heavily down on him. There was a snore as the weight shifted and he gasped for air. Not his past weighing down this time, but John.

"Gerroff me!" And he shoved the man away, hard.

"Sev? What's up?"

"You're crushing me, that's what."

The wolf didn't release him, but rolled to his side, pulling Samuel with him. "Samuel. Your heart's racing. Are you all right?"

"If you must know, I was dreaming of Prague." Silence pressed between them as John must have been remembering that botched drop as well.

It was supposed to be easy. That passing of information. Two nondescript men, meeting in a foreign town full of tourists. A hunted man and a sometimes beast sharing a hotel room for one night with no fanfare. Plenty of time to compare notes, pass a potion, make amends.

How Moody had learned his whereabouts, Samuel still wondered. He was expecting John when the Aurors blasted down the door. Vicious curses were thrown by both sides. The third floor window was his only escape. And then he was hunted in earnest.

Where better to disappear than to the ghettos filled with the dregs of humanity, most of them looking to disappear as well? The next five days were spent blending in with prostitutes and drug dealers. Only the roughest crowd would sufficiently dissuade the rabid Aurors on his tail. Even the smallest spell could attract deadly attention, so Samuel survived by his wits alone.

He watched the moon wax full with the Wolfsbane still hidden in his pocket, wondering where John Wolfe would hide. He cursed his foul fortune, he cursed his empty stomach, and he cursed Alastor Moody. Then he found the nastiest bint in the ghetto and threw himself on her dubious mercy. Vena had him running drugs through the worst parts of town in exchange for food well past its prime, and protection from 'Interpol'.

As the moon waned, so did his hope. This time he'd carried a name. It was vital that Lupin be told the identity of the mole within the Order. If John didn't find him soon, Samuel would have to risk discovery and arrest. He'd send the name to bloody Potter if he must.

He was renting an owl in Warsaw when Wolfe grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out of the shop. Haggard and haunted, John could still easily overpower the battered, hungry fugitive.

As soon as they had slipped into the gloom of the alley, Samuel felt the sharp tug of the Portkey that dropped them inside the 'safe house'. He had barely found his feet when John was shoving a satchel into his hands.

"I'm done with this cloak and dagger business. The risks are too great and the rewards, paltry by comparison. For good or ill, this will all be over within a fortnight. Take the boy and go. Your new identities and contact are in that case. Don't take time to pack."

He frantically slipped the greasy takeout menu into Wolfe's hands. "The name of your mole. When you feel merciful, remember the Creeveys." He paused a moment, then decided. "Perhaps you should let Alastor handle it."

And then the wolf was gone. Leaving him with a lonely, broken child and a trail of breadcrumbs leading to the new world.

He took a moment to anchor himself in the present, focusing on the soft bedding and warm arm pinning him against John's body. "I've long wondered, would you have helped me leave the continent if Moody hadn't found me?"

"What? I'd had those papers for weeks when you contacted me to set up the drop. Bloody Alastor."

"You do know that man is psychotic, right?"

John simply snorted.

## Chapter Eight

*Chapter 8 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Eight

Somehow Samuel survived the Saturday morning trek through the farmer's market. He despised crowds and could happily live without fresh food of any kind if it allowed him to avoid this crush of people.

John, however, seemed to thrive on the energy. One minute he was chatting with the beekeeper, selecting chunks of sticky, amber honeycomb; the next he was laughing with the girl from the flower farm; then he spotted a local organic farmer and left with another bag full of produce. The wolf was positively giddy about carrots, beets, and tomatoes, and Samuel smiled at the flush of happiness on John's face, then immediately mastered his expression.

Finally, at the end of the row, he spotted his own herbal contact. A square card table boasted nine bundles of terribly wilted leaves. The herbs looked pathetic and the Muggles were passing the stand quickly, all the while trying to avoid the proprietor's eyes. The wrinkled old man wore filthy blue jeans and an old flannel shirt. A huge straw hat eclipsed more than half of his face.

The bastard was as surly and shrewd as he looked. "My expenses have gone up. Dark herbs you've been wanting from me, not just anyone who could get 'em, you know. Forty should cover though."

"You slimy old blighter. You can't expect me to pay double what you overcharged me last month."

In the end, Samuel accepted that his wallet would have to take the hit. There really was nowhere else to get what he needed. With the full moon approaching and a Potion simmering back at home, he simply couldn't do without.

"Someday, Miller, I will find a reputable supplier, and you will be very sorry for your folly today." Samuel growled at the old man. The cur had the nerve to tip his hat in reply.

"Samuel, you can't pay that much..."

"Close your mouth, Wolfe. We can haggle over costs behind closed doors, but I do believe we have time for coffee before Jack sends out a search party."

Samuel felt the press of humanity ease from his chest as he claimed a table in the back of the coffee house. John's smile was far too wide for Samuel's comfort as he settled in with a mug of something frothy and Samuel's own black coffee. He wanted to ask if the wolf had eaten someone's canary. The question died on his lips, however, as the barista delivered a huge plate piled high with whipped cream covering a crepe that was positively oozing chocolate.

"Chocolate is supposed to have a positive effect on brain chemistry. Even better than sex."

"John, shush. We're in public. Besides, that is a highly simplified explanation of a terribly complex chemical interaction."

"All right, but you're missing out on something truly amazing." John's eyes fluttered closed as he savored the forkful of chocolate decadence. After a moment, the wolf remembered the bone from before. "Samuel, what plant could possibly be worth forty dollars?"

Samuel took a slow breath before responding. This could be a long conversation. "Glacier lily roots. He poaches them from the Northern slopes in Glacier Park. It's a long drive, the bears like them, and the fine for taking them is much more expensive than overpaying him."

"I don't remember you trying to find that herb back home."

"They replace the Valerian root, and thankfully you show no allergic reactions to the Glacier lily."

"I thought that was from my laundry soap."

"No, you should stay away from anything that includes Valerian roots or shoots. They both contain high levels of a specific protein, the leaves, however... never mind. Just be sure to ask me before taking any new potions."

"So when you moved out here, you came across the Glacier lily and recognized its full potential."

"Yes, John. I saw a picture in a book and knew it would work; I tossed some in your next batch of Wolfsbane and sent it off with Fawkes." He could feel the sarcasm dripping from his words. "How irresponsible do you think I am?" He closed his mouth quickly when he realized he was pointing at John with his fork.

"Easy, Samuel." John caught his hand and guided the fork toward the chocolate. "I think you need to eat some of this."

Samuel felt irritation melting away with the chocolate on his tongue. "Just as long as you know that I wouldn't use you as a guinea pig."

"Why didn't you tell me about the Valerian allergy?" John sounded curious, rather than accusatory.

"We were always busy with... other things back then."

"But you noticed."

"Of course I noticed. It would be hard to miss the raised red bumps that showed up a few hours after you swallowed the potion. What took some time was discovering which component was causing the reaction."

"All that time and trouble, spent on me?"

"You can stop preening."

"No, Samuel, I'm serious. Putting all of that effort into a potion for me... I'm just... well, thank you."

"You're welcome. Now do you understand why I'm willing to meet his price?"

John gave a sullen nod before his face brightened with a new idea. "Have you tried growing it in your garden?"

"Wrong climate. They grow in a very narrow range of conditions."

"There has to be a way..."

"Down, Wolfe. I have a more pressing issue to discuss. You intimated to me that you hold the Ministry responsible for Amanda's abduction. Do I understand you correctly?" After John's wary nod, Samuel plowed ahead. "Perhaps the clinic should send them a bill."

"If this is about the money, Samuel, I can..."

"This is most definitely not about money itself. That is simply the most effective motivator for change when dealing with incompetent bureaucrats and politicians. Also, I found the locations of a few high-end knitting shops in town and would dearly love to turn Amanda loose with the Ministry's credit card."

John stared at him with a blank expression until Samuel wondered if he'd pushed the man too far. And then a wicked smile filled his face. "There are several folks I'd like to see fairly compensated in such a manner..."

"And Amanda is the only one with influence over the politicians at this time. Keep your eye on the ball, John. Can you push this through?"

Wolfe closed his eyes for a brief time before pulling out his cell phone. "Harry, it's, uh, John... Yes, that's right, but I can't be more specific right now... That's great, but actually I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I want you to bill Scrimgeour for Amanda's ongoing expenses and treatment... No, the clinic's billing statement should suffice... I'll be sure to pass that along... Okay, thanks."

John's eyes sparkled with mirth as he tucked the phone away. "Harry wants to know if you played Beater for your house, and thinks your plan is 'bloody brilliant'. He's certain that, with the threat of publicity, he can push through what you'd charge an 'A List' client."

Samuel sniffed his disdain. "As long as Potter approves..."

"Oh, stop. Let's go spend the Ministry's money. That alone will be therapeutic for me."

## Chapter Nine

*Chapter 9 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Nine

Samuel was relieved when Jack's plane finally lifted off the runway.

Assistance was very much appreciated, but Samuel didn't like feeling that he was living under a microscope. Knowing how easily he could read John left him with few illusions that he could hide anything important from the ever intuitive Jack.

When the chips were down, though, Jack had been completely supportive, helping to outfit Amanda with several months' worth of yarn and supplies, goading Samuel to allow himself a second chance with John, and soothing Troy's bruised ego. But Samuel had been longing to settle into a routine. Now was his chance.

He smiled at the homey sound of the washing machine as he locked the Bronco in the garage. It would be nice to share domestic chores with John forever. But right now nothing was certain, and he'd have to enjoy each moment as it came.

He stopped short in the kitchen doorway and felt his pulse race with sudden irritation. John was sitting alone at the table, reading 'Moby Dick'.

"What are you doing?" He didn't try to hide the simmering anger.

"I didn't think you'd mind. It was on the top shelf in the den; I haven't moved your bookmark from chapter three. Is there a problem I should know about?" John clearly wasn't hiding his ire, either.

"Amanda?" One word, and yet it dripped with sarcasm and accusation. Could the wolf have possibly forgotten the drama from Friday night?

"Samuel, it's okay. She's in the den with Troy. She seems to like him and you wanted her to gain some friends... Is that a problem?"

He felt like an idiot. Of course John would keep Amanda under tight supervision. The only problem with this solution was that Samuel hadn't thought of it himself. But it wouldn't do to admit too much. "Well you could have mentioned as much right away."

John clearly saw through his posturing, but the man just shrugged his shoulders. "Troy and Amanda have already eaten. I thought we could have lunch in here."

The food was, once again, flawless. And with a full stomach, Samuel felt more charitable. "We will all weep on the day that I prepare a meal."

"Pasta."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just make pasta. You do make an exceptional sauce, it must be enough like a potion to hold your interest." John gave him a warm smile with the compliment. "Or you could keep washing the dishes and we can call it even."

"Somehow the five minutes that I spend loading the dishwasher does not seem to be an equitable trade for the time involved in cooking palatable meals."

"I eat too. So I think it's more than fair."

"Everyone's a critic."

"Samuel, Harry sent me something today."

"And why does that involve me?"

"It's your sixth year Potions text. I seem to be returning it to you again." Remus gave him a wary, evaluating look. Samuel felt as if he'd been punched when he recalled the last time a Potter returned that same book to him.

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Twenty-three-year-old Severus was lying on his side, staring across the black lake. His stomach complained that he had missed lunch, he was damp from the grass, and dusk was taking over the sky. He couldn't be arsed to do more than shiver. Mission accomplished. He would teach at Hogwarts, making him privy to the secret comings and goings of Dumbledore. Or so the Dark Lord believed.

He would also be privy to the comings and goings of the Death Eaters. Or so Dumbledore believed. What an asinine assignment. Spying on wizards who both knew he was spying. Ratatask, carrying insults back and forth. A tool, not a person.

He must be very careful to never lead the Dark Lord to wonder exactly how much information Snape was carrying to the Order of the Phoenix. Of course, he could never let on how much he was holding back from either wizard, but Dumbledore at least, wouldn't kill him. The Dark Lord would do so much worse. He was so very dead.

So that was it. The Dark Lord held the bigger hammer. At least he'd never deluded himself with fairy tales of personal loyalty. Pawns, they were all pawns, and he could not afford to think otherwise. No meaningful friendships, no ethical pondering; this was his own arse at risk. Who cared that Lily had been a friend. Dumbledore didn't need Snape to tell him that her son was one of only two children that fit the terms of the prophecy. Every wizard for himself.

Live or die, though, really didn't seem to matter anymore.

"Severus? Why are you lying in the wet grass?"

"What are you doing here, Lupin? I thought you were running with Greyback's pack. What do you think you're... Ah, I see, trying to play both ends against the middle? I'm afraid I've beaten you to it."

"Doesn't spying lose its effectiveness when you're known to be a spy?"

"I'm afraid this game of cloak and dagger is far too complex and subtle for your Gryffindor mind to follow. But let me tell you simply. Both sides know that I carry information. It's the value of what I give each one that tips the scales. I'm safe as long as I remain more of an asset than a liability to both."

Snape smiled evilly as he continued. "You, however, are far from safe. The Dark Lord is skeptical of all his minions' loyalties, especially bloody arrogant Gryffindors who are known to be best friends with James Potter. It would only take one word from me to advise them all of your true allegiance."

"What do you want?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean."

"You want something. From me, specifically. What. Do. You. Want?"

"Your contemptible little friends took pleasure in making my life hell. Black even tried to get me killed. But do you know what's worse than that? The bastard who leaned back and did nothing to stop it, polishing his prefect's badge."

He couldn't stop, so he blundered on without taking a breath. "I want you to know how very much I hate you, your arrogance, and the rules that were broken to protect you. But Lily Evans was a friend. So tell her to be careful in whom she places her trust. And ask if she remembers how to brew Shrinking Solution."

"Done. What then?"

"I never want to see your flea-bitten hide again."

He watched then as Lupin walked away. The man's feet barely left the ground as he hunched under what must be a heavy load of guilt and regret. Good. It would be much easier if Remus never knew how Severus really thought of him.

Wanting someone who clearly didn't want him. Craving hurt and rejection, it seemed. Severus knew that he was a sick man.

The next week, after the full moon waned, Severus told himself that it was nothing more than morbid curiosity that led him to meet with Lupin in the Hogwarts kitchens, an asinine place to meet, but definitely better than Lupin's suggestion of the Hog's Head.

A battered Potions textbook lay on the table across from an equally battered-looking Remus. "Lily asked me to return that to you, with her thanks for your concern over Harry's safety." As the wolf paused to stare at him, Severus simply nodded. "As for myself, I wanted to ask, how can I make amends? I doubt I'll survive many more moon cycles. I want to pay my karmic debt before I go."

That caught Snape's attention. "What happened? The transformation would be debilitating, certainly, but the effects should only be temporary."

"Careful, Severus, somebody might suspect that you care. I'm a bit short on safe places to lock myself up. Running far into the wild seemed the best plan. Let's just say that steel-leg traps are only illegal if the trapper gets caught."

"My God, Remus!"

"You might want to curtail those Muggle oaths; I don't think your lineage is favored among your new friends. I'm not looking for sympathy. I just wanted to try to make things right between us."

Severus felt something dangerous and frightening twisting in his gut. Hope. Dammit, he didn't want to risk rejection. Too late, because he was already considering how to minimize the external risks. So only his heart could be crushed. "Chess."

"Excuse me?"



"Meet me on Wednesdays for chess. I don't have anyone to match wits against, and I would hate to lose my edge."

"Chess. Right. Severus, I want you to know two things right now. First, that I am completely aware that chess is just a front for some dastardly plot you've cooked up. And second, because I am truly sincere in my penance, I will knowingly walk into your trap. May Merlin have mercy upon my furry hide."

"That does bring up an interesting point. I find that I am not entirely comfortable meeting an unrestrained werewolf on the night of the full moon... What to do?"

"We could simply meet on a different night that week."

"No. Unacceptable. I have, however, come across a potion called 'Wolfsbane', which would allow the werewolf to retain his human mind. It's a complicated brew and will take most of the month to complete. But Albus has always treated you as a favorite. I'm sure he'd order his new Potions master to brew it, if he knew it could help you."

"Why would you do that for me, Severus?"

"Because, if I ever learn by any means that your wolf has again run free, I will be certain that society at large is informed of your affliction. For the public good, you understand."

"You're blackmailing a werewolf." Remus sounded stunned.

"Merely applying a leash." He felt very satisfied with himself that evening.

But three months later, Lily was dead.

## Chapter Ten

*Chapter 10 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Ten

Samuel felt the room grow suddenly warm and his lunch turn sour in his stomach. He panicked as the bathroom doorknob slipped in his hand. It twisted on the second try, and Samuel reached his goal with only moments to spare.

He tasted the bitter burn of acid in his mouth, gasping and sobbing around a lump of guilt and shame.

He rarely allowed himself to feel his failure so deeply. But this time there was a cool flannel pressed to the back of his neck, a glass of clear water, and soft words of comfort babbled in his ear.

The sun was low in the sky when he realized that he was tangled in an afghan, leaning against John. His head was now pounding and he felt hot and dry and thirsty.

"...time is it?"

"It's okay, Samuel, do you want more water?"

Samuel could taste that misdirection and sat up sharply, squinting at the clock. Eight-twenty, and three hours of brewing remained or the Wolfsbane would be ruined. He swung his feet to the floor and began moving forward.

He found Amanda in the den with Troy. She was bent over the desk, writing carefully and methodically; he was tucked into a nearby chair with a large stack of University catalogs. Graduate school then. Troy certainly had the necessary intellect. Personal feelings aside, it would open many doors for the young man.

But right now Samuel was pressed for time. "I hadn't realized that you were considering further education. I think you would do well. But for the moment, I need to focus entirely on brewing, so can you stay a bit longer?"

Troy agreed so quickly that Samuel decided to pay closer attention to the young people, just not tonight. Potion to brew. Imperative. But his head was sending pounding signals of pain. Aspirin and water would help. He'd find both in the lab.

His hands were shaking, not enough for others to notice, but more than he'd like while slicing roots. He sighed as he closed his hand around a familiar bottle in his cupboard, then cursed when he realized it was empty. He was digging frantically through drawers when John stepped in with a glass of water and two white tablets.

"Your hands are shaking. Here, this should help." He spared the tablets the barest glance.

"No. Not while I'm handling potions ingredients. Aspirin would work, but I'm out."

And then the household seemed to mobilize around him. John was pulling him back into the den and Troy was grabbing car keys. By the time Samuel had regained control, he'd been dosed with aspirin and threatened with forced feeding.

He tried complaining to Amanda about being bossed and bullied, but conceded the point when she stared straight through him. Perhaps his best course would be to shut up and accept the help as offered. He found he couldn't disagree when Troy declared him feverish. But the Wolfsbane wouldn't wait.

So in the end, John stayed with Samuel in the lab, and Troy and Amanda were left to their own devices. The chair in the corner felt padded. He wondered who had incanted the change, but then struggled to put his mind back on brewing. "Slice the stems with the grain first, matchstick sized pieces; then cut across the grain at one quarter inch intervals." When he wasn't trying to be Alpha Wolf, John could follow directions quite nicely. Samuel smiled lightly as he felt the pain receding. Or was he just dissociating? No matter, didn't hurt as much and the chair offered perfect neck support. Samuel let himself float.

There was a hand on his forehead again. "Everything is chopped, sliced, and squeezed the way you asked. Can you talk me through the brewing?"

Keeping his focus on the potion required Samuel's full concentration. And finally they reached the first resting phase and with it thirty minutes of peace. "Samuel, stay with me right now. Just three more steps, okay?"

"Why didn't you ever check on me? After Prague, you never came. Wanted you to come."

"I thought you hated me for pushing you. Using you to get information back to the Order. You were waiting for me?"

"You're so much nicer when you aren't trying to be top dog."

"Yes, but sometimes you need to be pushed."

"John, what happened after we left?"

"Ron killed Nagini, and Harry cornered Voldermort..."

"No, I don't care about that. With you. Tell me about you."

"Things were pretty chaotic for a while. The Ministry put a lot of pressure on Harry. He's learned to play politics to get things done, though. And the first thing he thought about was the future. Don't ask me how he managed to repeal Umbridge's Edicts, but within two days, Minerva was offering me the Defense job. We thought the curse was broken with Tom's death. But such is life."

"What do you mean?"

"I made it through end of year exams again, and then Minerva offered the Transfiguration post to Dora. So I quickly found myself a professorship here in the states."

"You've been in the States for four years? Teaching Defense?"

"No, Literature. At a small private college. It's nice, actually."

"Why would Nymphadora teach anything?"

"She had a really hard time adapting after Hermione was killed."

"John..." Samuel's boneless peace was receding and he leaned forward in his chair, "what happened to the Granger girl?" He was pleased to hear the steel in his own voice again.

"Harry and Ron had planned to go into Auror training together. But when Harry realized the amount of power he held over the Ministry, he decided to focus his energy on politics. Ron lacks both Harry's cache and his financial resources, so he needed to continue with the original plan. I don't know why Granger joined him, but she definitely had the grades and reputation to get whatever she wanted."

Samuel felt cold as he stared at John. "Keep talking, Wolfe."

"Samuel, she was a truly good person. But she was never as quick as the boys, not physically. Dora meant to protect her, that's why she requested Hermione as her partner. They were following a lead on Macnair, but the house was booby trapped. Dora ducked, Hermione didn't. At least that's how Kingsley thinks it happened. Dora won't talk about it. She withdrew from everyone, including me."

John took a deep breath and continued, "She dumped me two days before Minerva mentioned offering her the post. I left, hoping it would make things easier for her. Seems like it worked, 'cause she's Head of Gryffindor now."

"You're a real arse, you know? What would you have done if she'd tipped the other way? Lead her on even more. Marry her and pretend she lights your fire. Merlin, what a mess."

"Wait a minute, you're jealous. Have you forgotten that you pushed me away? Right after you realized what Draco was trying to do... Oh, God. You didn't mean it, did you? You were trying to protect me. I'm an idiot, fortune's fool not once but twice. Samuel, I'm so sorry."

"And Nymphadora?"

"I can't mend that. I don't feel what she wants me to feel. She has a chance now to find someone who can."

"John, how do you think Nymphadora will feel if she ever discovers your preferences?" His voice sounded sharp to his own ears, like Minerva scolding a student. But he couldn't let this go.

"Samuel, what's done is done. I can't change it. Let it go, okay?"

"The problem with old business, John, is that it has a way of re-emerging in new relationships."

"You think that my dealings with Tonks four years ago will poison our relationship now?"

"No, John, I think that our failings poisoned your chances for a healthy relationship with anyone at the time, and that trying to pass yourself as a straight man was incredibly selfish. I further think that now is the time to put our old business to rest, for good."

## Chapter Eleven

*Chapter 11 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Eleven

If suffering from a fever stole the last vestiges of dignity from a man, being coddled by a werewolf was completely emasculating.

"I don't care what my bloody temperature is. I'm exhausted, wracked with body aches, and covered in foul smelling sweat. Can't you please just let me sleep?"

"Blame it on Troy. He told me that if I don't give him a number before he gets back to town, this will be the first stop the ambulance makes and they'll drag you back to St. Pat's. So the choice is yours." The damned werewolf was making ultimatums.

His hand felt heavy as he reached for the bloody instrument. "Fine, hand it over. You can go away now."

"Sorry, can't do that. Troy's orders. I'm to watch you like a hawk."

"I've never seen you watch a hawk."

"Amusing. Close your mouth."

Samuel closed his eyes to avoid seeing John, who was sitting in the chair beside the bed, undoubtedly staring. When the stupid thing beeped, he gave it a glance and turned it off. "Not so bad... tell Troy 99.1."

"Give me that." John held the thermometer in one hand, and the cordless phone in the other. "Troy, how do I recover the last read? Thanks... 101.6... okay, I'll let him know. See you in a few."

"Would you like some clear broth, Your Insufferableness?"

"So you're not hauling me off to the hospital?"

"Not yet, at any rate. Since your fever's coming down, Troy has offered to spend a few minutes teaching me to drive. Do you want Amanda to sit with you, or come with us?"

"I'll be fine indefinitely, take the girl, enjoy the sunlight. But first explain to me how a college professor can live in the US for four years and not learn how to drive."

John seemed to relax slightly. "Small campus, small town, I could get wherever I needed to go on my bike. And driving would hardly get me to London in any case."

"When do you return?"

John looked puzzled. "What? Oh, I'm taking an extended leave of absence. The Dean is willing to work with me, for a time at least. But I've actually been considering accepting a post nearby."

"Why would you do that?"

"Let's just say, I have hope that we can resolve our old business."

He was alone after that, fighting a battle with exhaustion. At first he was drifting on a tide of delirium, his maudlin thoughts awash in a sea of uncertainty. Where would he be in a few months? Where would John be? Who would be left in his life? And then he gave himself over to sleep.

He dreamed of Maine, walking along the coast with John; the tide was coming in, and Troy was calling to them from a row boat. Troy was turned to the shore, waving and smiling as a swell crested behind him. Samuel tried to yell, but Troy kept waving as the water engulfed his boat.

He felt the panicked beating of his heart as he lay on his bed, gasping for breath. Troy, in danger. No, just a dream. Samuel fought his way to consciousness. He could hear Troy in the kitchen, happily chatting with Amanda and John. Troy and Amanda. Troy in danger. *Bloody hell!*

"John!"

And the man was at his side. Urging him to lie back and breathe slowly. Trying desperately to calm him. But Samuel couldn't allow himself to be soothed. *Troy.*

"Troy! I can't calm him."

And then the boy was assessing him. Touching his forehead, counting his pulse. Samuel was having trouble catching his breath.

"Easy, Samuel. Easy." And then the boy spoke softly to John. "Not convulsions, maybe a panic attack. But it could also be something more serious. Call Dave. If he's still in town, ask him to bring the ambulance here."

"Troy, please, no ambulance. I'm all right. Just give me a minute to breathe." Samuel watched as John struggled between the desire to follow his request and real fear for his well being. Their panic was the motivator that he'd needed. When he spoke again, it was in a calm voice. "I'm fine, but I do need to speak with Troy. Alone."

John gave a shaky smile, but closed the door as he left the room. If that was all it took to gain the man's cooperation, maybe he should be ill more often. Or maybe not. Samuel didn't care for the muzzy headed feeling that encompassed his mind.

"Troy, I've done you a disservice in not speaking with you sooner. We need to discuss your growing feelings for Amanda." Samuel was fighting through the pain to focus on Troy. The boy looked mildly surprised at Samuel's declaration.

"Is that what prompted your panic attack? I truly don't see that it's any of your business, Samuel." Troy's face took on a pinched, closed expression. Suddenly the boy looked harder, older.

Samuel tried to hold on to reason. "Troy, she isn't thinking clearly, and frankly neither are you. The fact that we haven't admitted her to the clinic does in no way remove your ethical obligation to maintain a professional distance emotionally."

"Ethical obligation?" Troy sounded more angry than confused.

"Yes, medical ethics. The guidelines for treating family may be somewhat nebulous, but those for romantic partners are quite clear. Don't."

"Learned all of this in medical school, did you? Was that Johns Hopkins or Harvard? Or do you even know? You have no room to lecture me about ethics, Dr. Crane."

Samuel took three slow breaths. His hands were shaking as he fisted them in the sheets. He could feel the heat in his face. He could also see Troy's anger falter. The boy sat on the edge of the bed and placed his hand on Samuel's shoulder, concern winning out over anger.

Samuel felt his own temper wane. "Troy, you really should learn the difference between rage and respiratory distress. Yes, I've had bad choices thrust upon me. And I've made some others, all on my own. Perhaps they enable me to speak from experience. You know that I wish only to save you heartache."

But Troy was clearly finished with the conversation as he stood and stiffly straightened his sleeves. "You should let John take care of you tonight. I'll stop by tomorrow to check on you. Good night, Samuel." The door closed behind Troy with a decisive click.

# Chapter Twelve

Chapter 12 of 28

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

## Chapter Twelve

"Is that black ice on the bridge?"

What was the wolf on about? The sun high in the sky and the temperature in the eighties on Thursday. "No." Thankfully, Samuel was feeling more himself after three days of rest. Now he needed to sort through a week's worth of patient files.

"Samuel, you're not even looking at the road. At least Troy was paying attention."

Samuel marked his place and looked up at John. The man was hardly a teenager with questionable judgment stacked on top of inexperience, needing to be watched closely. But they were traveling on a winding mountain road, which led Samuel to question his own judgement. "I'm sorry, John. Slow down a bit before the turn. The goats like to gather on the road for the next mile and a half."

Samuel waited for John to navigate the curves and then opened the newest can of worms. "I'm becoming increasingly concerned about Amanda's lack of recall."

"So still no progress? Is that normal?"

"Many people avoid discussing painful events by claiming to have no recollection, but I have always perceived a certain amount of deception in those claims. If Amanda is hiding memories, she has done an excellent job of deceiving herself as well."

John clenched his jaw for a moment. "That makes no sense. If she had completely repressed the memories, then why the nightmares, why cut off her hair?"

"Precisely, but I searched both the conscious and sub-conscious portions of her mind. I found no sign of modified memories either. Perhaps the anti-anxiety meds are interfering..." Samuel let the thought hang between them.

"What happens if you stop those meds?" By the tone of skepticism, he knew John could reason out the ramifications of taking them away.

"Likely more nightmares, panic attacks, isolation leading to depression. But she will deal with the memories one way or another, have no doubt. I still hold out hope that we can minimize the severity of the impact on the rest of her life. She will have to face it. She needs to remember and recognize that she survived." *Come on, Samuel, channel your inner bastard.* "I'm going to start weaning her off the meds early next week. I can't handle that and the full moon at the same time."

He was surprised when John nodded. "That sounds prudent. Can you help me find my way through town?" And they were back to the mundane flow of navigating downtown Missoula. "Bribe a wolf with crepes?" John asked as he parked the Bronco.

Samuel had returned his attention to the files on his lap, so he answered with a distracted, "Uh huh, in an hour."

After John had turned the corner, Samuel rested his feet on the dash, creating a table of sorts with his legs. He began spreading pages to compare notes from different sessions with the heiress. He asked himself if he was being paranoid, but the worry refused to be dismissed. He pulled out his phone. "Judge Bradley, please... Dr. Samuel Crane... Yes I'll hold." Why did it all have to go to hell at the same time? He tried to lose himself in mundane details over the next hour.

In the cafe, Samuel chewed slowly, hardly tasting the food as he carefully weighed the risks of digging skeletons out of his client's closet. If any of this found its way into the press, he would undoubtedly be facing a large lawsuit from a very powerful Hollywood family. However, if his concerns proved to be true... It was simply too gruesome to contemplate. John was staring at him again, so Samuel forced himself to chew with more enthusiasm. "I suppose you feel you deserve that chocolate monstrosity."

"Samuel, what's wrong? Do we need to go home?" John folded his napkin and stood. He didn't seem to mind that he was giving up dessert. "I think it would be best if I drive. You have barely enough focus to avoid choking on your food."

They had passed the last house in East Missoula when Samuel's phone began singing its stupid little rendition of Bach.

"No fair, my phone doesn't even pick up a signal out here." John looked honestly distressed.

"Sorry, John. You have to choose between good local coverage or any national coverage at all when you live this far from civilization. I really need to take this call." John nodded and looked back at the road. Thankfully the man was a cautious student driver.

Samuel answered just before it went to voicemail. "This is Crane... Thank you for returning my call. I'm sure you're very busy... I trust that you've spoken with Judge Bradley and understand the importance of discretion... Right, just fax the entire file to my office. I need a well rounded picture of the progression... The girl's been ill for some time now. Maybe you could run the tox-screen under the guise of follow-up blood work... Please, don't mention any of this to the family until we know for sure... I hope I'm wrong, too." He closed the phone carefully.

"Munchausen's?" How did John know about that?

"Munchausen's by Proxy, actually. Tell me, John, how does a person who asks me twice a week about the difference between neurosis and psychosis know about fabricated or induced illnesses?" Samuel searched the man's face for any hint of deception.

"It's become a popular topic in fiction and movies in recent years. The Baron Munchausen himself comes from literature, arguably as a teller of tall tales. Did you know that?" Right, Professor Wolfe taught British and World Lit nine months out of the year.

"The point, John, is that as much as I wish to be wrong; if I am, and this reaches the press, she has a strong case for slander." Altruism aside, Samuel didn't want to be known for spilling secrets anymore than he wanted to be sued.

"I won't breathe a word to anyone. But I can't decide whether I hope that you're wrong or that you're right." The sharp crease between his eyebrows lent an air of sorrow and concern for people John had never even met.

"What on earth do you mean? Of course you hope that I'm wrong and that she isn't harming her children..."

"But that leaves them with an illness that continues to defy diagnosis. If you're right, at least the doctor can treat them."

Samuel hadn't wanted to entertain these thoughts. But he had known all along that there couldn't be a happy ending for this family, no matter what they discovered. And when he thought of them as more than unknown people with money and power, but as people with grief and heartache, it was harder for him to distance himself from the outcome of the questions he was asking.

"I need to stop. Now!" He could feel the world spinning around him. His face burned with heat; his palms were slick and clammy. The Bronco had slowed to a roll when he jumped to the ground and rested his hands on his knees.

"Easy, Samuel. Better?" John's hand curled around Samuel's ribs as he gasped for cool air. He felt better on solid ground, but the smell of gasoline kept him mildly queasy. "Maybe you should stop reading in the car. Will you make it home if we roll down the windows?"

Carsick? How humiliating. He'd never had an occasion to find out until now. Troy had certainly avoided learning to drive until he was enrolled in Paramedic classes and a few of the girls offered to help him earn his license. Jack didn't even own a car. It had been nice this morning to sit back and let John play chauffeur. Maybe the air was all he needed. *Oh right, no reading either.* He decided that he could live with it if the wolf would sometimes drive.

## Chapter Thirteen

*Chapter 13 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Thirteen

Sunday morning began with a bang, quite literally, as Samuel woke to the sound of the skillet crashing to the floor in the kitchen. Friday, he had found John trying to beat the aspirin bottle into submission, and Saturday the man had needed help bringing the roast out of the oven. So he opened the bedroom door with extreme trepidation.

Chaos reigned in the kitchen as John tried to capture the sizzling cast-iron pan to keep it from singeing the floor. Quarter-cooked eggs dripped down the side of the island counter while chunks of potatoes and onions and splatters of grease soiled Samuel's formerly hospital-clean kitchen. He snarled for John to stop just before the fool grabbed the skillet with his bare hand.

*Forget about the kitchen.* John's skin was developing an unhealthy grey tone, with dark, bruise-like smudges under his eyes. The man was clearly losing in his monthly struggle with the moon. "Leave it, John. I think we're going to change strategies." They had planned to save the medical intervention for Monday morning in an effort to give John a boost of health and energy for his meeting with the local Dean of Languages and Literature. That plan seemed stupidly optimistic now. "John, is this normal for the day of the full moon?"

"Not usually this tired. I think I've been a bit off since you drew blood on Thursday." *Damn.* Samuel had been sure that John's body could replenish the lost cells easily before the pull of the moon began to drain his ravaged body.

"I need to know these things, Wolfe. I can't help you if I don't... Never mind, let's get you down the hall." Samuel was glad of his weight-lifting program as he muscled John into the chair in his office. He opened the small refrigerator, hidden under his desk, and stared at the package of John's own red blood cells that he'd carefully separated for use on Monday. Would it be best to re-introduce them right now? *Think, Samuel. What are your options?*

John looked much worse than even a few minutes ago. "Severus..." And hearing his true name brought the Potions master to the helm.

"Blood replenishing draught. I'll be right back. Do not close your eyes, Wolfe." And he ran to the lab, frantically digging through the vials until he closed his hand around the right one. *Hold on, John.* Even with his haste, John's eyelids were drooping as Samuel came through the door. "Drink it down." And then there was nothing to do but wait.

When toffee colored eyes looked back at him, Samuel sighed in relief. "Why the potion?" John wanted to know.

"The potion will bring you back to optimal blood levels. What we're doing on Monday is, effectively, cutting-edge blood doping."

"That's legal?" Sometimes Gryffindors were idiots.

"Completely illegal. And if you were engaging in an athletic competition, I might feel guilty about it. Don't you dare tell Troy. I shouldn't be treating you at all."

"How do you know about blood doping..."

"Don't be an idiot, John. I've kept my eye on the field for years. I won't dismiss any strategy that might help you." He relented when John blinked rapidly, undoubtedly trying to keep himself awake. Samuel was pleased to see color returning to John's face. "Let's move you to bed. You will undoubtedly suffer from headaches throughout the day. We'll keep you hydrated and let you sleep."

Samuel spent the day preparing for the moon. He transferred several potions to his office, gathered blankets and pillows, readied clean bedding for the morning, and when John asked for a dish of water, kept his snort to himself and provided it. Each time he woke John to press a glass of water into his hands the man looked fresher, more rested--until the sun set and John's eyes became fever bright, his skin glistened with sweat. Samuel pressed the first restorative potion to John's lips. "This should help you metabolize the Wolfsbane." Then the steaming goblet, followed by one more restorative. "I need to get one more thing. Will you be all right for a few minutes?" When John gave a shaky nod, Samuel rushed to his office. He would need to hurry if he was to return before moon rise.

He sat in his chair to get into his files, but stopped to look out the window. Ten minutes later, he watched the moon rise over the barn, still in his chair. He cursed himself and his cowardice. He'd promised John to return. He could still.

At midnight he heard three light taps on his door. It was the idiot, Potter, wondering why he was sitting in his office with the light off. "Because I'm a bloody coward. How is Amanda?"

"Sleeping. What will you tell Remus?"

"I'm going to lie my Slytherin head off, and you are going to back me up." The glare that Samuel used when he delivered that demand would have intimidated Potter in his

Hogwarts days. When did the fool grow up, and why did he have to ruin all of Samuel's fun? "Potter, please, John and I hardly need more drama at this juncture. You did not find me in this office."

"Professor, I don't think that's a very good idea..." Samuel stopped Potter.

"Ironical that you can manage the title when it's no longer true and you're not my student. I'll see you in the morning, Mr. Potter."

Samuel watched the moon travel the sky that night, wishing he had saved one bottle of scotch when he was pouring them down the sink.

Samuel had overcooked scrambled eggs and oatmeal prepared when John emerged from the bedroom Monday morning. "Good morning." *Show no fear.*

Irritation flashed in John's eyes, and Samuel recognized the Alpha Wolf under the man's chinos and cardigan. "Why didn't you come back?"

"You don't remember me coming back in? I know it took longer than I'd planned..." Samuel let his voice trail off because, as weak and tired as John looked, power and rage crackled around him.

"What is the function of the Wolfsbane that you brew for me, Samuel? I don't remember you coming back because you didn't. Did you hide in your office all night, staring at the moon, shaking with fear that only two doors stood between you and the wolf?" John had stalked over to Samuel's chair and was standing over him, so close that Samuel couldn't stand without touching the angry wolf.

"Fine, yes, you're right. About all of it. I wanted to go back but I couldn't. So where does that leave us, John? Are you packing yourself back to South Carolina? Do we try again? What do you want?" Why did he always yield to the wolf? No matter, it was done, now he'd have to live with the consequences.

"It's too late to turn back, Samuel. I burned my bridges in South Carolina. They think I'm sick, AIDS sick, and friends or no, the Dean is hoping that I'll be chosen for the position here, so that my health can decline on someone else's insurance plan."

"John, why didn't you tell me sooner? Screw 'em all. Stay with me."

"Don't you get it, Samuel? I don't want to be your 'housewolf'. I want my own security, financial, social, and psychological. I like teaching. Besides, how can I depend on you for my survival, when you can't even enter the bloody room on full moon nights?"

*Control yourself, Samuel.* "John, since you've thrown your lot in with me; maybe we should start acting more like partners. We both need to be more forthright about our needs and feelings. And right now, I need to know that you're all right. Will you eat some cold, overcooked eggs so I can get on with violating all ethical guidelines?"

John clenched his jaw, then settled into the opposite chair and began eating the bloody awful eggs. Realizing that John was going to accept that load of crap, Samuel gave silent thanks to any deity who cared to accept.

## Chapter Fourteen

### *Chapter 14 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Fourteen

Samuel looked at John with a critical eye. The man had always been too thin and a bit worn around the edges. Today, he looked especially tired. Samuel realized that in more than fifteen years 'together', only once had he seen the man on the day after the full moon.

It had been mid-day, and he would have been covering double Potions, except one of the brats had exploded a cauldron, requiring Samuel to march a boil-covered second year to the infirmary. On his way back to his office, he had turned down a side hallway and came face to face with the Defense professor.

He had fought to cover his shock; the man looked a step away from dead. The students had all been cloistered in classrooms. There had been no one around to see him grasp Remus by the elbow, but still the wolf had shaken him off.

"I'm fine, Severus. I just need a little rest." Even worn down to threads, the wolf had infused the words with steel.

Samuel had left that day with the promise to himself that he would haunt that hall, next moon. But try though he might, he had never again surprised Lupin in the corridors.

Ten years later, he hoped he could offer the man more relief. John needed to know that he was functioning at his best when he would meet with the grizzled academics in the afternoon. Not a problem, Dr. Crane dealt regularly with haggard, emaciated bodies; he could easily recognize the effects of dehydration. And he was still a ruthless bastard; if illicit means could aid his lover's recovery, Samuel would do it with no regrets.

"Where did you find out about this technique?" Ever the intellectual, John couldn't let it go without fully understanding the process.

And Samuel realized that he didn't mind explaining to John the subtleties of the international politics of cheating.

"I suppose we're actually cheating too." John was staring at the needle in his arm. Samuel pinched his leg, forcing the wolf to look at something else.

"Gryffindor. You've been cheated out of so many opportunities that I would think you'd be pleased that we can finally level the playing field. No, don't fiddle with it; you're almost done." John actually looked healthier than Samuel had ever seen him look. Even if the rumors had reached this campus, no one looking at John today would believe them. *AIDS, indeed.*

Thirty minutes later, John was stepping into Samuel's office, asking for the keys to the Bronco. Wearing a tweed sport coat, he looked every bit the British Literature professor. Samuel asked John to show him once more, on a map, the roads he intended to drive to reach Helena, then pressed his own cell phone into the man's hand. "If there are any problems, call the land line." And with a nod, John was off, securing his own destiny. Samuel didn't want to say why he felt threatened by John's self-sufficiency.

At noon, Samuel realized that he would need to do something about lunch. He had pulled out bread, cheese, and a tin of soup, when Amanda took the skillet out of his

hand.

"You don't want to heat that yet. We'll need some butter to keep it from sticking to the bottom of the pan. And we should slice the cheese; oh, look, the knives seem to be locked in their drawer." She stared at him expectantly.

"There is no need for sarcasm, young lady. You know very well why I added a lock to that drawer, but I will be happy to let you use a knife while supervised." She was nearly as efficient in the kitchen as John. Regardless, Samuel washed, dried, and returned the knife to the drawer as soon as she set it down. No need to become careless.

"Do you think John will get the position?"

"They're foolish if they don't offer it to him; John knows how to engage a class. We should be hearing from him soon, I would think."

But Samuel's phone was silent all afternoon. When he called the cell, it went straight to voice mail. Samuel scowled. Whatever had happened in the interview, John should have called home by that time. Finally, after five o'clock, John rang through. Amanda snatched the phone off the cradle just before Samuel could.

"John? Are you all right? No, actually I can't, because he's standing right here." She scowled as she handed the phone to Samuel.

His hands were slick as he pressed the receiver to his ear. "John, what's wrong?"

His friend's voice was soft on the other end of the line. "Samuel, don't be angry."

He could feel the heat rising in his face; that opening couldn't mean anything good, and from the very subtle slur and the care John was taking with his words, Samuel was forming a clear picture of the problem. "John, is the Bronco wrapped around a tree?" He wanted to be angry, but just hearing John's voice, alive, filled him with a relief that eclipsed his ire entirely.

"I have not even left the bar. But I'm here with the car. Hee hee hee... How will you get to me?" Oh, God, this wasn't good. Plan 'B', then.

"John, where are you?"

"Men's room. Everybody else went home; I said you'd come get me."

"Are you calling with the cell? Good. I want you to repeat something very carefully. 'Portus'."

"Samuel, why would you want me to say 'Portus'?" A moment later, John was sitting on the floor at Samuel's feet. "Why is your phone a Portkey?"

"Puzzle it out, Professor." He offered his hand to pull John to his feet, but even as he helped balance the man, John kept his eyes on the rug. Samuel forced himself to breathe. *Be calm*. "It's going to be okay, John."

"Knew I shouldn't go with them, but I wanted to be part of the team. I told myself I wouldn't drink, but once we were there..."

"John, I know, okay?" He settled John onto the couch and stepped back to get a more clinical assessment. Running through his mental checklist, he felt better about John's condition; clearly John hadn't consumed an excessive amount of alcohol. Best to find out what John could tell him. "How much did you drink?"

"One glass. I swear, I didn't think it would make me drunk like this."

Maybe it affected the man differently right after the full moon.*Fascinating. Worry about it later*. He decided that John wouldn't need formal 'de-tox'. "Amanda, can you bring me a large glass of water?" He'd keep his friend hydrated and watch him carefully for the next few hours.

"Sev'rus, why are you being nice to me. Should be mad as an insulted hippogriff."

"John, to be blunt, I was expecting this to happen sooner. We'll get through it. You'll be fine." He hoped. And once he was certain of that claim, he'd need to figure out how to bring the Bronco home. It was definitely a Monday.

## Chapter Fifteen

### Chapter 15 of 28

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Fifteen

"What were you saying about medical ethics, Dr. Crane?" Troy was snarling as he handed Samuel the keys to the Bronco. "That it's okay for you to flaunt your disregard of them, but not for me?"

"Troy, if things go badly with John, he has more effective ways to hurt me than lodging an ethics complaint. While I doubt that Amanda would ever be that vindictive, it would give her power over you. John and I may have come to terms with it, but that's hardly what I wish for you." *Tell me about it*.

"Samuel, I know you're trying to help me, but you're becoming quite the hypocrite. Would you like for someone with a little professional distance to look in on John?" Troy didn't wait for an answer, just pushed through the door to Samuel's bedroom and began talking quietly with the man napping in the bed. Later, he left without speaking to either Samuel or Amanda.

Samuel was sitting alone in the kitchen when John came out to find him. The lights came on with a snap, stinging his eyes for a moment before his pupils could respond. "You're up. How's your head?"

"My head is fine, Samuel. What's wrong with Troy?"

"I warned him about starting a relationship with Amanda."

"And he didn't recognize that the rules should apply to him when they clearly don't apply to you. Rather irrational of him." John rested a hand gently on Samuel's shoulder, which softened the blow.

"This is different. If you ever wanted me to lose my license, you'd hardly need to allege misconduct. A halfway decent inquest..."

"Samuel, let's not borrow trouble. I'm not saying you're wrong about Troy and Amanda, but perhaps we shouldn't put him in the middle of our questionable activities either... He doesn't know about the infusions, does he?"

"What kind of idiot do you think I am, John?" Samuel waited a moment before quietly adding, "Jack told me that Troy applied to medical school." The silence told Samuel that John understood how devastating it was for him to hear that second hand. "I gave up everything for that brat, and he can't even tell me about this himself."

"You might not want to phrase it that way when you speak to him. He knows what you did for him, Samuel. The boy's trying to find his own way in life. That alone speaks to how far he's come since Hogwarts." The wolf paused as though deciding whether or not to go in for the kill. "Just because we couldn't make it work for you..." John let the rest hang in the air between them, but he added his other hand to Samuel's shoulder and stood behind him, offering silent comfort.

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As Samuel reduced the dosage of Amanda's drugs, she became increasingly hesitant and fearful, spending every free moment furiously scratching marks onto her chart. What she might be charting was anyone's guess.

The few times that Troy came to visit ended in verbal blows. The boy wanted Amanda to feel safe, Samuel understood, but allowing her to 'forget' the trauma was not the answer. Still, each time that Troy stormed out, Samuel feared he would not return.

Potter's visits had also become less frequent. A blessing and a curse because he soothed Amanda at least as much as he irritated Samuel. The budding politician was needed back home as trial dates were fast approaching for Yaxley and Macnair, and Samuel refused to consider the possibility that either would find a way to avoid justice.

John was again becoming his anchor, spending most mornings coaxing Amanda down the hall to sit in the den and silently supporting Samuel whenever he was within reach. He wrote his lesson plans in the den so that Amanda wouldn't be left alone.

On Wednesday, they filled the South wall of the den with bookshelves and loaded them with John's library. His desk was tucked into the corner, but the man spent most of his time sitting on the floor, near the girl. Thursday night, he coaxed her onto the couch where she read something by George Eliot for an hour before she returned to her charts on the floor.

Over the weekend, Samuel squelched his anger and asked Troy to stay with Amanda.

"You aren't afraid that I'll make unwanted advances while you're away tonight?"

He wanted to throttle the boy for his cheek, but settled for a growl. "That was never my concern, or were you not paying attention?"

John caught his elbow, thanked Troy and guided Samuel to the Bronco before he could resort to physical violence. "No drama at the department mixer please, Samuel."

The gathering was as academic and boring as Samuel had feared. As the only excitement resulted from the inebriated German professor loudly propositioning him, Samuel was relieved when John finally thanked the Dean and said goodnight to his colleagues. He sank into the passenger seat and John didn't argue about driving.

"That was easily the best steak I've eaten in years," John told him as he started the engine.

"No steak is worth that drive. Those people wouldn't know a joke if it bit them – " The wolf was staring at him. "Come on, John, a 'shake-spear'? That's ridiculous. And 'Frauline Betz', that cow, had her hand on my thigh through dessert. If I'm not allowed to make a scene..."

John was laughing so hard that tears trailed down his face. "I can't believe you didn't hex her."

"If I weren't 'wanted' internationally, I might have. Why do you want to work with those fools?"

"I like them, even the socially inept ones. I don't need to hold a Ph.D. in anything to recognize that Brenda Betz is lonely."

"Are you volunteering to warm her bed?"

"Absolutely not, you arse. With your boundless empathy, I'm amazed you don't have patients falling in love with you every day." Why did the man sound disappointed? He'd known Samuel longer than any living soul.

"Do we have a problem, John? You knew the man you were endorsing. Pushing me into Psychiatry hasn't changed who I am."

"You actually believe that, don't you?" John stared resolutely at the highway; Samuel couldn't read the man's profile.

Samuel watched the power lines dip and rise along the highway for the rest of the drive.

## Chapter Sixteen

*Chapter 16 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

Chapter Sixteen

Tuesday morning, Samuel picked up his files and settled into the armchair in the den.

"What are you working on?" John asked him.

"Tox screen results for the Hollywood children. This can't be right... Shit!" He grabbed the phone and dialed Los Angeles. After ten minutes on the phone with the



pediatrician, he was close to shouting. "No, two weeks, not one. Sixteen days. Whatever the pathway, it's still going on. Do you hear me? It's happening on your end!" He ended the call with a violent oath.

Amanda slipped down the hall and away from the tension before Samuel ended the call; John stared at him expectantly.

"What? There's nothing I can do at this point. I'm just the head shrinker. What would I know about decay rates of toxins?" He spat venomously *Shut up, Samuel. John is squarely on your side.*

"Samuel, I don't think it's meant to be personal. You might want to calm down."

"You don't understand—"

John gave a feral growl. "I understand perfectly; you still don't deal well with failure."

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4 November 1981

The floor was hard and his head throbbing. Severus couldn't be arsed to move. Classes were canceled for the entire week; he still had a few days to choose his future.

Some choice. Life as a Muggle, or life in Dumbledore's pocket. Certainly no one else would hire him, and all his ties to the Muggle world were hopelessly out of date. Maybe he could forge the necessary documents, slip himself into a small town... *Maybe not. Too much to learn; too easy to slip up.* Severus rolled his forehead onto the stone floor, savoring the soothing cold.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Who would possibly be banging on his door? Everyone should be out reveling. Everyone else had something to celebrate. For Severus there was nothing to enjoy but the bitter taste of defeat. He'd failed; Lily was dead, and everyone Remus had once called a friend was either dead or a traitor. The man would surely hate him for being the one who had carried the words to the Dark Lord and set these events in motion.

Still the masses rejoiced with firewhiskey and fireworks, lauding an infant, while a prat, a doormat, and a good woman lay dead.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

*Go away. I have no interest in revelry, remembrance, or redemption. Everything worth living for is gone*

Bang. Bang. Bang.

And then he heard Remus, shouting over the wards. "Severus, get your arse off the floor and open the door. You've been drunk for four days. It's time to come up for air."

*Remus. Repentance, restitution... rebirth...*

"Severus, if you wish to continue to believe that I can't breach your wards, I suggest you open the door."

*Damn wolf.* Severus staggered to the door and felt the sizzle of magic as he threw it open. "I'm right here. No need to dig your way in."

"Merlin, Severus, It smells like a brewery in here. And you look like hell. Should I find myself a cellar this month?"

"Shit!" Severus stumbled into his workroom and stared at the simmering potion. It was starting to turn yellow. Not ruined, but not ideal either. "I can still save it, Remus. You'll be fine."

"Sev... when did you last eat?" Remus was clearly questioning his ability to care for himself. Even squinting, he could read the disapproval in the wolf's gaze.

Severus avoided Remus' eyes by looking carefully at his fingernails; they were starting to turn yellow too, and his hands were trembling *Wasn't that a sign of liver distress?* "I'm sure I ate something yesterday. I'll be fine. Come back on Wednesday as we'd planned."

"It is Wednesday. I'm fixing you something to eat." Before Severus could stop him, Remus was entering his kitchen and staring at the mess. Severus vaguely remembered pulling every jar from his cupboards and smashing them on the floor. He thought he'd done that on Sunday. The rancid smell of decay supported that theory. He risked looking at Remus' shocked face; surprise was transforming into disgust. He opened his mouth to explain, but Remus held up a hand. "Snape, either take a shower or sit in the den. I'll get this."

Somehow shame motivated him in a way that self preservation had not. He was showered, wearing clean robes, and sitting in the den when Remus came back from the main kitchens, carrying a tray of toast, soup, and coffee. "Welcome back to the land of the living, Severus. It may lack the charms of heroic death, but it beats dying in squalor."

Severus snorted at Remus. "And a great life it is."

"Then what's your 'escape plan'?"

"Escape plan?"

"You clearly wish to leave, yet here you sit. What's blocking your path, and what do you plan to do about it?" Why did the wolf have to sound so unrelentingly reasonable?

"Remus, if I were to apply for a job in the Muggle world, it would require Muggle references, degrees, work history. I'm sure all of my records end mysteriously at age 11. Even if I could falsify the records I need, I won't have the requisite knowledge to maintain any credibility. I'm shackled to this world."

"So it's knowledge that you require," Remus stated as though it was a terribly simple problem, "because records are easy enough to insert if you're crafty about where you place them..."

"You have some experience with this. Ever the rule breaker, Lupin." Actually, Severus was listening very carefully. If the man knew what he was talking about, this could be his way out.

"Where, exactly, do you think I work? I've done what I had to do, and I won't apologize for that. So the question remains; is Severus Snape courageous enough to help himself?" Remus left a rhetorical pause that rivaled Severus' own classroom drama. "What jobs have you considered?"

He couldn't believe he was going to discuss this with Lupin, even if the man was acting as though he'd like to be a friend to Severus. "Something science based, chemistry perhaps... Muggle Potions of sorts—"

"Severus, do you realize that I teach Literature at a Muggle Academy? I'm quite familiar with the scope of most subjects." And over the next few hours, Remus proved his skill in both career counseling and the management of Severus Snape.

When Severus felt he'd made a strong case to train as a Chemist, Remus surprised him with a different suggestion. "I think you've set your sights too low. This is your chance to move up in the world. Why settle for Chemistry when you could study Medicine?"

Severus looked around him at the books pulled off shelves, the whiskey bottles littering the floor. *Yes, I'm a veritable pillar of the community. Muggle health would thrive under my care.*

Remus gave him a hard look, as though he could read his thoughts or perhaps just his expression. "I would think that four days of uninterrupted self pity have been quite enough. You're going to stand on your own again, Severus, if I have to push you up from the floor myself."

-----  
At the time, Severus had been too busy trying to keep up with enrollment forms and night classes to question Remus' motives. Dr. Crane, however, had the time and the insight to recognize that helping Severus had also given Remus a reason to keep going.

Well, this wasn't about John anymore. A tortured young woman and two small children needed him. Perhaps he wasn't the only person who could help them, but right now he was the only one trying. It was long past time for Samuel to pick himself up off the floor.

## Chapter Seventeen

*Chapter 17 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Seventeen

Samuel had believed that things were improving with Troy. For the last three days, the boy had conceded to Samuel's broader experience. Clearly now the honeymoon was over.

"She's frightened, and you don't even care." Troy was shaking with fury.

"Troy, you've never been privy to this aspect of my work, but I assure you that with every client I counsel, there is a point when I must push farther than they wish to go. This is exactly like scrubbing out abrasions. You do it, not because you wish to cause your patient unnecessary pain—"

"Samuel, don't try to tell me that she has road grit ground into her psyche. That's absurd."

"And yet it's an apt analogy. Left alone, those thoughts will fester and drive a wedge between Amanda and everyone she cares about. Given that you would like to join those ranks, should you not support my efforts?" *That's it, Samuel. Reason has long been one of Troy's strengths.*

"Don't pretend you want her to care for me. You've done everything you could to keep us apart. *Perhaps he's not so reasonable about this.* The boy glared at Samuel. "You know what? You win. I'll give you all the room you need. I've been accepted to USC Medical School. I had planned to leave next week, but I think tomorrow would be better; I'll let you know my new address when I have one."

The door slammed behind Troy before Samuel found his voice.

John scowled as he entered the office. "Stop yelling. I'm sure he's sorry already."

*Damned, idiot boy. Ungrateful brat.* "Fine, John," he said in the softest tone he could manage. "Is this better?"

"Look, I know it hurts to let them go—"

"What would you know of it, John?"

John rolled his eyes and sank into the chair. "Samuel, he's an adult now. I suppose that Harry has always been rather independent, so it was a natural progression with him. I do know that wasn't true for you and Troy; just remember that he does need to become his own man."

"Why are you trying to maneuver me, John?"

"Sometimes you need to be pushed, Samuel. Get your head out of your arse, find some perspective, and I'll be happy to stay out of your business. *I hate it when he's right.*

Samuel stood then, reached into a drawer, and pulled out a flashlight. "Perspective. Fine. I think I left some in the barn. Turn out the light when you leave, will you?"

Outside though, instead of turning left, Samuel went right, down the driveway and past the clinic. He paused to pat Hercules as he walked by Mary's garden. Brown canine eyes promised acceptance, no matter the transgression. *Shows how little you know, dog.* Mary waved to him from her kitchen, but Samuel dared not stop.

Perspective. It was worth a try. It was hardly Troy's fault that more than twenty years ago Severus Snape chose the wrong door. As for that last year at Hogwarts, a sixteen year old boy would never want his mother to beg for his protection. That blame belonged to Lucius and Narcissa. And Samuel himself. Hiding the boy away may have saved his life, but certainly did nothing to improve his confidence.

*Face it Samuel, you find the boy's concerns threatening because you're diving into questionable situations with reckless abandon* Perhaps placing some distance between them would be for the best.

Now, what to do about John? He should likely apologize to both the man and the girl. Both had suffered for other people's choices. The discussion with John would undoubtedly center on themes of personal discovery and growth. *Urgh!* Amanda would actually be easier. She understood frustration and simply needed to feel safe.

He looked up to see the cozy glow of light through the window calling him home.

Okay, Samuel, enough of the hiding. Time to be a man.

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"Absolutely not. Paving the way with Amanda is one thing; Troy doesn't even like me." The set of John's jaw and the tilt of his chin told Samuel that he would not fare well if he pursued the argument.

"And us?"

John stared at Samuel before answering, "I've known all along that you're a surly bastard. Why would it bother me now?" He held a hand out to Samuel before continuing. "I keep making things harder for you. I don't want to come between you and Troy, or Jack either, for that matter."

Samuel ignored the hand. "John, I'm perfectly capable of alienating my friends all on my own. You are hardly to blame for my stubbornness."

"How bad is your headache?"

How did the wolf always know? "What headache? Oh, fine, it hurts. I'll live."*Hasn't killed me yet, even when I wanted it too.*

John rested his knee on the couch next to Samuel. "Budge over a bit." He shifted in behind Samuel and began working his fingers deeply into the knots in Samuel's shoulders.

"Ouch! I'm in pain here."

"Easy, Samuel. Let me work out the knots. Then I'll get to the rest." At first the pressure filled his vision with bright flashes, but slowly those tapered away, and the sharp pain was replaced by a dull ache. Slowly, even the ache began to fade, and Samuel felt the electrical pull of those fingers pressing outward from his spine.

He recalled the scent of clover and that old oilskin coat, and he wondered what memories they could tie to the smell of lilac and fresh hay. His voice was only a scant whisper. "I don't think I've shown you the barn."

John let out a warm chuckle that turned to a sigh as Samuel captured a hand in his own and began gently massaging along the palm. "Keep doing that and we won't make it out this door." Samuel reluctantly stilled the motion, but didn't let go. He pulled John forward with him, and they walked in the moonlight down the gravel path to the barn.

It rose from the driveway, a grey shelter of weathered wood flanked by white lilac bushes. John was incanting *Lumos* and Samuel a silent *Accio* as they slipped through the door. Honey colored light warmed the bales of hay as Samuel spread out the wool saddle blanket. Sweet, heady, floral scents drifted through window, wrapping them in the warm breath of a northern summer night.

*The scrape of the day's growth of beard lightly burned Samuel's fingers as he drew them along John's jaw. His own head was spinning under the touch of brown, calloused hands feathering through his hair as warm, firm lips built exquisite torment by slipping softly against the pulse point on his neck.*

*When had they ended up on the floor? Doesn't matter. With a soft moan, Samuel uncurled his hands and sought the smooth cords of muscle stretching across his lover's back. John gasped at the light scrape of teeth against his ear, and Samuel leaned back into the soft scratch of fresh hay.*

*Much later, after the moon had set and the light was extinguished with a whisper, Samuel watched the stars traverse the sky through the dust streaked window. How long can a demon hope to hide in heaven?*

## Chapter Eighteen

*Chapter 18 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Eighteen

"That's exactly what I'm trying to explain to you, you great git. Check your fax machine. I've sent you the form. Fill it out, send it back, and we'll teach her to handle dog. He'll protect her and help her feel safe."

Samuel could imagine the veins pulsing in Troy's forehead as he ranted over the phone.

"It's not that simple, Troy."

"It's not that hard either. Fine, just promise me you'll think about it." With that, the boy rang off. *Good work. Now you're fighting 'long distance'.*

With a sigh, he closed his office door for the evening as Amanda breezed past him with her stack of bloody papers. Watching her shuffle down the hall and into the den, he changed his plans and by-passed that room for the kitchen.

John looked up from chopping carrots. "I thought you wanted to read over some articles."

"I needed a break."

"From Potions articles?"

"From Lady Macbeth." As he spat the words, he heard a keening sob behind him. *Merlin, help me and my bloody stupid mouth.*

Her voice was shrill as she ranted back at him. "Do you really believe I want to act crazy like this? Maybe you think I've forgotten that I had a life lived without stupid little lines marked all over the page. Or that I actually enjoy living in fear of what's behind the shower curtain!" Sobbing, she crushed the pages with both hands and tore the stack in half. Horror immediately filled her eyes. "Oh, God. I've ruined it." She turned and bolted down the hall.

At least the chair held his weight as he sank into it. *Professional distance, sure.* Of course it was important, no, critical, to allow the client a certain amount of privacy and to allow the therapist a life separate of his patient's pathology. Jack was right. Keeping her in his home had been arrogant. *Bloody stupid.*

"Samuel, if you don't go find her, I will."

"Wait, John. Just give me a moment to figure out what I should say."

"Maybe you should have taken that time up front to think about all the things you shouldn't say." John's eyes were dark, disappointed. *Time's up, Samuel.*

She had the pages spread across the floor like a puzzle and was applying tape to join them into a single, giant sheet. Samuel squinted at the lines that zigged and zagged upward, gathering and combining near the center and branching back out toward the top. *A giant maze?* Only when she had secured each edge did she look up at Samuel.

"You could move me, you know, over to the clinic. Then you wouldn't have to watch me fall apart every day. Troy says you're keeping me so close to feed your guilt complex." He was surprised by the challenge in her eyes.

"Troy has yet to attend medical school, let alone to study psychiatry." *That's rich, Mr. Kettle.* He held the mug of chamomile tea in offering. "You may not drink tea while sitting on the floor." She shrugged and moved to the couch. Samuel sat beside her before surrendering the tea.

She stared into the cup, then sniffed the tea. Samuel scowled at her before declaring, "I haven't put anything in your tea... *Today.* She glared back before sipping. "Tell me about the shower curtain."

She spoke quietly of not liking closed doors, turns in the hallway, even latched trunks. Her fear of things hidden might herald a surfacing of her memories. Seeing her shoulders relax, Samuel decided the chamomile was working and took a risk. "And the nightmares? What wakes you in the night?"

"It's always dark. I can hear them, close by, whispering. There's a faint light ahead of me at the base of a tree..." She let her voice drift off.

So close, but Samuel needed to hear more. He kept his voice to calm, hypnotic tones. "A tree?"

She stared through the carpet for a moment before she made eye contact. "Right, a giant tree, and there's a dragon and a squirrel..." Her trance was definitely broken and defense strategies were coming into play.

*Don't yell at the girl.* "I've read a myth or two myself. You'll tell me when you're ready, I suppose."

"I'm not doing this on purpose."

"I never claimed you were."

"It's right there, but when I try to think about it, I feel it slipping through my hands. If I close my eyes and look at it, I'm terrified, have to look away. I hate knowing how helpless I've always been."

Samuel, this cannot stand unchallenged. "Elaborate. Now."

"If Harry hadn't found me, I'd still be in their basement, waiting for someone to rescue me." She planted the mug on the coffee table with a loud 'thunk' and stared at him, daring him to refute her claim.

Samuel allowed a small amount of his ire to leak out. "You will stop that foolishness right now. Those are some of the most ruthless men I've ever known. Aurors have been hunting them for years to no avail, but I think I understand your concerns." *If she can't name it, help her.* He softened his tone. "You want to feel safe again, walking down the street, sleeping in your bed. They took that, and now you doubt you'll ever get it back." She nodded. "Perhaps I can help."

-----  
It wasn't the largest dog Samuel had ever seen, but Reggie was large enough that Samuel felt the need to ask Troy some pointed questions. With Amanda and John putting away their suitcases, he pounced.

Troy rolled his eyes at Samuel's concerns. "He's a Belgian Sheepdog. He's been trained and waiting for the right match for six months. That's a long time with Sam's dogs. She has a two year waiting list." Samuel glared at Troy. How had the boy acquired the dog within a week? How, indeed. Suddenly it didn't seem so odd that Troy was more relaxed around Amanda.

"Troy, thank you--"

"Look, I still don't approve of you treating John, but I suppose you're doing the best you can in a difficult situation. I need to get back. I might not need to hide things from Sam, but that also takes away the 'long flight' assertions."

"Wait, Reggie--"

"... Is just a dog, Samuel, and Amanda has become a good handler." Then Troy was gone.

He found Amanda in the den. Her arms were wrapped around the dog, and her face was buried in Reggie's fur. Intelligence shone out through dark brown eyes as he looked up at Samuel.

"Do not shed on my furniture."

Reggie stared back evenly.

"Call him." Seeing his confusion, Amanda continued. "I'm introducing Reggie to our 'family'." She stood up and took a step back from the canine.

It would not be productive to scare her dog, so he chose a light tone of voice. "Come over here, dog." Reggie looked at Amanda, then walked three circles before laying down. "What is so difficult about 'come here'?"

Amanda giggled. "He doesn't speak English." She took several steps away from Reggie. "Like this. Reggie. Come." Her tone was light, but firm. Reggie stood and trotted to her feet where he turned sharply and sat at attention, bright eyes scanning the room for danger. "Start with his name. Then give one word commands. Correct him with a simple 'Nooo'. Ready to try again?"

*Certainly not.* Her shoulders dropped. Oh, bugger! "All right," he conceded. This was meant to help her after all. "Reggie. Come." The dog looked at Amanda before trotting three paces toward Samuel. He turned back to Amanda, who glared a warning. Reggie responded by stalking slowly toward Samuel's legs. The glossy black fur on his back raised slightly as he reached his destination. He did not sit at Samuel's feet, however, and lowered his head as he sniffed.

Samuel heard a snort from over his shoulder, followed by John's firm voice correcting the dog. "Noooo." Then John's tone brightened. "Reggie. Sit." The dog snapped into a sharp sit with his ears up and eyes glued to John. "Use a bit more imperative in your tone, and keep your words crisp. Step away and try again."

"I think not." Samuel, at least, did not jump at John's command.

"Fine. Reggie. Come." The dog skidded into a sit position at John's feet. *Bloody stupid dog.* "Good boy. Do you want to release him?" he asked Amanda.

She obliged with a firm, "Break," and Reggie threw himself on his back at John's feet, exposing his belly and neck. Samuel was certainly no dog trainer, but the devoted submission was hard to miss.

"I see he knows who's Alpha." Samuel turned and stalked from the room.

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**A/N:** I'd like to take a moment to offer my heartfelt thanks to Brinian for her beta reading and dog handling expertise. Any errors that remain are entirely my own. Reggie was inspired by an article I read about service dogs being made available to survivors of torture. I have taken artistic liberties with the training program for these dogs. If you're interested in knowing more, here's the link that got me started, [http://www.dogsaver.org/sdva/sdva\\_training01.html](http://www.dogsaver.org/sdva/sdva_training01.html).

## Chapter Nineteen

*Chapter 19 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Nineteen

Sweat dripped from Samuel's chin, he had dirt buried under his fingernails, and his clothes were filthy. "This one's sprouted too, John. It was a stupid idea."

"Samuel, that man keeps raising his prices. You said yourself that once the tubers begin to grow, they're useless." John was digging with a fierce determination that reminded Samuel of Amanda's new companion.

"And these are just as useless as his." Samuel stared at the green buds peeking out from the brown root.

"I just wanted to be certain. I'm not looking forward to returning to the Valerian version."

"John, I am sorry. Next month..."

"We may need to rely on Miller for a few months more, but this little guy is going to make us proud." John held up a tuber as he wrapped it in his handkerchief. *Perhaps John has finally gone round the bend.*

Samuel shrugged as he tucked his jacket and water back into his pack. At least now the wolf might be ready to return to the Bronco. John, however, opened his battered map and traced the trail for a few moments before asking, "Would you walk with me, just little bit farther?"

Half an hour later, Samuel swore at the map in his hand. The elevation lines were so close together that they nearly combined; the next rise would re-define steep. Rocky mountain caps glinted in the merciless July sun, close enough now to pelt with a rock, had Samuel indulged that particularly juvenile impulse. Sweat stung his eyes with nearly the same ferocity as the blinding light, his leather boot had come un-tied yet again, and his lungs were screaming for oxygen, even if he would admit none of it to the wolf.

Finally they reached the narrow pass between mountain peaks and the top of the rise...likely the very top of the world. Samuel reached through layers of clothing and supplies searching for the water bottle. "Selective gravitation."

"What?" John was staring as though Samuel was daft.

"Sorry. Robert says that in backpacking, one must always remember the 'Primary Law of Selective Gravitation' which states that whatever item you want, regardless of weight or mass, will be at the bottom of your pack."

"Ever the pessimist. Samuel, look."

Water in hand, Samuel lifted his eyes from the dirt to see Eden stretching out before them. The sky arched overhead like a giant dome of azure.

The highest peaks stabbed upward, craggy and grey with small patches of white snow and ice bound to the sides as if by magic, but below, highland meadows sprawled across the bits of soil that clung stubbornly to barren granite, forming a verdant green hallway that would lead on to other wonders of form and dream in the high mountain air. A dizzying drop further, the tree line swiftly enclosed the land, wrapping the valley floor in mystery.

A veil of water dashed from high ground to the green garden below and John pointed to a herd of goats, grazing on a nearby slope. Then Samuel felt the wind lifting his hat; in less than a heartbeat, it was gone. His mate was drawing wand from sleeve when he stilled John's hand. "Let it go." A hat was a small offering to leave for those who guarded such a place.

*You did not come here to stare at the scenery.* "John, I think we should keep moving. That hill is the last that may hold lilies."

"Lilies, right."

-----  
They were halfway up the driveway when Samuel realized what was wrong with his house. "Let me out here, John. I need to do something at the clinic."

"It's Saturday."

"There's always something I can do at the clinic."

"This wouldn't have anything to do with the Firebolt leaning against the garage, would it?"

"Oh, is Potter here?"

Whatever John might have said was lost forever as the green-eyed monster bolted across the driveway, placing himself firmly between Samuel and freedom. "I need to speak with Malfoy. Or is it Troy Phelps, now?" The arrogant tilt of Potter's chin sealed the decision as Samuel slipped the graceful length of willow from his sleeve. Potter's eyes flashed with raw, angry power as the famous holly and phoenix feather wand flashed toward Samuel in a high arc.

Samuel smirked as the brat's face erupted in green boils even as he felt the impact of the blast to the chest lift him off his feet. Falling backwards, Samuel formed the thought, *Levi...*, before he could complete it, though, he felt his wand slide from his fingers in the same moment that Potter lost his own with a look of shocked bewilderment.

Pain exploded through his lungs as Samuel slammed into the ground and darkness closed in from all sides. He held on to consciousness though pure force of will, gasping for each breath as one drowning, deliberately ignoring John's offered hand and dragging himself to his hands and knees. Potter certainly wasn't pulling punches. "It's nice to know where I stand with you, John."

"Quite the show for your Muggle neighbors, Samuel." John's tone was deceptively calm, and Samuel tilted his head sideways to assess the dark glare that was turning toward the Darling Hero. Thankfully, John's expression darkened further as he locked eyes with Potter.

Green eyes widened as the boy recognized the peril of further angering the man. "Remus..." He closed his mouth with a snap at John's sharp look of reproach. Interesting. It was not John's life and livelihood that the alias protected. He was a bona fide hero, with medals and titles to attest. Samuel had seen them, too, at the bottom of the sock drawer.

The hero in question had turned away from both of them and stalked into the house. Samuel sneered at Potter until the boy looked at his shoes. Then he pushed to his feet and made for the basement.

-----  
"Thought I'd find you down here," John said, as rounded the corner.

"Is Potter gone?"

"You've built quite a life here." John's voice was soft.

"And I have no wish to place it in jeopardy."

"I expected you to turn us away, you know. Standing at your door, with no other options, I thought you would say, 'No.'"

Samuel stared at the dried chunks of Valerian root. He would need an exceedingly sharp blade or they would crumble as he chopped. "John, can you hand me that knife?"

The knife clattered to the floor as John let out a howl of pain. "Merlin, Samuel, that's silver."

*Crap!* Samuel could see at a glance that the burn was only minor. "I keep the burn paste on the top shelf. Do you need help applying it?"

"No, I'm fine." John's shoulders were shaking. A tense moment passed before Samuel realized the man was laughing.

"I had forgotten. Are you certain you're all right?" Samuel forced himself to retrieve the blade and began working quickly and precisely.

"My fault. I should have looked where I was grabbing."

Samuel risked looking up as he whispered, "You, Troy, and Amanda."

John blinked twice in confusion before he answered. "Loyal as a badger? I would never have guessed. Harry won't say much, but reading between the lines, this is about Yaxley and Macnair. Can we at least find out what he needs?"

Samuel didn't answer other than securing knives and potion ingredients before walking to the den.

Standing in the doorway, Samuel forced himself to watch objectively while Amanda and Potter tossed a tennis ball to Reggie. While the terror rarely emerged in the presence of the dog, she carried herself with a new watchfulness. Perhaps it was for the best that she remain wary. Reggie, however, had thrown himself into the moment, enjoying the taste of doggie freedom and wagging his tail frantically between tosses.

As Samuel stepped into the room, Potter stepped over to Amanda and murmured quietly. She scowled at Potter for a moment, but turned a softer expression to Samuel. "There are some letters I've been meaning to write. I'll be in my room." Then with a sad smile she left.

The man before him swayed with the frayed look of emotional exhaustion, as though his drive to find Draco was the only thing keeping him upright. Samuel felt something sharp twist behind his ribs. He pulled his mind back to an image from the dungeons, and the heat of anger that followed helped ease the pain. "Potter, I'm appalled. Macnair is a fugitive from Azkaban. Surely even your powers of reason can generate an argument sufficient to return him there."

"Macnair isn't the problem, Prof..., I don't even know what to call you anymore. Setting Yaxley free for lack of evidence is unacceptable. Unless Amanda can testify..."

"Absolutely not!"

Potter held his hands up, conceding. "I get that. So, I need to prove he was a willing Death Eater. I find I'm short of witnesses to that."

"Draco can't help you with that, and even if he could, I doubt that Narcissa would consider my handing him over to you as 'protecting her son'."

"Unbreakable Vow, right. I don't need Draco to testify, finding him was one of the conditions for Narcissa to..."

"Are you simple, Potter? You will not make a deal with Narcissa."

"She's harmless."

"She forced me to kill Albus!" *Shut up now.* Seeing the tremble of his hands only increased his distress. Samuel had no well of anger large enough to drown his grief. He turned to the bookshelves to buy himself a ragged breath without this particular audience. "There is nothing I won't do to ensure that her punishment stands. If you see me as a vengeful bastard, so be it." The break in his voice exposed far too much. Samuel bit his lip to keep the rest inside.

"I don't like it either, but I'm out of Death Eaters. Who do you propose I offer the deal to?"

Samuel turned to the coffee table where Amanda had left her book. *'Silas Marner' Bloody perfect.* He drew a shaky breath. "Me."

# Chapter Twenty

Chapter 20 of 28

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

Chapter Twenty

Potter stared at him blankly.

Samuel took another ragged breath. Too late to back out now. "Make your deal with me."

Strong fingers bit into his shoulder and turned him around. "No!" John's eyes were haunted and feral. "Unacceptable. I won't lose you again." He pushed past Samuel and trapped Potter against the couch. "Harry, find another way."

"This doesn't concern you, John." Samuel had no desire to deal with the Alpha Wolf in addition to Harry Bloody Potter. "And I'm coming home. Potter wouldn't jeopardize Amanda's care." Samuel stared at the boy in challenge.

"I said that I could clear your name. I wouldn't lie about that." Potter's voice wavered behind the bravado.

"Harry, I need to shout at Samuel privately. Don't go far. You're next on my list." Something deeper than rage glimmered in John's eyes. Potter bolted into the hall.

"You, Troy, and Amanda. Or are my loyalties meant to dissolve under the mildest pressure?"

John looked at the floor. "You have to realize that you're walking into the lions' den..."

"Seems more like a vipers' nest."

"This isn't funny, Samuel."

"No? Well, if you can't see the humor, I'm hardly the one to explain it. I'll be in my office." Samuel turned on his heel before John could argue.

The first book he grabbed was 'Potions Compendium'. He was flipping to the letter 'F' when he willed his hand to stop*It's time to make a deliberate choice, Potions or psychology, past or future?* With disgust, he dropped the book beside his chair and returned to the shelves. He'd need more than a few hours of luck in any event. DSM-IV-TR in one hand, and a battered copy of Fromme in the other, Samuel began stacking books on his desk.

He looked up from his growing pile, realizing that he'd been in the office for nearly an hour. The silence in the house left Samuel wondering if he would be helping Remus hide a body. *Bloody wolf. We need Potter and his influence.* Maybe he could stave off trouble by playing doting host. He made a side-trip to the kitchen and then moved down the hall.

Shifting both mugs of coffee into one hand, he reached for the doorknob, but froze as hushed words slipped through the crack. "That's not good enough, Harry. Your intentions aside, I have little faith in the triumph of reason over passion in this matter."

"Remus, it'll be fine. Do you need an Unbreakable Vow?" Samuel found perverse pleasure in listening to Potter sass John.

"You can make any vow you please. That will be cold comfort when it's taken out of your hands. I won't help unless you present solid assurance of his protection."

He stood in the hall like an eavesdropping fool as John argued with Potter over the futility of protective charms and vows. Annoyance warred with gratitude until he heard John's temper crack. "There's nothing to discuss. It can't come from you, and it won't come from me until you present a foolproof plan." He was close enough to the door to be certain that Potter had no answer.

Irritation won, and he shoved the door open without preamble. "Are you both done gossiping like old hags? Potter, I require your assistance for this to work. Wait in my office, and do bring your brain. You have much to learn and little time to absorb it." He turned to John. "Keats, I don't know what the problem is, but we need to solve it. Now."

"Samuel, that was a long time ago. It's not fair to use old endearments to get your way." John crossed his arms and leaned against the desk.

*Fine.* Samuel was experienced in the art of posturing. He rested a hip against the back of the couch, a scant arm's length from John, braced his hands there as well, and crossed his leg over in a relaxed pose. The message was intentionally clear; he could comfortably wait out any idiocy. "John, I've been babied long enough. I accepted sanctuary from Albus with the understanding that I would do my part to destroy that organization. I allowed you to shelter me when Potter desperately needed inside information, but I won't back down this time. I don't have your way with words, nor a hero's cache, but I can write a press release." He raised an eyebrow in challenge.

"Actually, I think you'll find that you can't write this one, but you're welcome to try, Samuel.*Can't? Holy Merlin! John, you idiot.*" I can freely give my name, my address, and credentials. What, exactly, do you control, John?"

"I control the association of past and present. You can introduce yourself as Samuel Crane. You can even answer to Severus Snape among those who are in on the secret..."

"Okay, I get it. So I can go back as an obscure American psychiatrist whom no one will recognize or as a presumed dead Death Eater traitor with no way to vindicate myself? Thanks for painting me into a corner, John, but I owe this to Albus." Samuel stopped when he couldn't control the tremor in his voice.

"Samuel, I'm not trying to prove a point here." John's voice shook as well.

"You're doing what you must, and so am I. Let's not end this on bad terms, Keats. Give me two hours with the boy wonder, and then we'll eat out, make an evening of it, okay?"

John folded, sitting on the floor in defeat. "You win. I'll break it."

Samuel didn't feel victorious, just exhausted and depressed. "That's fine, John. Two hours."

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Samuel wanted to enjoy the fine food. He knew that the chef took great pride in re-imagining ethnic dishes and that Cathy's sister had done them a huge favor by seating them without a reservation. None of that lessened the taste of ash in his mouth.

John shaved another bite of chicken and chewed mechanically. Samuel stared at his own stack of paper thin vegetables and squashed it with his fork. This felt like goodbye, and that wasn't his intent. "Let's make a reservation for next Saturday. We'll celebrate a long incarceration for Yaxley." John looked up sharply at the suggestion.

"You want...Okay, but we'd better let them know we enjoy the food." John offering practical advise was a good sign.

*Take a deep breath, Samuel. You can do this.* "I can do this, John, as long as I know you're taking care of things here. Give me something to fight for, and I'll move heaven and earth to return. It will be okay."

Through the rest of the evening, late into the night, John kept two things very close. One was his laptop, the other, Samuel. That was all right, though, as Amanda was immersed in knitting something large and brown. She claimed it was a sweater and then turned back to marking off stitches on her infernal chart. Samuel tried squinting to see the pattern until John jabbed him in the ribs and gave a subtle shake of his head.

He brought himself up short, then, as he glanced over at Potter's blanching face. That boy didn't understand enough of human complexity to be reading Erich Fromme. "Potter?" he interrupted sharply.

"They were lording their status over the mock prisoners, just because they could..."

"Skip to Fromme's conclusions. They differ from Zimbardo's significantly."

"I see that he disagrees, but..."

"Fromme argues, Mr. Potter, that our choices are influenced by our appetites, not determined by our station. He further postulates that, in the large majority, humans abide by a code of humane morality, that we are not all sociopaths waiting to happen." Samuel stared as Potter swallowed slowly. "You are the least likely of anyone to enjoy the suffering of another."

Later, in the darkness of their bedroom, John ghosted his fingers along Samuel's arm. "Thank you for that."

"Potter truly needs to learn to apply a healthy level of skepticism to what he reads. And what he's told about what he reads. John, I want you to do something for me."

"Anything."

"Gryffindor, I should hold you to that, but I won't. Consider telling Bill Weasley about your current struggle with alcoholic escapism. I fear this week may become especially difficult."

The room was silent as John pressed his forehead to Samuel's back. The tears were hot on his skin as he turned to hold his lover.

John's voice was raw as he held Samuel in place. "No. Wait. I'm all right. You're coming back, dammit."

"That's the plan, Keats."

A/N: The book that Harry is reading is 'The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness' by Erich Fromme. Yes, I do realize that Severus grossly over-simplified Fromme's position on the Stanford 'mock prison' experiment.

## Chapter Twenty-one

*Chapter 21 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Twenty-one

Late Sunday night in Potomac was early Monday morning at Hogwarts, and the Trans-Atlantic Portkey ride dropped them on the lawn in front of the castle. Hard. Potter was the first to find his feet while Samuel wished the world would stop spinning.

Samuel was shocked by the efficiency with which Potter gained entrance to the Headmistress' office. He straightened his slacks and sport coat as he stepped off the staircase and noticed Minerva staring at him in confusion. Then began the revolting 'fawning over Potter' ritual. Samuel scowled at them both and settled into a chair without waiting for an invitation.

By Samuel's reckoning, it must have been the wedding of the century hough how the Weasleys would have funded such was a complete mystery. When the old tabby began discussing the flower girl, Samuel cleared his throat. "Potter, shall we dispense with the unpleasantness?" When Everyone's Favorite Groom blinked at him, Samuel prodded further. "The letter?"

John had been especially pleased when he finished this missive. Fidelius protected facts were doled out, one bite at a time, each carefully building on the last in a way that prevented the reader from skipping ahead. Minerva paused after reading a few sentences and scowled at the portrait of her predecessor. It didn't take long for that glare to be turned upon Samuel himself.

Potter stepped between them and quietly assured her that Remus Lupin was to be taken very seriously, especially regarding the post script hich must have been written after Samuel had seen the letter. Minerva's glare grew even darker as she snarled at them both, "Well played, Remus. Mr. Potter, use the suite we discussed, but I'm holding you accountable for this man's actions. Personally accountable." She narrowed her eyes. "Severus." Clearly it was both a greeting and a dismissal because she turned her back on both of them and directed her ire to the painting behind her desk. "Albus Percival Wulfric Brian..."



Samuel didn't want to hear any more. He followed right on Potter's heels down the stairs and through the halls to a hideous tapestry across from a well camouflaged door. "I didn't realize that congratulations were in order." Samuel shifted his jaw to the side and forced his face to relax. "May you lighten each other's load and soothe each other's tears."

Potter smirked. "No wonder you never say anything nice. That's as 'girlie' as it gets."

Samuel scowled and snarled at the whelp. "Fine, I'll offer my father's sentiments. Burn her shoes and keep her in her place, boy, or she'll have you eating from her hand. But perhaps the more pressing question is why a new husband can spend so many nights on my couch? Honeymoon over, Mr. Potter?"

"What honeymoon? Amanda disappeared between the wedding and the reception. Does it please you to know that you're in the position to give us the most cherished wedding gift of all?"

"Antler chandelier has come back into vogue?"

"You're still a git."

Samuel allowed himself one last sneer before he pushed past Potter and into the suite of rooms.

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Irritated from lack of sleep and Potter's complete disorganization, Samuel swept into the Great Hall in full Potions master's demeanor. They were thirty minutes late for breakfast, and he desperately needed some form of caffeine.

The table was unusually full for this early in August. Minerva and Trelawney, he'd expected. Sprout, Hagrid, and Filch caused no surprise. Slughorn could be busy brewing for the school year. Longbottom was a shock, and Tonks e just wasn't ready to face the woman.

If he was unprepared for the crowded table, they were astounded to see him. All conversations stopped mid-sentence. Longbottom blanched, and Trelawney's fork clattered as it struck the floor. "I see everyone has read the *Prophet*," Samuel snapped at the gaping fools. "Am I welcome at this table, or should I check my food for poison?"

Slughorn broke the silence. "Severus, it's good... er... well, I'm glad to learn that we were mistaken." Hagrid stood quickly, and Samuel barely ducked the intended bone crushing hug. After exchanging greetings of varying sincerity, he welcomed the isolation he found on the far side of Trelawney.

His gambit paid off until his cup was snatched from his fingers. "Sibyll, really!" He tried to take it back, but she fended him off with one hand while pulling the cup close to her face.

She gasped dramatically and plunked the cup onto the table. "Severus..."

"Not the 'Grim' again, woman. You've already predicted my death, which will certainly come to pass eventually."

She stared him down his time. "Not the 'Grim', The Wolf... he brings death to your door."

"For Merlin's sake, Sibyll, keep up with current events. I'm not afraid of John Wolfe..." He realized his faux pas as he looked down a table of blank stares. "...Remus Lupin," he corrected.

"The leaves do not lie, Severus. You cannot escape your fate."

"Which fate would that be? Wolf, poison, betrayal, or fall... and will that be before or after I am named Headmaster of Hogwarts?" He stood and glared sharp icicles down the table before turning on his heel to leave.

"Professor Snape, I mean, Dr. Crane," Longbottom sputtered. "Tell Remus that I can do it."

Samuel felt his head begin to pound. "Glacier Lilies?" The nod was immediate. "Fine. Thank you." He even tried to make it sound sincere.

Back on the seventh floor, Samuel stared in amazement at the socks, shirts, and trousers scattered across the sitting room. *Potter, swine keep a neater living space.* He snorted and swept his wand across the mess. The clean room that resulted soothed his sense of order, and he moved into the bedroom that Potter had graciously offered to him.

He opened a book and stared at the wall. The stones were stacked in a mosaic-like pattern. They reminded him of John, shirtless in the Montana summer, arranging paving stones in a meandering path through the garden. *Focus, old man. Yaxley's motivator...*

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Samuel plodded forward through the subterranean halls, missing John. Stupid Potter fter insisting that he contact the wolf and allowing depressingly brief assurances by both that all was well nded the connection abruptly, citing the fast approaching hearing in London. Now his hands were shackled as he staggered at wand point to the farthest cells the Ministry housed.

Thinking of John right now would be a grave error. As he had taken pains to point out to Potter, Macnair was still a killer. Yaxley must have become quite dominant to have held the other wizard in check for nineteen days. Samuel couldn't afford to be distracted while facing him.

"That's far enough, Snape." *I don't care if you can project your voice, Potter. You're still a whelp to me*The steel bars marking the face of the cell were overly dramatic. Prisoners were contained by the magic, not the structure. As he turned to the cell 'door', he caught his first glimpse of Ruben Yaxley. The last month had clearly not been kind. Closely shorn hair framed a fading black eye, newly crooked nose, and jagged teeth. *If that man bites me, Potter, you will deeply regret it.*

He was dressed in ragged army pants and a stained undershirt. If he'd been wearing a robe when he was captured, it had been taken away with his shoes when Potter demanded a suicide watch. As a result, Samuel was deprived of robe and shoes as well. *Bloody fool. You should have confessed. Now, I'm going to make you pay for dragging me from my comfortable office.* Under-educated eyes locked with Samuel's in astonishment.

*Calm. Potions master. Death Eater.* "Ruben, you've certainly looked better."

# Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter 22 of 28

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

**A/N:** I'm going to post an extra warning. This chapter will contain violence and mention of past violence. I worked very hard to keep it mild, but if you find the thought of Severus (Samuel) being hurt, you'll want to skip the next two chapters.

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## Chapter Twenty-two

Yaxley glared through the bars at Samuel before saying, "Heard you were dead." The tone was flat, matching the lifeless eyes.

"Shut up, both of you." Potter shifted his wand to cover Yaxley. "Lay on the floor, hands behind your head." When the man complied, Samuel was jostled into the cell. Potter raised his wand to release the shackles as Samuel decided a change of tactics was necessary. He shook his head quickly.

"Going to leave me in irons, Potter, like the coward that you are?" The half-wit seemed to understand because not only did he leave the bindings in place, Samuel was instantly doused in slime. Yaxley crowed at Samuel's misfortune until Potter hexed him as well. Then they were alone. *How do you break a Death Eater?*

*Understand his motivation.* Staring at the man, it was clear. Macnair's deviant appetites aside, Yaxley was not the backbone of the operation. He was a little man craving power and authority.

*Play to his weakness.* Unable to fight back with his hands bound, Samuel was not surprised by the kick. Ribs that were already bruised screamed in agony as he gasped again for breath. He allowed himself one glance through the bars at Ron Weasley's stark white face and trembling wand hand. The barest shake of his head kept Weasley from intervening, but it looked to cost the boy greatly. *Gryffindor fools. Every advantage comes at a price.*

*Destroy his security.* "Big man, Ruben? Remember that I know things. Things you'd rather I not share." Yaxley thought for a moment, then crashed his knuckles into Samuel's ear. The room was blindingly white for several heartbeats until the pain receded. Weasley was pointing his wand again. The stupid fool was going to foil the ruse. "Weasley. Run along and tell Potter that I think I'll take his deal. Yaxley's hardly worth life in Azkaban."

Samuel watched Yaxley's courage falter as Weasley walked away. "Think you're the big man, then? Gonna sell me down the river?"

*Re-define the relationship.* "I believe I'll simply sell you out, and clearly they want you badly enough that I can buy myself a few concessions." Yaxley looked confused. Not the sharpest tool in the barn. "You don't think I can cut a deal with what I know about you?"

"They want you too badly for killing their 'Guard-guy.'" *Vanguard? Yaxley has been swimming in some new circles.*

"True, they want me to suffer for... that, but I think grabbing Weasley's girlfriend makes them hate you even more. What did you want with the girl, anyway?" Samuel stared at Yaxley, waiting for the man to spill what he needed to know.

After a moment, Yaxley looked away, dismissing the threat. "You wouldn't turn on me. We're on the same side."

"That didn't save Clearwater."

The fool's mouth fell open. Clearly, they hadn't guessed at his deception. "That was you? What'd that bint ever do to you?"

*Cultivate the subject's dependence.* Now he had currency. He needed for Yaxley to believe he'd gained the upper hand. "I refuse to shelter the weak. Why should I believe that you can offer protection from anyone?"

Yaxley hinted at several former colleagues in Azkaban, holding the tacit promise of protection from harm. Samuel continued to bait him, sure that man would slip soon and tell him something that would help Amanda.

After several rounds with no success, he heard boots on the stone floor. Almost out of time, he pressed the last button. "Takes a lot of courage to grab a little girl."

"You don't get it, Snape. We were after the traitor."

"What? You aren't making any sense." The steps were louder in the corridor. *Just a little more time... please.* No one heard his internal plea because, only moments later, the Aurors stood outside the cell. Weasley grabbed Samuel, leaving Yaxley to Moody's tender mercies. He didn't have to feign the anger as he tried for one more glimpse of Yaxley as he was shoved down the hall.

"Where's Potter? Couldn't you wait one more minute? I needed to know what he meant about 'the traitor'." Samuel scowled through his bruises.

Weasley stepped back and pointed his wand at Samuel's face. He ignored the question about Potter. *The brat likely needs help pinning medals on his robes.* "Wasn't going to let him hit you any more. Let's heal those up." Samuel fought against his own irrational fear. Weasley's wand work was clearly improved from his school years. His ribs set nicely, and the pain and swelling left his face. He found he could easily keep pace with Weasley down the long hall to Potter's office.

He was pleasantly surprised to find his own shoes and his robes folded neatly on a chair. Samuel snatched a framed photo off Potter's desk in a bid to level the playing field. Ginny Weasley-Potter, blew kisses toward her husband before dragging him out of the frame. Samuel grimaced. While he was distracted, Potter stepped closer to look at Samuel's face. "Good job, Ron, but you missed the ear." Potter incanted his own healing charm before handing eleven inches of willow to a very irate Samuel.

"Give me that. I'm not a baby, and I can decide what needs healing. Merlin!" Fortunately they left him to his own grooming, and soon he was slipping into Courtroom One right behind Potter. The hearing itself was the expected quibbling over facts, Yaxley trying to argue that he was not a Death Eater, Potter dredging up every random reference he could find tying Yaxley to other convicted Death Eaters. The problem was, there simply wasn't any proof.

*Last step: leave the subject adrift.* With a quick glance around Weasley's body, Samuel snarled at the relaxed smirk on Yaxley's face. His hand twitched against his will. Was this how Potter felt when he glimpsed the Golden Snitch through hazy light across the pitch? He cleared his throat and scraped his chair as he stood, interrupting Potter mid-sentence. "That's fine, Mr. Potter. You had very little to work with." Samuel paused to savor Yaxley's condescending smirk, and an ancient wizard in the front row filled the vacuum.

"If that's all you have to offer, drop the charges, my boy. You haven't proven a thing."

"Forgive me, but I said that was all that Mr. Potter had to work with. I, however, have much more evidence to offer."

"Convenient that you show up now, Snape," Moody barked angrily.

"Mr. Potter and Remus Lupin asked for my help. Was I to turn them away, Alastor? But let's turn back to the matter at hand. Ruben Yaxley, what was the occasion of our first acquaintance?" Samuel paused again, but held a hand up, keeping the entire Wizengamot silent, waiting for Yaxley's answer. The man's eyes flashed pure hatred, but Yaxley said nothing. "That's fine, Ruben, because I am also capable of telling these people that we met at a gathering of Death Eaters, in the presence of Voldemort." He paused again, this time to allow the frantic whispers to die down, "Yes, Voldemort, we can all say his name. And that very night, Ruben, you showed your Mark to me, right before I received my own."

The little wizard was speaking again. "And are you here to answer to the matter of your own Mark, Severus Snape?"

"That matter has already been addressed and closed by this body, twenty-two years ago. My acquittal remains a binding decision. It cannot be reversed."

"And the murder of Albus Dumbledore?" Moody couldn't keep his eye on the Snitch, apparently.

"The particulars of that matter may be discussed with Headmaster Dumbledore's portrait at your leisure, Alastor, but the terms of my appearance here today include amnesty on all charges relating to his death, and all actions taken at his direction. Again, the agreement is binding. For the matter of Ruben Yaxley's crimes, shall I begin by listing the Ministry officials that he was blackmailing in the summer of nineteen-ninety-four?" The room was in an uproar, but Samuel barely heard. His eyes were locked with Yaxley's as their fire dimmed, and the Death Eater slumped until only the shackles on the chair held him up. *Checkmate.*

The decision took only minutes, and then Samuel stared at the bastard's bent head as Yaxley was sentenced to Azkaban. There was a moment of relieved silence in Courtroom One before Moody's voice carried throughout the chamber. "Severus Snape, you are charged with the murder of Penelope Clearwater."

## Chapter Twenty-three

*Chapter 23 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

**A/N:** Tremendous thanks to **excessivelyperky** for helping to make this chapter readable and for keeping me focused on the plot-line.

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Chapter Twenty-three

The cell was dark again.

*Moody's decided to bore me to death.* Samuel closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. Checkmate, indeed. Moody finally had him over a barrel, arresting him for a murder committed in January of '98. He could hardly expect the Wizengamot to believe that Albus' direction transcended the grave.

The Clearwater situation had been worse than any scenario even he could have dreamed up. It had left him with a terrible choice of whom to protect. John might know the whole truth of it. Potter and Ron Weasley would likely give him some benefit of the doubt, if only for Amanda's sake, but it would surely divide the remaining Weasleys. Undoubtedly, some of them still felt an attachment to Percy's girlfriend, and speaking ill of the dead was a risky defense. *Stupid girl.* His next thought was so dangerous, he buried it in the deepest cavern of his consciousness as he turned his entire mind to Occlumency. His life currently depended upon its holding.

The cell was bright again.

He definitely needed a hobby. Something in which to lose himself. Robert had offered repeatedly to take him fly-fishing. On rainy winter days the man would sit in front of a magnifying glass for hours on end, using bits of feather and fur to disguise the barbed hooks as insects. Lacking hooks as well as feathers, Samuel decided that fly-tying would not work as a distraction. John would be planning a month's worth of meals, including the proper use of leftovers. That would not suit, either. He thought of Amanda's hands, as she crafted lengths of yarn into items of warmth and comfort. Maybe he would have a knot-work scarf to warm his ears in the North Atlantic. *I wonder how Black slipped out.*

Dark again.

Samuel let himself drift for a time. He thought of John -- John reading in the study, weeding in the garden, chopping vegetables, slicing potions ingredients *Potions, Samuel. Begin by adding powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood...* When he lost himself in the intricate dance of brewing, time and light became irrelevant.

*Wump.* The pain was sharp against the back of his head, dull and throbbing against his forehead. His eyelids felt heavy as Samuel came back to himself. The cell was bright except for the bent and blurry form of Moody, with fingers still wrapped around Samuel's throat, pinning him to the wall.

"I said, explain the significance of the Clearwater girl," Moody snarled in a tone that Samuel himself enjoyed using on Potter.

Blinding pain in his head was paling beside his new awareness of a deep ache inside his ribs. "I don't know what you're talking about. You clearly believed you knew enough in ninety-eight."

"Snape, your friends taught me many things about the value of pain and persuasion. Shall I teach you what I've learned?" Samuel tried not to look at the prosthetic leg and eye.

Fingers tightened around his larynx, limiting Samuel to a raspy whisper. "Mad-eye, this is not my first rodeo."

"And that will make it more satisfying when I bring you to your knees." Moody's own eye was glazed in a way that hinted at insanity.

With no one to help him, and nothing left to lose, Samuel opened the floodgate of his mind. "Truly ironic that you arrest me for your own handiwork. And I thought you had a stronger stomach than Remus... Is this your own delayed guilt over killing a mole?" He had no way to protect his throat as the pain flared again. *Now you've done it...*

"You used me, Snape, to kill that girl, get back at Weasley. Last chance to tell me why... Fine*Crucio*." Moody's voice was flat, emotionless as he cast the Unforgivable, and Samuel felt a chill of horror as he sensed his own mind slipping away.

*Give me something to fight for, John, and I'll move heaven and earth to return*Alastor Moody was proving impossible to move. He tried to remember his basement lab, but the pain was too bright and sharp. Forget proving his innocence; he was going to die right here. *John, you do know that man is psychotic, right?*Psychotic, loss of rational thought... Loss *Mum? Lily? Albus? No... John!*Even the pain was slipping away.

Unexpectedly the world came back. "...Moody, you fool... Not allowed to torture prisoners..." Why did Weasley sound so concerned?

Another familiar voice was very close, and dark fingers were prying his eyelids open. "Severus, look at me." Kingsley was crouching in front of him, holding his head up. Samuel blinked, and then Kingsley kept talking. "Severus, this is very important. Do you have any allergies to potions or ingredients?"

The world was coming back faster, and the rushing in his ears was fading. Still, it hurt to rasp, "No allergies." He felt too vulnerable on the floor, so he used Kingsley for leverage as he pushed himself up to 'stand' against the wall. He could see Moody, reluctantly handing his wand to Ron Weasley, Moody whinging to Weasley that he hadn't harmed anyone important.

"Not important!" the boy raged. Samuel felt his breath catch in his throat. He didn't want to crave anyone's respect, but listening to Weasley defend him... "Not important," Weasley continued. "You're hurting Harry, you idiot."

*You're hurting Harry... Well played, Remus... Concrete assurance of protection...*That was enlightening. Samuel pushed his bruised ego aside and allowed Kingsley's aid as he took a step toward the door. Five feet, three feet, he grabbed hold of the bars and slammed his bare foot into the steel brace. Hard. *How do you like that, Potter?*He welcomed the bloom of agony from his toes and the satisfaction of striking back, even as Kingsley pinned him solidly against the outside wall.

"For Merlin's sake, Severus, going to bite your tongue, now?" Kingsley's sarcasm stung in a way Samuel hadn't expected.

"No, I'm done."

"Let's hope so. It will be harder to move you to Hogwarts in a full Body-Bind. Do you still trust Poppy for care?" They were moving again, but it seemed very slowly.

"s fine." The hall was dimmer than he'd remembered, and he felt as though he was leaning heavily on someone with every step.

"Definitely concussed. Keep your eyes open and lean on me," said Kingsley, erm, Minister Shacklebolt. "Severus, weren't you in Maine when Penelope died?"

"Used an alias, hard to prove it was actually me."

"Remus knew..."

"John's biased. Or hadn't you guessed? It hardly matters. I'm responsible for her death. I gave away her name."

"You gave her name to the Death Eaters?" They stopped, mid-stride. Kingsley's fingers bit into his shoulder.

Samuel could barely keep his eyes open to meet Kingsley's challenge. "I gave her name to Remus."

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"Severus, sit up." The touch was surprisingly gentle as his Head of House urged him up against the pillows, pressing a warm vial into his hand. It was hard to focus through the blinding pain as he raised the vial to his lips. "That's still hot." Slughorn's hand stopped his own. "Sip it slowly."

The first sip tasted of tree bark and old socks and made his stomach clench painfully. As the spasms eased, he was encouraged to sip again. This time the pain in his head subsided and the room came into focus. *The infirmary. The Shrieking Shack. The Marauders.* "Thanks, Professor."

Slughorn chortled, then stared at him with growing alarm. "You're welcome, Professor Snape."

"Professor? No, that's not right, either... Crane, Samuel Crane."

"You do remember. That's a good sign. Tell me, how did you pick that name? From Stephen Crane, the novelist?"

"Ichabod." Tired of camaraderie, Samuel turned to face the wall.

## Chapter Twenty-four

*Chapter 24 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

**A/N:** This chapter was made possible through the kind help of **excessivelyperky**. The spelling is better as a result, and any mistakes that remain are entirely my own.

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Chapter twenty-four

Samuel's entire world was focused in his left ear, defined by the pop and hiss of static interrupted by a distant tinny ring. Then his breath caught in his throat as a far-away voice whispered his name like a plea. "Samuel?"

"John." Just as plaintive, just as desperate. "Merlin."

"I was worried all night when you didn't call." The relief in John's voice soothed Samuel's soul until he realized that he wasn't truly a free man.

"About that..."

"Bloody hell, what's gone wrong?"

Samuel found a warm satisfaction in telling of Yaxley's clumsy machinations in the idiot's bid for dominance. He savored the memory of the man's easy acceptance of the bait. He decided that John didn't need to know that the struggle took a violently physical turn, nor that the boy wonder's sidekick had almost tipped his hand. Before John could ask, he distracted the man with a careful description of Potter's mastery of politics and brilliance in the courtroom.

He tried to avoid scoffing or snorting when John expressed real pride in the boy's success, but before he could turn the topic, John was pressing for details of Samuel's own performance. He didn't concern himself with the number of follow up questions that John asked about each of them (two about Potter and four about Samuel), nor the fact that he could hear John smiling as he offered congratulations on outwitting the move to charge him again as a Death Eater. The sweetest moment was sharing the shocked silence in the chamber, when he threatened to reveal the greedy and the gullible who had bent to bribery, the true fear in the eyes of weak men in power. Fear of him and what he knew. All that remained to tell was Moody's treachery, but that made him think of John's own subterfuge.

"Clever charm you placed on Potter, John. " It would have been more satisfying had he not seen Mrs. Potter fawning all over her husband's phantom hurts. Of course, Kingsley claimed that the link was responsible for summoning help so quickly--Samuel thought, unkindly, that he wouldn't like to know how long it would have taken slow help to arrive.

The man was deeply upset by hearing of that betrayal, and John didn't deserve his anger, so he tried to allay his fear. "Shacklebolt tells me I have nothing to worry about when he challenges the charges tomorrow."

"Kingsley's a smart man, Samuel. You should listen to him." John's conviction drew Samuel's thoughts to his last conversation with the Minister of Magic.

*He'd stopped the Minister on his way out of Hogwarts. Even as he turned, Kingsley was trying to tuck that bloody bottle of potion into his robes. Samuel cursed himself for a fool as words he'd sworn he wouldn't speak slid smoothly past his lips. "I gave you two days warning on your house. I told you about Thicknesse. All I've asked until now is to be left alone. I need to go home. Please."*

*"I do understand the risk you took in returning. I promise you, I will sway them to our way of thinking. I just need a little more time," the Minister assured him.*

*"Kingsley, look at the moon. I'm almost out of time."*

Samuel sighed as he admitted, "I would have more faith in him if I had not seen Slughorn slipping him a vial of Felix Felicis."

"Maybe it only looked like--"

"John."

"Sorry. What about Minerva?"

"That old bat will never forgive me, and perhaps she shouldn't. Albus was like a father to her, and I did escape the worst of the fighting."

"And if you'd died in June, no one would have guessed that Penelope Clearwater was selling us out, one at a time, to Bellatrix." John's words were becoming increasingly clipped as he leveled his anger at the wizarding world at large.

"John, reason doesn't factor into the grieving process. " Samuel cringed as he realized that he'd also given Minerva a piece of his mind.

*"...strange that no one, not even Albus, wondered what it cost me to kill my friend," Samuel had calmly intoned before turning his back on the Headmistress.*

"Are you still there, Samuel?"

"I'm still here, sitting on the floor of the Shrieking Shack, hoping they don't think to look here so they can drag me back to that thrice damned infirmary." He knew he'd made a grave error before he'd even closed his mouth.

"Twenty-four hours in the hospital wing?" John was clearly alarmed. "What aren't you telling me, Samuel?"

He thought of the uncomfortable conversation while Kingsley tried to assess his frame of mind, of how he'd chastised the man for over-dramatizing the situation, and of how he'd fled to the relative safety of Slughorn's dungeon lab, the healing that brewing had offered his wounded pride and shattered nerves. The tremor in his hand was hardly noticeable after a day of slicing and simmering.

"Pomfrey's just determined to punish me for escaping her clutches this afternoon. They seem to forget that I have more experience evaluating Acute Stress Disorder than all of them combined."

Of course, John could cut to the bleeding heart of the matter. "What did Jack have to say?"

"You would be over here by the first available Portkey, if I had called Jack before calling you. I know which side of my bread is buttered, John."

There was a terrifying moment of silence. Then a resigned sigh. "Samuel, out of concern for you, I'm putting you on notice. I won't be your enabler." Another pause. This time there was the faintest sound of rustling papers. "I'm looking through your office. You'd better pray that you can reach Jack before I find the number..."

"You win, I'll call him now. Just do me a favor and tell Troy--"

"I can't tell him anything if he keeps hanging up whenever I answer."

Samuel was shocked by that thought. "That's completely cowardly and rude. Troy wouldn't do that."

"Well, it has happened five times, and you've only been away for two days." John sounded so certain that Samuel took a few moments to ponder an appropriate threat that would marshal the brat back to civilized behavior. "Tell Kingsley to call me if his liquid luck runs out."

"Are you certain they won't throw you in a holding cell to wait out the full moon?"

"You're worth at least a week in lock-up, if it comes to that. Besides, this is more my fault than yours. Now I wish I'd been more interested in why she would betray us."

Samuel held his breath for a moment before admitting, "I never concerned myself with her motivation. Would a good reason save the Creeveys, or Granger's parents..."

"I suppose not. There is still the issue of how she gathered her information. I do hope that we can save Percy and Arthur the embarrassment of full disclosure."

"That was harsh, John. More in character for me than you."

"I already warned Harry, I have claws, every day of the month, if I need them. Don't threaten my--"*Oh, Merlin, don't say it.*" "Someone I care about."

"I miss you too, Keats." He thought of the difference it made, having just one person believe the best of him. Maybe he could make that difference...

"Don't worry about the Wolfsbane. Bill helped me reinforce the root cellar under the barn. It will hold an angry werewolf."

"There is still time. I'll be home soon."

With the battery warning light flashing, Samuel called through to New York. "Jack, I think I need your help... I'm looking for the name of a good attorney in California... Right, family law..."

## Chapter Twenty-five

*Chapter 25 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

**A/N:** This chapter would still be a garbled series of random events without Perky's help. Any mistakes that remain are entirely my own.

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Chapter Twenty-five

The infirmary was lit with only the barest grey of pre-dawn light when a whispered voice sent Samuel scuttling behind the bed for cover.

"Prof...I mean, Sna...Erm, Dr. Crane..." *Easy, Samuel, it's only the Potter brat.* "We need to leave. Get dressed. Let's go."

A more alert Samuel stepped silently across the lawn with Potter, just past the Quidditch Pitch where Samuel stopped walking and folded his arms across his chest. "The Bloody Savior of the Wizarding World is going to help me bolt when Kingsley specifically told us to wait?"

"Remus is scarier than Kingsley," He-Who-Must-Never-Obey-Anyone-Ever offered as his explanation. *He does have a point.*

Samuel simply sighed and, in his mind, contrasted the hazy grey dawn of Scotland with the wide blue skies of a Montana evening. It wasn't a difficult choice. Let Kingsley send along his wand later, or never; he grabbed on to the Portkey.

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Samuel felt the tension seep out of his shoulders as he pressed the edge of the silver dagger against the soporiferous beans. This potion left him feeling especially competent. Even Slughorn hadn't worked out this trick for extracting the juice. It was his little secret...that he shared with Potter. He comforted himself with the knowledge that even with his notes, the brat wasn't anything more than barely competent around a cauldron.

He carefully cleaned the blade and set it to the back of the workspace. He didn't want John to burn himself again. He stopped for a moment, staring at the knife...

The door opened behind him. He recognized John's familiar step on the tile floor and forced his hand to set the dagger back on the bench. The wolf cleared his throat softly. "I didn't realize you were so far behind on potions. You've been down here for hours."

"I'm caught up on my standard stock. This is just...sorry, it's a bit stupid really." John tilted his head and settled into the padded chair in the corner, waiting for Samuel to finish. "Fine, Moody was being 'cute,' and absorbing myself in imaginary brewing left me a measure of control over my own mind." He sighed, but continued. "The Hogwarts stores helped a bit. Brewing in my own lab helped a bit more, but not nearly as much as following the precise steps that insulated me from the actual chaos."

John leaned forward slightly. "Are you okay? Honestly?"

Samuel knew he'd paused too long to offer trite assurances of his own mental stability. "I've given up the idea that I can simply 'buck up,' if that's what you're asking, John." He let himself fold onto the small chair by the desk. "Being home helps. The rest will simply take time. Moody is hardly an expert in the art of torture, and I survived on my own in Maine, John. I'll be all right here." *With you.* "Does Potter need help with travel arrangements?"

"He managed the airlines with no problems. Maybe Amanda is quietly coaching him, but he also grew up Muggle. He should do well." John seemed confident in the fool's ability to interact closely with a Muggle socialite, and Samuel simply couldn't drop everything to fly to L.A. no matter how pressing his patient's legal claim.

"Ms. Jones may behave disingenuously when she is faced with her friends and her former 'party circuit.' Keeping her out of trouble can be Potter's opportunity to redress his own wandering ways."

John snorted, then instantly sobered. "And her children?"

"He knows that he has free reign of any and all means to ensure their safety." With the family's money and influence, it might very well take a wizard to secure it. "Fine, I'll say it. I have full confidence in Potter to do whatever is necessary to protect them. Happy?"

"Are you sure it's a good idea to send Harry and Troy to the same town? I know that Kingsley has blocked extradition for both of you, but Harry..."

"I will advise Troy of Potter's arrival and accommodations. If nothing else, I can be certain he'll look out for his own best interests. Did you not counsel me to trust the boy?"

John actually looked a bit green. "As long as you're certain..."

"In this, I am certain. Do I smell bacon?"

"Hmm, I suppose I could start breakfast early. Omelets in twenty minutes?"

Samuel smiled tightly as he began straightening the potions bench. Cauldrons and vials were cleaned and stacked, jars of ingredients returned to his store. At last, he let his fingers ghost over the silver dagger.

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Samuel looked at the table and slid John's coffee to the setting on the right. Hopefully that would be enough... He scowled at the blue spikes of wildflowers in the center of the table.

John smiled at Samuel as he settled two plates on the table, paused, then switched the plates. "Cold?"

"What?" Samuel felt his heart kick to a faster cadence. He poked at the large pile of bacon on his plate.

"It just seems a bit warm to be wearing a sweater." John's face looked deliberately neutral.

Samuel kept his hand from drifting to his collar in the stifling heat. "Hmm? No, I'm comfortable." *"Slice the roots across the grain to maximize contact without bruising the flesh..."* "When do you meet with Alan this week?"

John closed his eyes and exhaled slowly before meeting Samuel's intense stare. "Tomorrow morning. No, I did not consume any alcohol while you were away. Nor did I, at any point, feel the need to imbibe. I am, however, fighting the strong desire to drag you to New York by your ear." John held up his hand to stave off any interruptions. "I am fighting the urge because I trust you to manage your own affairs."

Samuel thought that the raised eyebrow conveyed that John's trust was nearing its limits. Just as well he'd worn the extra layers. With the full moon only four nights away, the wolf could likely smell fear, aside from all the rest... "I'm speaking with Jack again tomorrow. I think everyone is over-reacting a bit, but I am flattered by all the attention." He cleared his throat and seized a topic that would keep John off-balance. "Troy assures me he has not been calling." He looked again at the bowl in the center of the table. "Why are there blue flowers all over our home?" *Two bones, John, but which one will you grab?*

John looked surprised for a moment, then gamely answered. "They keep appearing on the doorstep every time I go out on an errand. You clearly have a young admirer who thinks you like blue-bonnets."

Samuel felt the denial die on his lips as he remembered what ten-year-old Susanna Martin had named her pig *Merlin*, *not again*. He hadn't dared to enter the diner for several weeks after the fair last year. Fortunately, his thoughts were interrupted by a light jingle, moving down the hall.

"Good morning, Reggie," John greeted warmly. "Amanda."

Samuel sighed as the weight of yet another soul pressed down on his shoulders.

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Samuel had moved to the deck when the afternoon sun warmed the valley. It was actually hot rather than pleasant, but he wished to be out-of-doors as much as possible. He could feel the sweat dripping down the face of the phone and onto his hand. "...No, Carol, I am still not taking calls from Dr. West. Move on... I suppose it is wildfire season. Is the evacuation plan still valid?... Perhaps you should do that... Just keep me updated." He rang off, skipping the pleasantries. Carol was a good administrator, but a prickly person. At least she knew how to deal with Samuel's snark.

Reaching for his glass, he scowled at the rattling of ice cubes. Empty. How fast had he quaffed the last glass? Light steps approached from behind, and a new glass settled next to his hand. He had worried about slowing reflexes over the past few days, but in his moment of need, his hand slipped quickly to his other wrist. He pulled the blade, cunningly sheathed inside his sleeve, and twisted to face the threat.

Kingsley took a fast, instinctive step away and held his hands in a quelling, conciliatory gesture. "Sorry, didn't mean to startle you." The Ex-Auror shifted into a defensive posture. "Do you always carry a silver dagger, Severus?"

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**A/N:** I have a small request in regards to reviews. Yes, I love getting them, the good, the bad, and the could'a been better. But as we come to the final wrap-up, I ask that we keep the reviews 'spoiler free', so if you have theories that you'd like to discuss or questions relating to later chapters, please leave them on my livejournal, send me an email at [kodiakmac\(at\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:kodiakmac(at)gmail(dot)com), or stop by [www\(dot\)magicsanctum\(dot\)proboards105\(dot\)com](http://www(dot)magicsanctum(dot)proboards105(dot)com). If you decide to sign up and want to be sorted, just list Kodiak as the person who sent you. \*Big cheesy wink\*

## Chapter Twenty-six

*Chapter 26 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Twenty-six

Samuel felt the heat rising in his face. With dagger in hand, facing down an old friend, there was no point in denying anything, but perhaps he could control the damage. "It seemed the best choice for me to carry. There's no risk of John trying to reach for it when he inevitably realizes that I have it." The afternoon sun had drifted low enough to force Samuel to squint at the interloper standing on his deck.

Kingsley was watching him carefully. "Sev, Remus wouldn't hurt you."

"I know that! If you haven't noticed, I'm a bit on edge." He forced himself to slide the blade into the leather at his wrist. "Forgive my atrocious manners." He swept his arm to indicate the other chair and picked up the lemonade as Kingsley settled in with a glass of his own. The bite of tart lemon on his tongue helped him ground himself.

"Maybe this will help." Kingsley set the willow wand on the table and slid it toward Samuel. "The Wizengamot has cleared you, and Arthur offers his apologies."

The thought of why Arthur Weasley would send that message filled Samuel with a dull, aching grief. "He was never meant to know."

"It was unavoidable, once Mad-Eye pressed charges. Yaxley was happy to name Penelope as Bella's informant. He thought the information would seal your fate." Kingsley let out a bitter chuckle. "You had no choice, Severus. Penelope was gleaned information from Percy. They'd been thwarted at the Ministry, so she had him looking for a new way into Hogwarts when she was killed."

"Stupid boy was only trying to reconcile with his family. Too arrogant to see that he was being played."

"And she was under a dark wand herself. Bella's good at finding the soft under-belly. After spending a sickening hour interrogating Madame LeStrange, I don't believe there was ever a good resolution to this." Kingsley paused and stared at the low hills that enclosed the valley for a moment. "I was hoping to find Potter here."

"Sorry. You seem to have missed him." Samuel actually sounded a bit smug to his own ears.

Kingsley narrowed his eyes. "Purely by accident, I'm sure. Where is he?"

"There was some unexpected business for the clinic. One of my patients required a chaperone while she handles a time sensitive legal matter."

"The mystery poisoning, right?"

He froze. "How indiscreet was I?"

"I believe the word you're looking for is 'frantic', but given the circumstances, I'll forgive your lack of faith in my powers of persuasion. What did Remus add to this lemonade?"

"Basil. Does Potter need to request political asylum?"

Kingsley snorted.

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"I can't cook for the Minister of Magic."

"What is wrong with you, John. This is Kingsley who used to scavenge burned toast at Grimmauld Place. Fine. I'll cook."

The wolf took the bait. "No! That's okay. I'll see if Mary has any more elk in her freezer."

Samuel held most of the snort inside.

"Where is Kingsley, anyway?" John asked as he opened the refrigerator and began gathering vegetables.

"Amanda and Reggie are giving him the tour."

"Here's the diner, there's the school and the clinic, oh, look, we're back home. Not a very big town."

Samuel saw his point but felt the need to add, "You forgot the paddocks and the bend in the river where the ducks gather. She was thinking of saddling the horses. Merlin knows they'd like the exercise."

"Samuel, why do you have horses when you hate to ride?" John's voice was filled with studied innocence.

"I didn't know that when I moved out here, did I? Besides, Robert always has a few students who need an experience in mutual-dependence." He stared at John's reddening ears as the man laughed himself silly at the sink. "Oh, stuff it, Wolfe. It was never a problem when Troy lived in town."

"Samuel..." John's eyes broadcast sincerity, and his face was so full of compassion that Samuel couldn't let him complete the thought.

"No, John. I'm not going to break. A bit of independence is good for the boy. It's probably good for me, as well." He drew a sharp breath. That was quite enough for this confessional. "More flowers?"

"Waiting when I came back from the mailbox, just like clockwork."

Somehow that didn't ease Samuel's worry. "Maybe you could take Kingsley and Amanda with you tomorrow. I would like for her to spend more time around people."

"You could hardly ask for a better bodyguard. I know she has Reggie now, but he's a companion, not a guard dog." John closed his eyes for a moment, and his face relaxed as he conceded, "Okay, I'll invite them along when they get back, but you'll need to handle dinner tomorrow. I can't cook while I'm in Missoula."

Samuel smirked as inspiration struck. He pulled a large covered casserole dish from the cupboard and began gathering ingredients. He had finished mincing garlic and quartering tomatoes when John looked over his shoulder. "Never you mind," he answered the unspoken question. "You'll have to wait until tomorrow with the rest of them." He was certain his secret would be out when he specified the bread for John to bring home; why not enjoy teasing them tonight? Basil and olive oil melded with the sharp aroma of the garlic and then he settled the lid on top and slipped the dish in the refrigerator. There, even if he forgot about dinner until late afternoon, he would be ahead of the game.

John chuckled and turned back to the sink. "I hope you know a better name for that dish than I do."

"Umm... I will by tomorrow night. Kingsley said he'll stay through Saturday if we want an evening out. What do you think?"

John tossed out casually, "Cathy's holding a table for us. I understand the food is amazing."

It was Samuel's turn to chuckle. "Don't ask me. I couldn't taste anything that night, either. Carol recommends skipping the meal entirely and filling up on the eclairs." He paused to scowl at John's interest in the suggestion. "A very bad idea this close to the moon. No?"

"Hmm... a pity. Will you dice some onions for me?" John was supplying large onions and the cutting board even before Samuel agreed.

"And a knife? The one I was using before would be fine."

John turned and faced him directly. "Something wrong with the one in your sleeve?"

*Do. Not. Yell.* After a breath Samuel supplied, "Yes, I'm carrying a knife. No I do not wish to cut onions with a dagger." He thinned his own eyes at John's unmasked scrutiny. "Think of it as my very own Reggie, just not as pungent."

"Reggie doesn't stink. Ever. How long do you plan to carry your 'Binky'?"

Samuel gave an even deeper scowl as he estimated the force required to smash an onion against John's head*Just in case I ever choose to do so, of course.*



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The night was so still, it was difficult to believe that he was sharing his home with a patient, two wizards, and a dog. He stared through the gloom at his darkened driveway, daring the shadows to move. Maybe Kingsley was right and he was becoming as paranoid as Mad-Eye Moody. *Not possible. That fool had insisted that the Aurors re-open the file of every presumed-dead-Death-Eater now that he had definitive proof of Snape's continued existence.* Yet here he sat, in the dark, watching shadows, wondering if they were the same ones he'd glanced at each night for the last four years.

He thought of Reggie, ears back, sniffing the air behind the barn in the early evening *Stop*. It was not a good idea to indulge his paranoia. He pulled his eyes away from the view out the window and let them drift across the shadowy forms that filled his den.

A cloud shifted, and the yard was filled with soft silver moonlight. It crept past the glass and touched the edge of the sofa, shimmering along the raised stitches on the brown sweater. A different viewpoint, light from a different angle, perhaps a more open mind allowed Samuel to see the design at last. A tangle of roots drew in to become a textured trunk that reached out as branches. The pattern stopped abruptly with the last row of stitches, but Samuel could imagine the rest clearly. A dense crown of leaves would cap the tree where it reached to the sky, exactly like the curtain blocking Amanda's memories.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

*Chapter 27 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

A/N For everyone who has read this far, a heartfelt thank you. Big thanks also to Sirius Lupin, who is a brilliant beta reader.

This chapter is dedicated to Rebecca, who poked me gently and asked me to finish the chapters that have been languishing on my hard drive.

I don't own the characters, or the town of Potomac, but I do like to visit, hope you do, too.

### Chapter Twenty-seven

Samuel stared at the silver moonlight with John wrapped up in his arms. A chapter of his life was closed, a new one beginning here in the land of purple mountains, but he still felt a bit unsettled. The feeling reminded him of wondering if he forgot to turn off a burner when he was three miles from home, and not being able to focus on anything else until he drove back home to check. Not once had it ever been on when he returned, but that wasn't really the point.

He felt like he was forgetting something, that there was some loose end he'd missed.

"Are there any other countries I'm wanted in?" he asked his sleepy mate.

"Not unless you started smuggling potions into Canada when I wasn't looking," John answered easily.

"No, just the sheep that count themselves at night," Samuel quipped back.

"I think you're safe in that case. G'night."

"Night," Samuel answered automatically even though he continued staring out the window at the drifting shadows.

"Need to scare the coyotes off again," he said to himself before he slipped into an exhausted sleep.

He took John's coffee cup out of his hand in the morning and replaced it with a vial of deep blue potion.

"That will work better than the coffee this time around. It should be okay with orange juice," he said with a soft, concerned smile to John's grey, haggard expression. "Longbottom should have our roots in time for the next moon, so I expect everything will be a bit easier."

Samuel didn't like to see the bit of rash at the back of John's neck. He knew it must itch and sting every time the shirt collar brushed against it even lightly.

John gave Samuel a loving smile before he quickly downed the potion with a cringe. "Garlic... It tastes like garlic." He chuckled as he lifted a bite of eggs to his mouth. After carefully chewing he laughed heartily. "Now everything tastes like garlic."

Their eyes locked for a moment as something deep and smoldering replaced the laughter in John's eyes and Samuel responded with a slow smile.

"Plenty of time for that after the moon, Keats."

"Actually, Samuel," John said with a soft, slightly sad smile, "I have a suggestion for tonight. Let's set up a sound relay from our room to your office. You stay there, but you can hear me, and if it's too much you can turn off the sound. I'm sure that seeing me furry will bring back at least a few bad memories."

Samuel was about to argue that it wasn't necessary when Amanda and Reggie joined the table. They weren't company, but there were things he preferred to keep between the two of them, and when John caught a hint, he was usually respectful of Samuel's need for privacy.

He spent the morning brewing for the moon and the morning that would follow, extra healing and fortifying potions, even as he heard John's footsteps traveling the hall overhead, no doubt setting up an infant monitor. Samuel sighed, wishing he could just face his fears straight on and look his lover-partner, rather-in the eye no matter what night of the month it might be.

He'd planned to take a walk and clear his head when Reggie bolted out the back door ahead of him.

"Bloody fur ball," Samuel insulted the dog halfheartedly. "I'll fetch him," he told Amanda, who was jogging down the hall in her socks.

After a half-hour of Samuel searching, Reggie came down from the hills on his own and lifted his leg to the corner of the barn in an uncharacteristic show of territorial assertion. Instead of correcting him, Samuel sighed and patted the dog. "Dang coyotes," he said in agreement.

He sat with John for a short while after lunch, talking of nonsense like fences and feed and whether he should keep the horses now that Troy had moved away. It seemed strange to him that John would offer to take on their care—at least for the coming winter—but he realized he didn't want to sell them if John liked riding. He didn't mind the thought of riding with John, when he stopped to think about it, so it was easy to agree to keep them over the winter and consider it again in the spring.

When he couldn't delay any longer, he brushed his lips across John's forehead and set his feet on the road to his clinic to look in on his patients. Things went reasonably well, including a face to face conversation with the intrepid Dr. West. In the end Samuel thanked the man and helped him find a guide to teach him to fly fish. Samuel did admire the man's persistence, after all, and he could help Doug West enjoy his holiday even if he didn't have a post to offer him.

He stared at his computer for a long time, searching through references and images. He wanted to put it in perspective before he asked Amanda what that tree meant to her. With a flash of triumph, he printed out the Norse mythology surrounding Yggdrasil, the world tree. He felt a small shiver travel up his spine as he looked once more at the design he had seen in Amanda's mind and later flowing off her knitting needles. Sorting this out was the key to everything—he could feel it.

He needed to understand what it symbolized and help Amanda safely contain those memories, but he had mind magic at his disposal. He would use that if she needed a stronger temporary seal on those memories. The late evening sun was dying and he decided, committed himself to meeting John in their bedroom that night, full moon aside, he would offer his partner the comfort of his presence.

With that thought, he paged his nurse to send Amanda in.

"I keep them behind the curtain," she told him softly, "so that I don't have to look at them: Yaxley, the squirrel; Macnair, the dragon... the wolf, Fenrir," she said in little more than a whisper.

Samuel felt his lunch sour in his stomach. "Who?"

"Greyback."

## Chapter Twenty-eight

*Chapter 28 of 28*

Respected psychiatrist Samuel Crane has a comfortable life and a firm hold on his own sanity. Can he maintain that hold when his past comes knocking on his door? Includes characters living under assumed names and HBP spoilers.

### Chapter Twenty-eight

*Fenrir: wolf of the Fin, bringer of Ragnarök, the one who would devour Odin, the one who would devour the sun.*"I'm a bloody fool!" he cursed himself as he ran through the night. Amanda had meant Fenrir in a more literal sense, though the werewolf himself liked to think he really was the Norse wolf god reborn.

The only sound Samuel could make out in the darkening night was the sound of his own feet on the gravel. The house and barn were dark, and the moon's light was glowing over the tops of the mountains. The full moon itself would rise any second.

A moment of intense relief overtook his heart as John stepped out of the barn and waved to Samuel in the gloom. It was fine. He'd merely panicked at the name Amanda had spoken. They would go inside and John would laugh heartily at Samuel's silliness.

Then John crumpled as the shadow stepped around the corner and swung a plank of rotting wood into the back of the man's head.

"Greyback," Samuel whispered as he fumbled for his phone. He had to summon help. Alone, he was no match for the violent werewolf. Greyback seemed to know that too, as he charged at Samuel with feral ferocity, knocking him onto his back with the force of the blow and sending the phone flying out of his hand.

As he lay on the ground, reminding his lungs how to draw in air, it all began to fall into place. Nymphadora had not been the target at all. She had merely been an easy way for Greyback to punish Remus, his errant pup. Hermione had been in the wrong place at the wrong time, but with her death the werewolf had successfully flushed Remus from the safety of Hogwarts and slowly hunted his prey in the Muggle world.

When his quarry showed a skill he hadn't known the man to possess, he used Yaxley and Macnair to call Remus in from the cold. He had known that losing and recovering the girl would bring him home. Remus was human to the core and cared about people. Remus John Lupin would do the honorable thing and try to offer all the help he could. And when he did, all Greyback needed to do was follow him.

Then he ran headlong into the Fidelius Charm protecting Samuel and his new life. He had even tried to smoke them out with the small bunches of blue lupine flowers, but they had missed the threat that was implied and failed to panic as he had hoped they would. They would still have been safe, if John had not ended the charm and let the wolf in the door. He could see every one of their glaring mistakes clearly in the light of the moon as he tried to roll to his feet before either werewolf finished making the piteous sounds of their painful transformation.

He staggered to his feet and rushed toward the feral werewolf, summoning all the dark anger in his soul. Samuel had people he cared for too, people who had no way to defend themselves against a creature they believed lived only in fairy tales. Blade in hand he heard the crunch of shifting bones as he covered the last three feet in a flying leap. He visualized how he would drive the blade in deep enough to hit Greyback's blackened, twisted heart, even as the hairy arm swung out and batted him away.

The blow ripped like fire through his flesh, and Samuel fell to the ground hard. Snorts from the huge demented wolf rounded behind him as he lifted his body in sickening slow motion. John was out of reach, and Samuel was outmatched. He was making a mad grab for the shiny blade as two things happened almost at once. Greyback staggered once in his forward charge and a large dark shape bounded into the werewolf's path.

In the game of canine chicken, it was Reggie who prevailed; hackles high and snarling in the moonlight, he forced Greyback to swerve just a few feet in front of Samuel. The sound of the gunfire registered late in Samuel's brain. As the giant werewolf rounded, another shot rang out in the still air. Robert was standing at the corner of the house, shotgun resting on his shoulder. The beast's angry yellow eyes shifted to Samuel's nosy annoying friend. He'd had few real friends in his life, to the point he'd expected that he would die alone. Now they were all here, and they would die with him.

John, a crumpled mass of unconscious werewolf, now lay ten feet to his left.

"Reggie," Samuel commanded in a firm clear voice. "Get John."

Amazingly the dog obeyed, leaving an open path from the dark creature straight to Samuel. He remembered another werewolf, with glowing eyes, charging him all those years ago. Remus, bringing fear and death as he closed the distance, blurred with Greyback, bringing animal retribution to his rivals. He remembered the deafening roar as Remus collided with the giant stag, how he had been turned aside. Greyback, instead, kept charging.

Another round of buckshot paused the monster in his final stride as Samuel made a last desperate lunge with the tiny silver dagger. Between the ribs and drive upward, stab the silver into its heart. He felt the skin torn from his back, even as warm blood surged over his hand and chest. Samuel watched the light of life dim from Greyback's eyes even as the world grew dark around him and the pain began to abate.

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Samuel sat in the warm glow of the late afternoon sun, watching Amanda and Ron Weasley take turns tossing a Frisbee for Amanda's companion dog, Reggie. The beast in question applied himself to the occupation of play with the same intensity that he applied to reading Amanda's moods and guiding her back from the dark corners of her mind.

He sipped at the mint lemonade that John had mixed for him and continued reading through the notes that Dr. West had written about the happenings at the clinic. He'd needed a pair of functional hands as his own body began the slow process of mending the torn muscle and nerves from his late night fight with the large alpha wolf. It had nothing to do with anything as sappy as gratitude to the man who had left the clinic at a dead run to tend to his wounds as he lay in a bloody tangle with the cooling body of the beast.

A warm hand tangled in the hair at the base of his neck, and Samuel tipped his chin up to receive the lips that were coming down to meet his own. Success for Samuel Crane was measured in small steps these days; lifting his right hand higher than his shoulder, lifting his left higher than the table, John walking past the liquor aisle in the market with nary a longing glance, and, maybe the best of all, Amanda introducing her boyfriend Ron to the bravest dog in the world.

NOX

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A/N Thanks to everyone who has taken the time to read through to the end. Just a small request because you got this far, sign my 'guest book' by clicking that little button that says review and say something as simple as, "Hi."

If you want to tell me where you're from that always makes me smile. Either way, it's been a pleasure. Kodiak