

# Home Sweet Fucking Home

by F.R. Southerland

2005

Aaron got the call Thursday night, just twenty minutes before midnight, before he was due to meet a demon about shipment of magical artifacts. He canceled the meeting, caught the next flight out of Las Vegas without offering a single apology. Twelve hours later, he was home.

Or, what used to be his home.

New Ashton hadn't changed much. The city was still the same shithole it always was, cleverly disguised as an ambiguous sort of place, a geographical impossibility, a place where magical and supernatural shit was the norm. The place where he'd grown up, where they'd all grown up, wasn't a very forgiving place, even for those supernaturally inclined.

The years might've gone by, but the memories hadn't. At least some things had changed. Kay no longer lived at home. She had her own place, an apartment in a shitty little neighborhood, but it was as far across the city from their mother as could get. That seemed to work well for her, but Aaron had gone all the way across the country and that still didn't seem like far enough for him.

The other side of the world probably wouldn't be enough.

There was no way he would've come back if it wasn't for a good reason. The last time had been when Kay gave birth to CJ. And this time it was once again because of his half-sister, though the occasion this time wasn't joyous.

Despair tightened in the bottom of his stomach, coiled into a knot that wouldn't loosen. Barely past noon and he already wanted the day to end—fair enough, given he'd been awake for almost twenty-four hours now and sleep was no doubt too far away.

He took a bus from the airport to the bus station just outside the city limits, then he walked the rest of the way. As tired as he was, he couldn't sit still for a minute longer. The walking gave him something to do, gave him the opportunity to think, to smoke cigarette after cigarette, and soak in the midday sun that bore down on broad shoulders.

She was sick, she'd said. And she sounded like it too. She sounded god-awful tired, like every ounce of energy was being sucked out of her and it was a struggle for her to keep her head high. She wouldn't tell him what, so Aaron could only assume it was worse than a cold or the flu. She wouldn't be calling him if it was something like that. Kay had always been the one to get sick, and very sick at that, when they were kids. He and Jamie were demigods. Their blood, their lineage, it protected them from illnesses. Kay wasn't like them. All human. And get sick she did. Often. It wasn't a surprise to hear it now, but it still took his breath away.

She wouldn't have called him if it wasn't bad. The lack of details worried him, and he knew his sister didn't want to talk over the phone. He didn't have a choice but to come. If he hadn't—well, Aaron was enough of an asshole as it was. When it came to Kay, it was different. He wouldn't abandon her

again, not when she so clearly wanted him there.

Her street wasn't very busy for an afternoon, and he made it up the steps to her apartment without anyone stopping him on the sidewalk, without being stopped—he almost wanted to be stopped. Delay the inevitable. Hold on to the few precious seconds he had before everything went to shit.

But there was no way to do that. As much as he hoped, Aaron had always been practical. Wishing, delaying—none of it was particularly helpful. A waste of time, a waste of energy. He composed himself before he rang the doorbell, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and resisting the urge to immediately light up a cigarette to calm his nerves.

He noticed it immediately when she opened the door. She looked thinner than the last time he saw her. Three years ago, thereabouts, when she and CJ had made the trip out to Vegas to stay with him for a week. She looked drawn, gaunt. The hollows of her eyes were dark, making the blue-green of them stand out—but even they seemed dulled. Kay's hair was shorter too, chopped off just below her ears.

She said nothing when she saw him there, immediately pulling him into a hug, face pressed against his chest. Her fists bunched into the fabric of his leather jacket, and she didn't let go even when he enfolded his warm arms around her. For a few seconds, there was nothing at all wrong. Everything was fine. Aaron was there and she was safe and warm. The world was right.

That all faded when reality snapped back. She relaxed her hands and closed her eyes. Tears wanted to fall but years of practice kept her from shedding them. Even so, she ended the hug long before she was ready, and feebly swiped at her eyes anyway.

And then her fist hit his chest, walloping him with all the strength she had—which, given the circumstances, wasn't much. "You could pick up the goddamn phone once in a while."

The blow didn't do anything to him, but Aaron staggered back in the doorway anyway. A wry smile pulled at his face. He didn't have any good excuses for having not called her, or for why he didn't pick up whenever she did. He wanted to avoid anything to do with his family, to avoid the guilt of having left them behind. Avoiding it wasn't helpful in any sense, but it kept it out of the forefront of his mind, and that was good enough. He almost hadn't answered her call Thursday, but he had.

"I made an effort."

"Not a strong one."

"Fucking sue me."

That earned a faint smile from her. Kay waved him into the door and shut it behind him. The locks slid back into place, but she took her time doing it, to gather her thoughts. A part of her hadn't expected him to come. She'd been fully prepared for his refusal, but Aaron was here now.

It was time to face the facts. This wasn't going to be easy. "You fly in?" She filled the silence with small talk as she walked the short distance to her kitchen, grabbing for an ashtray. Aaron had a cigarette out and lit before she even had it on the coffee table. "Of course you did. How else did you get here so fast?" But there were other ways, favors from demons or witches who could travel a large distance in a blink, but Kay dismissed that with a shake of her head.

Aaron didn't say anything, just watched his sister. She moved slowly, like she was in pain, everything she did was deliberate and careful from the way she sat down, to how she folded her arms over her chest when she leaned back, to how her fingers traced the burn scars on her upper arm—a remnant left over from childhood and his literally explosive outbursts. He took a long draw on the cigarette before he passed it to her. "Where's CJ?" he asked, expecting the kid to run out from one of

the other rooms like a bat out of hell, but the place was silent. “She’s what? Eight now or some shit?”

“Yeah, or some shit.” Her smile was thin but she took the cigarette and inhaled on it, letting the smoke join Aaron’s a second later. “Amber’s at school.” She put emphasis on her daughter’s real name. Aaron always insisted on the nickname, as did Jamie. It was going to stick, Kay was sure of it, and that would lead to a fun discussion of how it stood for Cujo Junior and just why her brother thought it was funny to have nicknamed the bitey toddler after a fictional rabid dog. “It’s Friday. She won’t be home until three. Sorry.” It wasn’t important though, not right now. Her daughter’s absence gave her time to talk with Aaron alone.

“It’s alright. I’ll see her then.” What was a couple of hours compared to a few years? And CJ wasn’t the reason he was here anyway. It was for Kay, and whatever it was she had to say. There was no sense in keeping up with the small talk—it had never suited them anyway. They’d never been one for mincing words anyway, not when it came to getting down to the important things.

Kay pressed her lips together, looking down at the cigarette between her fingers. Her hand shook as she brought it up for another drag. She passed it back to him and exhaled the smoke in a heavy sigh. “I’m dying.”

Silence. Aaron watched the smoke curl from the end of the cigarette, watched it go up toward the ceiling, where it vanished into nothing. He swallowed hard, kept his eyes trained there.

She watched him, waited for a response, waited to see how badly this would affect his control. The air was warm, but no warmer than it usually was within his or Jamie’s presence. Her heart thudded loudly, a boom-boom boom-boom in her ears that drowned out all other sound. She realized she was holding her breath and she exhaled, tasting the tobacco and tar that lingered on her lips and tongue.

Finally, he moved, dropping his gaze from the ceiling and focusing ahead of him. “Shit.”

“I was diagnosed a while back. It’s cancer. I—” Kay cut herself off, shifted some in her seat to better face him. “I was taking treatments but the doctor said that they’re not working—”

“No.”

“—he says there’s not a lot of time.” She ignored his protest. When he started to rise from her couch, she grabbed his wrist, even though his skin was hot to the touch. “You’re not going to walk away, and you’re not going to burn any of my shit, okay?” She spoke firmly, jaw set, eyes suddenly bright with intensity. “You’re not walking the fuck away from me now. Do you understand?”

Her grip was tight on him, tighter than he expected. Instinct had him wanting to pull away, but when he heard the desperate plea in her voice, the vehemence within her look, he sat back down. This wasn’t happening, he tried to tell himself, she couldn’t be dying. She was only twenty-nine. Too young to die, too young for any of this shit.

“Do you understand?” she repeated. There were tears in her eyes now, glistening but unshed. Her composure had been tentative at best, and it was now crumbling apart. She had wanted to be strong for this, but she wasn’t. “Jamie can’t help me. Jamie’s—he’s on the brink of losing his own shit.” She didn’t need to explain to him how much she relied on Jamie’s help. They had always been close, had always supported each other. His young brother had always had his own problems, and it was clear that they were getting in the way of looking out for Kay, looking out for their niece. “I can’t rely on him. I can’t put that pressure on him. I don’t know what to do, Aaron. I’m running out of people I can call on. I can’t—Mason’s out of the fucking question. And there’s no way in hell I’m getting Mom involved. It’s us, right?” She looked up at him. “It’s always been us. The three of us against the fucking world,

right?”

But I left. I left you and Jamie and I swore I was done. I couldn't face it. I couldn't fucking face myself. I can't do this. The words ran through his head, but he couldn't voice them. For once, he was speechless, trying to make sense of everything she had said. He had to understand it, process it. It was worse than being smacked in the gut. “Fuck.”

What was he supposed to say? What was he supposed to do? His anger was palpable, leaving a heavy aura in the room. The heat was steadily climbing, but Kay didn't let go of him. “I don't want this,” he heard himself murmur, his voice low.

“No one wants this.” Her voice was quiet too. Her fingers eased away from his wrist, drawing across her face. She pushed away the tears that had fallen. “I can't do it alone. I don't know what to do after—when I—” Her breath came out shaky. Fingers combed through her hair, gripping it for a moment before she dropped it. She had calmed down some, resigned to the fact life had handed them all shitty cards and that there wasn't much they could do about it. “We need you, Aaron. That's all there is to it. We need you.”

The cigarette between his fingers had burned down and Aaron leaned forward automatically to crush it out. Without thinking, he had another one from the pack, blazing before it came to his lips. He took one long drag, then another. The nicotine did nothing for his nerves, nothing to soothe his mind so he could think.

For once in his life, he realized, he could do the right thing. It wasn't what he'd pictured with his life, and it was a blow he hadn't quite processed completely yet, but there were some things he knew with certainty—if Kay needed him, if CJ needed him, if Jamie needed him, there was no way Aaron could turn his back on them now.

There was a lump in his throat that made swallowing difficult. It was going to take time to come to terms with it. It would take time for him to understand, to figure out what to do, but time might not be on their side. He had to do this like he did everything else—headfirst, little hesitation.

He let the cigarette drop into the ashtray before he turned to Kay. Her eyes were fixed on her hands now, where she pulled at her fingers. When he took her hands, she stilled them. One look at his face, and she understood his new resolve. She tried to smile, but it failed. When her tears came, she didn't try to stop them and neither did Aaron. He put his arms around her, drew her close, let her cry. It was what she needed right then, and he gave that to her. There was very little question now what he wouldn't do for his family.

A weight lifted from her when she sank again into his arms. Her troubles were far from over, but the burden had now shifted. Aaron was going to help her, help them. The certainty of that was all it took to ease her mind and soul. She could rest now, for the first time in months.

When she withdrew from the embrace this time, she murmured her apologies for having cried into his t-shirt, but Aaron didn't seem to notice the wetness or care that it stung his skin. He just shrugged, picked up the remainder of his cigarette, and got right down to it. “Guess I'm gonna have to find a fucking place to live. Get a fucking job. Shit. I'm gonna have to go legit, ain't I?”

Kay's chuckle was humorless. “Looks like.”

“Home sweet fucking home.”