

Altered Episode Nineteen

Dean huffed audibly and closed the cell phone with a click, dropping it into the seat beside him while his left hand clenched the steering wheel and kept them safely on the nearly deserted highway. The sun was setting and he'd taken off his sunglasses a bit too early, it seemed, as he squinted into the fading light, a crease in his forehead that Sam knew was more than just defense against the dying glare.

"Still no luck reaching, Dad?" Sam asked, looking up from the phone in his lap at the sound of his brother's frustrated exhalation.

"No," Dean answered, and from the intonation, Sam knew he wanted to offer an explanation but had already given every one he could possibly come up with. They hadn't heard from their father in almost a month. No phone calls, no voice mails, no coordinates, nothing. Dean's hand tightened on the steering wheel under his little brother's quiet scrutiny. "And no one else, either." He gestured toward the cell distractedly. "I've tried everyone on the contact list. Half of 'em go directly to voice mail and don't return the calls, and the other half say they are temporarily out of service." He bit the inside of his lower lip contemplatively. "I'm starting to think something big's going down, and we haven't gotten the memo."

Sam pursed his lips and looked at his brother, nodding slowly and wishing he could offer some explanation himself. But his mind was a blank. Truth be told, he'd been thinking the same thing himself. It was one thing for their Dad not to answer, but when Bobby didn't pick up, or Joshua...well, Sam had to agree, something was definitely up. He tapped the phone in his hand against his thigh distractedly. "I'm sure we'll get someone eventually."

"Yeah," Dean said with a small grin that Sam knew was as much an acceptance of the younger brother's reassurance as it was an attempt to offer some in return. Hell, what was brotherhood if not the mutual sharing of false hope? Dean flicked his eyes in Sam's direction, fell to the phone in the younger brother's lap, and back to the road in the smooth manner of someone who'd spent years trying to check up on someone else without the second party noticing. As prone as Sam was to playing the mother hen, he was certainly stubborn when it came to accepting the watchful protectiveness Dean doled out in return.

Taking a moment to digest Sam's hunched posture and nervously fidgeting fingers, Dean said, "How 'bout you?"

"What?" Sam asked, drawing his gaze back inside the car from whatever distant nothing he'd been staring at for the last couple hundred miles.

Dean nodded toward the phone in Sam's lap. "You having any luck reaching anyone?"

"Huh...oh, no," Sam said, moving his hand to the phone as though he'd meant to keep it hidden and forgotten. "'Ts my old phone from Stanford. No service on it," he mumbled. He took a deep breath, obviously trying to compose himself, and reached decisively for the glove compartment door. He popped open the box, pulled out the cord they used to charge the phones, and plugged it into the cigarette lighter. "I was just getting ready to charge it up, take a look at some of my old video that's stored in it."

Dean's eyes darted out the window and back to the road as he bit back the urge to tell his brother what a bad idea that seemed to be. The older Winchester often put on a show of careless nonchalance, but he knew that Sam had been thinking about Stanford and Jess a lot lately. He'd been letting it slide, because he had come to accept that, yes, there were some things that Sam needed to keep for himself. He couldn't help but wonder, though, if this might be a line Sam ought not to be crossing. He refrained from saying anything, but psychic boy seemed to already know what was on his mind.

"I know what you're thinking," Sam began, voice edging on confrontational.

Dean raised his eyebrows in mock amusement, not wanting to fight with his brother, especially when they seemed to have lost contact with anyone and anything else familiar. "Oh you do...?" He grinned wryly. "Then you owe me a dollar."

Sam leaned back against the passenger door, turning toward his brother incredulously with a questioning smirk dancing across his face and lighting up his eyes. "A dollar? For what?"

"C'mon, spice boy, porn ain't free." He pointed to his head, raised his eyebrows, and grinned lewdly, "And this is the good stuff. Which one were ya watching? Huh? Was it the one with the two hot chicks from New York? Or maybe the police babe from Chicago? Ooh, the hair wash girl from when we stayed with Bobby..."

Sam's head rocked back against the window as a soft chuckle bubbled out of his chest. "Dude, TMI. Anyway, I thought peep shows were a quarter."

Dean shrugged. "Inflation," he said, "it ain't just the easy way to get a date without leaving the motel room anymore."

"Dean!" Sam tried to sound offended, but it was impossible to do through the ear-to-ear grin that had spread across his face. He just shook his head and plugged the cord into the phone.

Dean's grin faltered slightly as he saw Sam's hands proceed with the task of charging up the phone. He cleared his throat and darted his eyes away to hide his disappointment at the brief nature of their reprieve. "So, uh," he ducked his chin slightly, obviously uncomfortable, "you wanna tell me about it?"

"Not really," Sam answered.

"Well, suit yourself."

Sam looked down at the phone for a long beat, and Dean knew the part about not wanting to talk was just BS. His instincts were confirmed a moment later when Sam spoke up.

"It's just..." Sam paused, and Dean kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead as though he wasn't worried about his brother and had all the time in the world. "Well, it's kind of an anniversary, or, it would've been, you know, for Jess and me." He put his fingertips to his forehead as if willfully smoothing the tense wrinkles forming there. "There's a few messages from her on this phone still. I had it on me, when..." His voice broke off. "Everything else burned. It's all I have left."

"I know." And as much as it had hurt Dean when Sam had left all those years ago, it hurt him more that everything Sam had left for had been taken from him so violently. He wasn't about to take away what remained. He pulled his eyes from the road and looked at Sam, really looked at him for the first time in hours, and Sam met his gaze. "Just so long as you're just remembering," he swallowed, "not psyching yourself up to do something stupid."

Sam's gaze dropped, and they drove the rest of the way in silence.

Sam waited for the sound of the shower spray and the first wisps of steam to come under the ill-fitting bathroom door before he scooted back against the headboard of the too-small bed and opened the phone. Now fully charged, the screen displayed the prompt that he had three saved video messages. He'd played them all a hundred times before, but as he clicked play on the first, and Jess' smiling face appeared in the frame, he felt like he did the first time he'd seen her.

His chest clenched against a bubble of what could have passed as acid reflux if it hadn't been for the deep, aching emptiness of the burn. He'd forgotten how much he missed her; the bright gleam of her smile, a smile that seemed to reach into his soul somehow, pierce the shadow of growing up Winchester, and make it okay to just be Sam, Jess's Sam. The sight of that smile again brought crashing back the sheer

mass of everything that had been ripped from him when Dean had ripped him from the flames and left behind everything he'd ever thought he'd wanted.

It wasn't that he wouldn't have given it all. If he'd known then what he knew now, he'd never have been so stubborn about giving up the search for Dad and returning to Palo Alto. If he'd known then how much better off Jess and Becky and all of that shining future-upper-middle-class crowd would have been without him to bring the fire and darkness down on them, he'd have never gone there in the first place. He wasn't a selfish bastard, just, well, somewhat ill-informed. Had he known the Demon was hunting him, not the other way around, he'd have passed on the future until he'd dealt with the past.

Jess flagged a test paper in front of the camera phone. "Look baby," she squeeed, her voice like ice-laden willow branches tinkling together in the winter breeze, "I got an 'A' on my Latin test." She focused the phone on her face and batted her long, dark lashes while pursing her full lips. "You know I couldn't have done it without you. I am sooo gonna thank you properly as soon as you get home." With another flash of her perfect smile, she pressed her lips to the camera before it went dark.

Sam let his thumb trace over the screen, the image of her sweet kiss burned onto his retinas, despite the screen being black. He was sorry to see it fade.

He was sorry for a lot more than that, too. His eyes glanced to the bathroom door and he could still see the worried glance Dean had cast in his direction as he'd slipped inside. He was sorry Dean worried so much about him. He was sorry there were times, in the past, when he'd taken Dean's worried protectiveness for smothering oppression. He was sorry that the Dean that came to find him in Palo Alto was a broken, re-glued porcelain replica of the mighty hunter brother he'd left behind. He was sorry there were years of Dean's life that Sam would never know and that there were years of his that Dean would never share. He was sorry Jess would never kiss her own children with the soft lips she'd brushed against the phone.

But he wasn't sorry he'd kissed those lips. He wasn't sorry he'd wanted Jess's children to be his children, or that he'd wanted to build her that house and the picket fence where those children could grow and be happy. He wasn't sorry that he hadn't known he was never meant to have those things. There was no way he could have known, and if he had... If he'd known his life was bound to the Demon, and that everyone around him would suffer for that binding... Well, what would he have been without hope?

So, despite what Dean may have thought about him replaying these old messages, digging up these old bones memories, Sam wasn't sorry for doing it. He wasn't sorry that he'd been happy once. And he wasn't sorry he wanted to be happy again. He was only sorry it had been such a long time since he'd believed it was possible.

He clicked on the menu and started playing the second message. A small smile played out on his lips. Disneyland. He'd almost forgotten.

Jess had insisted on bringing Sam to Disneyland on their last Spring Break. She'd made it quite clear that she found it appalling that any child could grow up in the United States of America and never visit the Magic Kingdom. She'd practically dragged him kicking and screaming from their apartment where he'd been bound and determined to spend the entire break studying for the friggin' LSATs. He wasn't sorry she'd done it.

The scene on the screen became more familiar as it played out. Jess was grinning, her long blonde hair fluttering in the breeze, and the sunlight glared off her white short suit in a way that made her look downright angelic. She was at one of the photo op posts that overlooked Sleeping Beauty's castle, chatting it up with Prince Charming himself. Sam could vaguely recall the dorky grin that had pulled at the corner of his mouth as he'd filmed the conversation.

"What's that handsome?" Jess teased, batting her eyelashes and tossing her hair over her shoulder flirtatiously. "You want to marry me and take me back to your

castle?" She turned and looked at the towering castle with its spiraling turrets painted in pinks and blues. "That castle over there?" She put her hand to her mouth in mock wonder. "That would be like a dream come true." She feigned a swoon. Then her eyes turned to look into the camera. "There is just one problem with that plan, though," she said, eyes darkening.

"What problem would that be?" Prince Charming asked, playing along.

She ducked her chin a little sheepishly, kicking the toe of her sandal along the sidewalk. "It just so happens, that I am completely...undeniably...irrevocably..." She accented each word by taking a step closer to the camera and gazing into the lens from beneath her lashes, "...head over heels in love with my boyfriend."

Sam could remember how his heart had leapt at the precise moment that the phone started to slide down as he'd prepared to sweep her into his arms. Just as the frame fell to her feet and the entwined shadow of his between them, she skipped away playfully. The camera lifted just in time to see her leap into the arms of some poor dude in a Pluto costume. "Isn't he dreamy?" She laughed with a tease. And the video cut off.

The smile still pulling at the corners of his mouth, Sam clicked onto the next message. Jess re-appeared, this time in a baby tee and boyshorts. She was sprawled on her stomach across their bed, the phone clasped in her hands as they dangled over the edge. He could just barely see the freshly painted toenails, cotton balls still tucked between the digits, as she kicked them around behind her distractedly. "Oh baby," she whined softly, lips pouting out, "I'm so bored here all by myself. Enough studying already. That cranky old librarian sees you more than I do anymore."

She traced a finger over her bottom lip, along her neck and just under the neckline of her t-shirt before letting her head fall sideways onto one outstretched arm, long hair pillowing around her face. "What's she got that I haven't got?" She moved the phone closer to her face so that all he could see was her mouth. "Come home now. I promise, I'll make it worth your while."

Sam glanced around the room quickly. Even though he could still hear the shower running, he wasn't taking any chances on Dean walking in and seeing that. Dean had had escapades, trysts, interludes that Sam was sure could make a sailor blush with shame. Sam had had a lover, and the difference was the complete lack of shame. Sam wasn't sorry for that either.

He was about to close the phone back up, knowing that Dean would be out in a few minutes, when he noticed with perplexing incredulity that the text prompt indicated that he had one un-played video message. His brow crinkled. He was pretty sure that he'd never seen that on there before, and there'd been no service to this phone since...

He glanced at the date on the display: **November 1, 2005**, and every ounce of giddy pleasantness that had settled over him in his reminiscing was instantly strangled by the wave of anguish that squeezed him from the inside out. The day before she died...

His thumb trembled visibly as he instructed the phone to play the message.

Jess' face appeared onscreen once more, but Sam had to squint to see it. It took him a moment to realize she was barely backlit by several candles lined up on their kitchen counter. He thought it might have been another one of her romantic, come hither messages, but there was a little too much white in her eye, a little too much tremble in her voice, a little too much sheen to her forehead, and he knew she was afraid.

"Sam," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "I know you're not nearby, and I don't know when you'll get this message, but I had to call anyway." She looked around her as though she thought someone might be sneaking up on her from out of the darkness. "It's just... things are weird here, baby. The lights keep flickering out. The TV won't keep a signal. I asked around, but aside from some power surges on the

floor, no one else seems to be having the same problems. I don't know...maybe I've seen too many bad horror movies, but I'm getting seriously creeped out." Sam could see her one free arm wrap around herself protectively, long fingers working worriedly at the flesh of her opposite arm. "Sam, I'm scared. Please come home."

The phone jerked and Jess' head turned quickly as she looked at something off camera. "Who's there?" A beat. "What?" Another beat. She turned back to the phone. When she spoke again, Sam nearly let the gizmo fall from his grasp. His eyes were focused on her lips which clearly said, "I love you," but no matter how many times he played the message back, he heard something else entirely, like a bad dub on one of those old Kung Fu movies Dean used to watch when they were kids. He replayed the message one last time to be sure, putting the phone directly on his ear the second Jess turned to look into it that last time.

"*Alea iacta est.*" *What the hell?*

Then the phone did fall from his grasp as the bathroom door flung open and Dean entered the room, surrounded by a steamy mist. He had one towel wrapped loosely around his waist and was scrubbing another over his short hair, large droplets of water still clinging to his eyelashes, as he turned and froze at the sight of his baby brother, pale and stricken atop the bed. He studied Sam silently for several long beats, then began rubbing the towel through his hair once more. He stalked over to the corner of the room where they'd dropped their duffel bags. Keeping one hand at his waist to prevent the towel from slipping, he bent and grabbed Sam's bag from the floor. In one fluid motion he turned and flung the duffel across the room onto his brother's lap.

"That's it," he said authoritatively. "Nuff reminiscing for one night. Get your ass up. We're going out." Sam opened his mouth to protest, but Dean's jaw clenched and he tilted his head defiantly, eyes boring through his younger brother. "That wasn't a request." Dean flung the loose towel onto his bed and began digging through his own bag brusquely. Realizing that Sam still hadn't moved, Dean turned his head to look at him over his shoulder, eyebrows raised expectantly. "Up!" He demanded. "Now!"

He turned back to his rummaging, mumbling under his breath. "Might not have anything constructive lined up to do in this town, doesn't mean we gotta sit here and rot."

Sam wanted to argue. He held the phone up, mouth agape in preparation to tell Dean what he'd just seen, but to his dismay, the message he'd just played was gone. He spent several seconds randomly pressing buttons and searching for it in vain, but all that remained were the three original messages. Sam shook his head in bewilderment. *Maybe I do need a drink.* He grabbed his bag and stalked off into the bathroom silently.

Local Bar

Sam leaned back in the chair, his long legs splayed out carelessly under the table as he peeled at the label of the beer bottle he'd been sipping on for the last hour. He glanced up every now and again from under his furrowed brow to watch Dean.

His brother was in his usual hunter form, stalking around like a big cat, the women of the establishment unaware or unwilling to acknowledge that they were the prey. Sam watched as Dean struck up a conversation with one busty blonde, only to have his head turned by a curvy redhead that paraded by and start a second conversation with her. Sam swore the next time Dean ended up in the ER, which, according to Sam's watch, would probably be, oh, anytime now, he'd hit the docs up for a Ritalin script. If Dean didn't have ADD, then Sam was pretty sure there was no such thing.

Dean caught Sam's near-leer of disapproval in his direction, rolled his eyes, and excused himself from the company of the petite brunette he was currently charming. He walked cockily over to his brother's table, set his beer down with a clunk, and dragged the chair out from under the table, lifting it just enough to make it scrape

across the floor raucously. He spun the chair around backwards, straddled it and leaned forward to get in Sam's face.

"Dude, you keep looking at me like that, and people are gonna think you're my jealous boyfriend or something."

Sam raised his eyebrows, determined not show just how little he cared about whether his brother got laid that night.

Dean leaned back in the chair and threw his hands up. "Whatever. You don't wanna mingle, why don't I go bring someone over here to meet ya?" He leered over his shoulder. "That blonde over there? Huh? I bet she'd wipe that gloom and doom look off your face." He leaned closer as if to whisper in Sam's ear. "She's got a tongue piercing," he said, pulsing his eyebrows.

Sam glared back at him from half-hooded eyes.

Dean shrugged. "Hmph, not your type then." He looked around the bar again, eyes rolling a little loosely in their sockets to make Sam wonder just how many beers he'd had already. "Oh!" He exclaimed. "Tawnia over there..." he pointed to a petite brunette, "...is a gymnast. Heh?"

The glare of doom. "Dean, would you stop trying to pimp me out, already?"

"Ah, c'mon little brother. Is it so wrong for me to want to put a little color in your cheeks?" He quirked a smirk. "Preferably all four..."

"Dean!" Sam growled, lowering his gaze.

"Sammy, Sammy, wait..." Dean said throwing up his hand to end the tirade. "Check this one out." He held the beer bottle in his right hand, took a long swig off of it, and pointed across the room with the pinky finger of the same hand. "Tall, well-built, long legs..." Dean rattled on, taking another drink off of his beer.

With a sigh, Sam turned to see what poor girl his brother was leering at now. He heard Dean's snicker too late as he met the gaze of one tall and very well-built, *long-legged indeed*, MAN. The dude smiled back at him flirtatiously, having obviously been eyeing him up from behind for some time already.

Dean almost choked on the last swallow of his beer when Sam turned back and glared at him, eyes barely slits. "There's my color," Dean laughed pointing at the flush rising over Sam's cheeks. After a few seconds, the laugh faded and Dean shook his head, standing up. "Fine, if you're so intent on sucking all the life out of the room, I think I saw another fine drinking establishment a couple miles down the road. Maybe I'll head over there and leave your sorry ass to sulk in peace." He straightened and frowned. "After I hit the john."

Sam could tell that Dean was in no condition to drive, but he was pretty sure Dean would pass out in the bathroom or, at the very least, forget about the other bar by the time he came out. He wasn't too worried. He shook his head and watched his brother make his way to the back of the bar.

Once Dean was out of sight, the weight of the phone in his pocket seemed to grow by several tons. Unable to get the thought of his earlier episode with the phone out of his mind, he gave in to the temptation to fish it out. He torqued his head sideways with a little smirk, his brother's happy drunk antics having succeeded in lightening his own mood by several shades.

He leaned forward, covering half the table with his large upper body, the phone held out at arms length. He twirled it around distractedly, warring with himself as to whether he was going to open it again. Finally, the phone won out, and he clicked it open.

The original three messages were still there. Sam sat upright quickly and looked at the screen more closely. For the second time that night, an unplayed message prompt flashed across the tiny monitor. He tried to check the date, but that information was unavailable. His curiosity piqued, there was no way he could ignore the mysterious prompt, so he checked around to make sure that Dean hadn't come out of the restroom yet, and hit play.

At first there was only some garbled sound, but Sam recognized the song as “Invisible Man,” by Queen, and he knew there was no way the message was from Jess. After a few seconds, flashes of light and movement began to appear on the screen. Sam realized that whoever was holding the camera was either shaking or just moving erratically.

He had a sensation of overwhelming vertigo as the entire recording device flipped around, forcing him to place a hand on the table. The image began to move back and forth like a zoom lens alternating between macro and panoramic view. Sam could barely make out a face in the flashes of momentary clarity. *Dean!*

His fingers tightened around the phone, willing the image to still so that he could figure out what was going on. He could make out the interior of the Impala, though it was distorted somehow. Sam realized that Dean had the phone on but apparently didn’t know that it was in camera recording mode. He seemed to be trying to see the numbers in order to place a call.

Some loud touch tones drowned out the music for a second, several numbers apparently pressed simultaneously. Then the whole phone shifted closer to Dean’s mouth. “Hello?” Dean’s voice was weak, thready, and his breathing seemed erratic.

“Dean hang it up and start again,” Sam caught himself saying. He knew that there was no way that Dean could hear him, but then, there should be no way he was getting messages on a phone with no service, either.

The shaking stopped suddenly, and Sam was finally able to make out the predicament that Dean was in. The entire passenger compartment of the Impala was filled with greenery and branches, the windshield shattered, and the door caved in. The phone slid slowly back from Dean’s face, and Sam saw with horror that his brother was covered in blood. He realized with a start the reason that the phone had stopped shaking. Dean’s eyes were half-open and fixed in a far-off stare. *Dean!*

“Dean!” Sam yelled to the phone. “Dean!” But Dean didn’t move, and Sam could no longer hear him breathing.

“Dean!” Sam cried, snapping the phone shut and shoving it into the pocket of his baggy jeans. The fact that there was no service on the phone in question completely escaped his mind. At the moment, all he could think of was Dean threatening to leave and go to the bar down the road, Dean, who’d had at least one too many beers to make that a good idea, and the fact that he’d been in the bathroom entirely too long to rule out that possibility.

Sam spun around abruptly and forced his long legs to weave him through the crowded bar. Any other time, when he forced himself to stand upright and dispatched the slouching, weighed-down by layers of flannel, hoodie, and weight of the world posture he usually assumed, he moved with an almost gazelle-like grace. Panic, half a beer, and almost no sleep for the past two days made him far less than adequately prepared to maneuver across the floor, however.

Halfway between the now-empty corner table and the door to the restroom, Sam felt an almost imperceptible bump on his hip, and a waif-like, leather skirt clad, blonde went sprawling unceremoniously onto the planks. Whatever fruity little drink she’d been nursing rained down on top of her and the boots of her more than PO’d boyfriend.

“Oh geez, uh, I’m really sorry,” Sam stammered, eyes distractedly searching the back of the bar for his brother as he held out his hand to help the girl up.

“I think that would be an understatement,” a baritone growl retorted from behind him. Before he could turn, Sam felt himself lift off the floor as the collar of his undershirt became unbearably tight around his throat. To his surprise and chagrin, he was lifted off his feet. Just the toes of his beat-up sneakers grazed the splintered wood beneath as his hands flailed up to claw at the strangling shirt collar.

His vision began to cloud around the periphery as he gagged, blood rushing in his ears. In desperation, he did the only thing he could think of and swung one of his big feet back and up. He connected with a solid thump into yielding flesh that was

punctuated by his attacker's stifled groan of pain. Sam felt himself fall to the ground in a haze.

Still grasping at his burning throat as air rushed back into his lungs, Sam turned. He couldn't help but raise a pleased eyebrow to find a giant of a man with a shaved head and python-sized biceps kneeling on the floor with both hands cupped between his legs, face bright red. The guy looked almost pathetic enough that Sam expected to hear him whine, "Oh man, why'd ya have to go and do that?" *Dean loves that movie. Shit! Dean!*

Sam backed up a few steps to give the angry man a wide berth as he headed back toward the restrooms. Once he stepped back, however, the severity of his current situation became all-too apparent. Kneeling Dude had friends, lots of 'em, and they didn't seem to like Sam all that well. Three more men, almost the size of the guy on the floor and dressed in matching jackets and biker boots, stood elbow-to-elbow, blocking any passage Sam might have in that direction. Looking around, Sam spotted several more Hell's Angels wannabes, still seated at their tables and booths but obviously aware of the situation.

"Uh, look fellas," Sam stammered, hands out in a placating gesture, "I didn't mean to cause any trouble. It's just...my uh, my wife, she called me, see we're expecting our first baby any day now, and she called to tell me that she thinks it's time. So, if you'll just let me..."

"What kind of sorry SOB goes out drinking and leaves his wife at home alone when she'd due to pop any day?"

Well, whattya know, skinheads with real family values. Just my luck. Oh, and pregnant women about to pop, always the choicest expression. "Well, that's the thing, see, it's my brother...my brother's birthday, and I promised him months ago that we'd do something...So, if you'll all let me go by so I can get him. We'll just leave."

"Your brother, eh?" A third rogue asked, standing from his stool at the bar. "Shorter than you, leather jacket, military cut, boots?"

"Uh, yeah, that sounds like him," Sam answered, confused. "Why?"

"Cuz the punk was hitting on my woman," Barstool Man answered, pulling the redhead from earlier tightly against his side. "I been thinking I need to teach him to keep his hands to hisself."

Now, if Dean had been there to defend his own honor, or lack thereof, Sam would've probably sat back and enjoyed the show. His brother would give up his life without blinking, but God help any poor bastard with the audacity to insult the one thing for which he had any pride, other than the Impala, which was the fact that Dean did not HAVE to pick up women. They offered, and he either accepted or declined. The glove box of the Impala had as many napkins inside with phone numbers written in hooker-red lipstick as it had badges and fake IDs. Most of the numbers had never been dialed.

In hindsight, Sam would wonder if defending Dean's tomcatting was really the wisest decision, or for that matter, even justifiable, but then, Dean wasn't there to defend himself, which was why Sam was in this predicament to begin with. The thought of his brother possibly bleeding to death somewhere while some drunken jackass threatened him didn't sit too well with Sam.

"Look, I did see my brother talking to your better half over there earlier, but I think you might wanna check your facts as to who was hitting on whom before you go and do anything you can't take back."

"Oh, I wouldn't worry my shaggy head about that if I was you," the punk said, leaning forward with daggers in his eyes. "I don't take anything back. See, I'm always right. If I was you, I'd be worried about the fact that I just called that pretty young lady a liar right in front of her big, strong man." He smashed his fist into his other open hand a few times suggestively.

"Man, I really don't have time for this," Sam waffled, stepping back. As he moved, he felt the heavy weight of what he knew to be the rest of the biker gang pressing in behind him. *God, I'm so screwed. Aw, the hell with it...*

Sam ducked and dove for the gap beneath his attacker's raised fist. He lunged forward like a quarterback diving for the end zone. With a start, he realized he'd cleared the frontline only to find several more assailants closing in the flank.

"Can't get away that easy, pretty boy," a raspy voice growled as Sam felt a hand fist in his jacket.

He reacted on instinct, curled his left hand around his right, and sent his right elbow up and into a fairly large but none-too-soft beer belly. He heard the attacker grunt and felt the grip loosen on his jacket. Just as he prepared to stand to full height and race for the restrooms, a light exploded behind his eyes, and he fell to the floor in a shower of brown, broken glass.

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"SS-Oww!" Sam hissed sharply. He immediately regretted the sudden sound and movement as a wave of searing pain sliced through his skull. His eyes, which had ventured open slightly as he edged toward consciousness, squeezed tightly shut in protest at the flickering fluorescent light that streamed through the open bathroom door to the foot of the bed he was sprawled over.

"Sorry," Dean's voice soothed from behind him. Realizing that his brother was there, and that he was apparently okay, not broken in a wrecked car somewhere, Sam let himself sink into the mattress as Dean's hand worked tentatively at the back of his head. "I had to use alcohol to clean it. Peroxide would sting less, but I don't think you'd look too good as a bleached blonde."

Sam groaned slightly as the evening's events began filing through his brain in random order.

"You with me there, little brother? I don't want you to get too comfortable. They hit you hard enough to leave part of the bottle in your head. I'd say there's a pretty good chance you've got a concussion."

"I don't have a concussion," Sam protested weakly, "just one whale of a headache."

"Thank you, Dr. Winchester, for your expert opinion."

"I've had concussions before...Ah! What're you doing back there?"

"I'm trying to decide how many stitches it's gonna take to close up this gash."

"Don't need stitches either, Dean," he said, disgusted at the fact that even he could hear the slur in his words.

"Oh, fine then. We'll just let it heal on its own so it can leave a nasty scar on your head where hair will never, ever grow again. Then, every time you get busy with a chick and she runs her fingers through your hair, you can relive the night you tried to take on twenty bikers in some backroad, hicktown bar for no apparent reason."

"Wait, my hair?" He almost sat up in alarm but sunk back into the mattress where Dean had placed him on his stomach so that his wound could be treated. "Maybe stitches would be okay..."

"Thought so. Just let me get a few things."

Sam nodded slightly and listened as his brother's footsteps retreated into the bathroom, the sound of the squeaking medicine cabinet door grating on his hypersensitive nerve endings. "So what happened to those guys anyway?" He asked into the pillow.

"They rode away on their bikes," Dean answered casually.

"Why would they?...Shit, Dean!" He rolled onto his side to see his brother as Dean returned from the bathroom with the supplies. The left side of Dean's face was purple and swollen, his eye blood red, and even in the shadow of his own silhouette, Sam

could tell his knuckles were raw and badly bandaged. "So you got beat to hell falling off the toilet in the restroom?"

Dean shrugged stiffly. "Yeah, well, they were outta T.P., so I had to wrestle one of those bears in the woods for some Charmin Ultra."

"Oh well, so long as you didn't go all *Legends of the Fall* on my account," Sam snickered half-heartedly and hissed.

"Dude, you call me Tristan, and I'm gonna knock your ass back out."

"So, if I was unconscious, and you were drunk, how the hell did we get back here?"

Dean put on some latex gloves and began parting Sam's hair gingerly. "After the Apple Dumpling Gang rode away, I carried you out to the car and drove here. Finding your brother on the floor in a pool of his own blood is apparently as good as drinking a whole pot of coffee. Besides, the designated driver was feeling a little under the weather."

"God, we're poster boys for Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Our faces are gonna be plastered on every high school bulletin board in the country with the words, Don't Let This Be You, painted under 'em."

"Yeah," Dean agreed distractedly as started parting Sam's hair with his fingers. "So you wanna tell me what that was about back there?"

Sam shrugged with the one shoulder he wasn't lying on. "Nothing to tell. I was going to look for you and ran into some trouble."

"Looking for me? Sam, I might've been a little tipsy, but I've been able to manage going to the bathroom on my own since before you were born."

"I know," Sam sighed, "but I was just worried. You were in there a long time... Ow!" He barked as Dean pulled a few hairs a little too tightly.

"There's more to it than that," Dean observed, focusing on the cut while his mind worked to put two and two together. "You were acting strange before we even went there tonight. Hell, that's half the reason I decided we needed to get out. So spill."

Sam considered telling his brother about the strange video messages, but he couldn't think of a way to say it without sounding like he was completely off his rocker. It wasn't rational, but he felt like he was telling Dean about his prophetic nightmares all over again, and that wasn't something he really cared to relive. Not anymore than the rest of this miserable night. "Like I said, you were gone quite awhile, and I started looking around, didn't really like the looks of some of those guys, so I got worried."

"Uh-huh..." Dean flicked the switch on the clippers he'd fetched from the bathroom. Sam recognized the buzz of the hair-cutting tool, though he hadn't had one near him since he was fourteen and stopped letting his Dad cut his hair into the same military cut that Dean sported.

"What're you?..." Sam twisted around until Dean's hand came out of his hair. He met his brother's gaze, a gaze that was now framed with an all-too-familiar cocked brow and knowingly pursed lips.

"That the story you're gonna stick with?" Dean asked, flicking the clippers on and off a few times. "Cuz I gotta trim a little away from the cut to get the stitches in clean. Now if I'm nice and calm, I can get real precise and make it so no one will be able to see the little bit of missing hair. But if my little brother wants to piss me off and get me on edge, my hands might shake..."

Apparently demons weren't the only masters of manipulation that Sam had to learn to deal with. Sam let out a defeated huff, because no way could he escape with the room spinning, and well, even Sam had one thing he was a little proud of. He let his head fall onto the pillow and shut his eyes as he said, "I saw you in car wreck. I'm not sure, but I think," he swallowed hard, "I think you died."

The clippers snapped off again as Dean sat on the edge of the bed beside his prone brother. "Saw? Like a vision?"

"No, not like a vision..." Sam's voice fell off as he realized how stupid the next part was going sound.

"Like what then, exactly?"

"The phone," Sam sighed, "video message."

"Sam, I didn't send you any video," Dean objected, confused.

"I know. And you couldn't have even if you'd wanted to," he added. "There's no service on that phone."

Dean twisted around on the bed to face his brother, the movement jostling the younger Winchester and making him grimace. "Wait a minute? THAT phone? The one from earlier with the messages from Jess on it?"

"Yeah, Dean. THAT phone."

"A message you've never seen before on a phone with no service," Dean extrapolated flatly, "and you believed it?"

"Ugh," Sam said with a roll of his eyes, disgusted that he had no excuse for his strange behavior. He couldn't believe he was even going to say this. "I thought maybe it was a message I never got, you know, when the phone had service, like it was lost or something, or I just missed it."

"Why? Has that ever happened before?"

"Sort of..."

"Sort of HOW, Sam?" Dean was getting more than a little irritated at his brother's fondness for half-assed explanations. He flicked the clippers on and off a few times and leaned closer to the mop of bloody hair.

"Earlier," Sam said quickly, trying to roll away. "When I played the messages earlier, I found one on there from the weekend Jess died, one I'd never seen before, and I thought I'd just missed it, what with everything that happened. And I figured if I missed one, then maybe I could've missed others..."

Dean flicked the clippers back off. "Look, Sam, I'm no expert, but I don't think it's possible for messages you never got to just suddenly appear on a phone with no service. How do you know the message from Jess was real? And how would that explain you seeing me in car wreck I've never been in?"

That was the problem, it didn't, but if it wasn't real, well, Sam really didn't want to go there either. "I dunno. Just something she said..." *Alea lacta Est, Samuel.* "And when I got the video with you in the wreck, I just sorta spaced on the part about there being no service."

"Huh," Dean said thoughtfully as he flicked the clippers back on. Sam tried to move away, but Dean held him still as he went to work carefully trimming the hair around the cut. "Well, that means both messages were probably not real."

"Dean?" Sam asked hesitantly as the clippers fell silent and Dean placed them on the nightstand next to the phone in question.

"This is the phone?" Dean asked.

"Uh-huh," Sam agreed, already knowing instinctively that if Dean tried to find the messages, they'd be gone.

Dean pushed a few buttons, gazing at the screen expectantly, then shook his head, and let his hand fall to his lap. "Battery's dead."

"I knew it," Sam said. "You don't believe me."

Dean pushed his head back into the pillow. "That's the thing. I do believe you, because you didn't start acting strange until you got it in your head to charge this puppy up and go digging up bones. I'm just trying to wrap my head around it."

"So what does your head think?"

Dean shrugged slightly. "I'm not sure yet, but I don't like it. You said you had false visions in Missouri, right? When we crashed the car? And at the hospital?"

"So you think this is tied to the Demon somehow?"

"Could be," Dean surmised. "We know Haris is also called 'The Whisperer.' He lies and manipulates: that's his M.O. If that was one of his kids that messed with your mind in Missouri, who's to say this isn't another one?"

"Through my phone?"

"Yeah, I dunno." Dean fell into a silent contemplation as he carefully stitched up the gash in Sam's head, then stood, removed his gloves with a snap and went into the bathroom. He returned a few minutes later with a glass of water and some ibuprofen. "You catch a couple winks. I'm gonna see what I can scrounge up about demonic manifestations on the internet. I'll wake you up in a couple hours."

Knowing that Dean was gonna stay up all night worrying about him, Sam protested, "I don't have a concussion, Dean. Go to bed yourself. We'll figure this out together in the morning."

"I still got plenty of charge left in those clippers," Dean replied, tilting his head suggestively, eyes widening with authority.

Sam was too tired to argue, so he begrudgingly shut his eyes and let himself slide into sleep. He could argue just as well in two hours as he could now.

Dean watched as sleep overtook his brother, then gently tugged off Sam's shoes and socks before pulling the comforter off his own bed and covering him with it so that he wouldn't have to move Sam back to the head of the bed. He bit the inside of his lip thoughtfully as he observed the younger Winchester for several long minutes to make sure he was resting comfortably before firing up the laptop.

As much as he hated research, he hated the fact that something could be toying with his brother's head even more. A part of him wanted to just dismiss the whole thing as the confused rambling of a concussed man, but he couldn't take the chance. Besides, it was a little too coincidental that this had all started when Sam dug up the old phone.

Dean glanced at the innocuous looking phone where it lay dead on the nightstand. He considered taking it out and smashing it, just in case, but like Sam had said, it was all he had left of Jess. Besides, he was pretty sure that if it was the Demon calling, it wasn't attached to the actual phone. If he could find some way to break the connection and spare the phone, well, he didn't want to take away his brother's memories for no reason.

There was something about the fact that this phone had no service on it that touched a nerve in the back of his mind somewhere.

They're heeeerrreee.

The voice of that kid from *Poltergeist* floated out of his subconscious mind. He recalled the scene exactly. The national anthem had played, the television station had gone off the air, and then... *Shit!* It was like Electronic Voice Phenomena, the voices they sometimes picked up on audio equipment that the human ear hadn't picked up at the time of the recording.

Dean quickly dragged up all the information he could on EVPs, most of which he'd read before, but refreshed his memory nonetheless. There was a whole school of parapsychologists who did nothing but search through static in search of EVPs with high-tech recording equipment. The static was apparently the best media because it meant there was no background signal interference. *No signal.*

Dean leaned back in his chair as he tried to put the pieces together. It made sense that if the Demon was communicating with Sam, he was doing it on a phone with no signal. But that didn't really help. Didn't tell him where the signal was coming from, or if there was any way to stop it without taking away Sam's only connection to Jess.

Now Dean remembered why he had so few possessions. He didn't do sentimental. Outside of his necklace, his car, and his journal, he didn't place much importance on things. The things that were attached to people were the hardest to dismiss, though. And Sam didn't have a car, a necklace, or a journal. What he had was burned to ash like the mother he never knew.

Dang, now Dean was just depressed. He ran his hand over his head roughly and glanced at his watch. Almost 5:30. Time to wake Sam, and too late to get some sleep himself.

He rested his hand on Sam's shoulder and shook him gently. "Hey, Sammy..."
"Huh?" Sam asked tiredly, his eyes opening a slit.
Dean held up three fingers. "How many fingers, dude?"
Sam grumbled and shut his eyes again. "One, dork wad," he said, flipping his brother the bird. "I don't have a concussion, Dean. Let me go back to sleep."
Dean laughed softly. "No problem. I'm just gonna go out for coffee. If I'm gonna be too long, I'll give you a call to make sure you're okay."
"Whatever," Sam said, snuggling back into his pillow and tugging the covers up to his chin.
Dean shrugged and snatched his keys off the table before heading out the door.

* * *

The shrill tones of the phone ringing cut into Sam's sleep with an intensity that made him want to push the pillow over his head. "Dean!" He groaned. "Dean, answer the damned phone." When the ringing continued, he pushed the covers back roughly, and reached for the end table. The phone vibrated in his hand as he picked it up.

He pushed the talk button and put it to his ear without checking to see who it was.
"Sammy."

Sam tried to open his eyes, but the glare of the early morning light filtering through the blinds kept him squinting painfully. "Dad? Dad, we've been trying to get ahold of you for days. Where the hell have you been? Why haven't you answered your calls?"

"Sammy, I need you to shut up and listen for a minute, son," the familiar voice said. "Your brother is coming to get you at school."

"Wait," Sam said, confused. "School? Dad, I haven't been in school for over a year. What's..."

"Quiet! I only have a few minutes. Now your brother is coming to get you. Don't go with him, Sam. It isn't safe."

Sam's heart clenched in his chest. "Why isn't it safe, Dad? Why shouldn't I go with him?"

"Sam, your brother...he's not himself. He's different. I don't want to go into detail over the phone, but he's not to be trusted. Sam? Sam, do you understand me?"

Sam pressed a hand to his forehead as his head began to throb anew. Before he could answer, the reception cut out, static crackling over the line. "Dad?" He prodded. "Dad, you still there?" Silence. "Dad?!"

"Alea lacta Est, Samuel."

Eyes shooting open despite the glare, Sam jerked the phone away from his ear and swallowed the gag that threatened to choke him as he realized that he'd just been talking to his father on the phone with no signal. Blood dripped onto the number pad, and Sam placed a hand to his nose as a flash of blinding pain pierced his head.

"Alea lacta Est, Samuel."

Sam's feet backpedaled madly. The sheets twisted around his flailing limbs as he pushed himself into a seated position and back into the headboard with a resounding thud of cranium against particle board and veneer. It was a damned good thing he didn't have a concussion. Beating one's skull against a wall was not recommended treatment for head injuries.

But *crap*, something wasn't right. Blood dripped from his nostrils and onto the screen of the phone in his hand. It was almost black in silhouette against the illumination that emanated from within the device, despite the fact that Dean had clearly said the battery was dead. Not that it mattered, considering he was hearing his father's voice when there was no signal.

"What the...?" Sam clapped a hand over his nose, trying to staunch the flow, and did another internal somersault as the phone vibrated in his hand. Heart thudding in his chest, he dropped the device onto the comforter, between his splayed legs. It landed half folded in on itself and clicked off with a tone as it snapped shut the rest of

the way. True to form, the phone didn't seem to care that it was switched off, as the light from the screen intensified and flared out from the crack between the halves of the hinges. After a few more rings, the vibrations stopped, and the phone looked almost too hot to touch.

Sam struggled to breathe through his mouth as the blood in his nose flowed more freely, despite the hand that was attempting to slow it. He could barely hear over the pounding in his ears, and the magnified sound of his own breathing as it echoed off of his closed fist. He almost missed, then, when the sounds of music emanated from the now-still phone. Not just any music, however. It was *Invisible Man*, by Queen, the same song that had been playing in the video Sam had received in the bar that night. The song that had been playing when Dean...

Alea lacta est, Samuel

Sam, your brother...he's not himself. He's different...He's not to be trusted.

Your brother is coming to get you at school.

Dad, I haven't been in school for over a year.

The phone was still on the bed before him, but the vibrations of the music, the hiss of Freddie Mercury's voice as his tongue slipped over the 'sss' of "invisible," followed by the punctuating clash of the band after "man," sliced through his skull. Somewhere behind his eyes, the music played like the strains of a movie soundtrack inside tinny, worn-out speakers. Each note opened a capillary in his sinuses and sent a fresh sluice of blood down his nasal passages. He bent forward in an effort to keep from choking as the fluid ran down his throat.

I'm the invisible man...

DAH!

I'm the invisible man...

DAH!

"Ahhh!" Sam put his free hand on the bridge of his nose. The space between his eyes pulsed as though the entire Queen ensemble had set up an amphitheatre at the crown of his brow. His eyes throbbed in their sockets, throat constricting around the heme-coated mist that tried miserably to pass for air.

The situation escalated from disturbing and inconvenient to threatening in the space of less than a minute. There was no doubt, as his head threatened to detach from his shoulders, that he wasn't picking up stray signals, or recovering lost messages on a screwed up receiver. Something was definitely trying to get through to him, and if he didn't answer the phone, it'd just drop a party line directly to his head.

Yielding, Sam picked up the phone, a shock like static on cold steel tingling through his arm, and he flipped it open. He was momentarily blinded by the intensity of the light coming from the display and cringed. He threw his arm across his face, ignoring the blood in favor of saving his eyesight, and squinted down at the device. After a few seconds, enough time for the blood to paint his shirtfront like the bib of a baby eating Spaghetti-O's, the glare dimmed and Sam could actually make out shapes on the display.

It was a scene he recognized immediately. The tiny cabin they'd shared after reuniting on the eve of Elkins' death came sharply into focus. Sam had no trouble recognizing himself, though the angle was obviously shifted from his original perspective. He and his father looked up simultaneously as the door opened. Sam remembered how much of a relief it had been to see Dean return. As good as it had been to reconnect with his father that night, he'd never understood why it was necessary for Dean to go to the funeral home alone. They were a team, or at least they'd become a good semblance of one in the year since their reunion, and Sam hadn't liked the idea of Dean taking on the assignment alone.

It was the first time he'd wondered how many such assignments Dean had undertaken while Sam was away, but not the first time he'd worried. He'd always worried. But then, Jess had been there to smooth the wrinkles on his brow and remind him that there were others in the world who needed him too, others who were more helpless than Dean.

Sam squinted at the phone in bewilderment. He remembered that night, remembered it clearly. It was the first time he and his dad had talked, really talked in years. That wasn't something he could ever just forget. It was etched in his mind like handprints in concrete, eternal and fast. There was no logical explanation, as far as Sam could tell, for why someone or something would want him to see this again. What had he missed?

Alea iacta est, Samuel.

The die is cast. *When?*

Sam's grip tightened on the phone, and he raised it closer to his eyes. *When?* All the video clips had been old. The call from his father had stated that Dean was *coming*, as though he and Sam hadn't been reunited for over a year. And now, the vampire hunt in Colorado. Whatever he was supposed to see, it wasn't something that was going to happen, not anything like the visions that usually plagued him. This was about something that had *already* happened.

The memory of Dean *brokenbleedingmangled* dying in the crushed frame of the Impala that he'd seen in the bar the night before came crashing through the static in his head.

Alea iacta est, Samuel.

Sam shook off the memory. *No, anything but that.*

The figures on the phone's screen moved just as Sam remembered them, Dean strolling in confidently and setting the jar on the heavy table with a clunk and a scrape. Something was different, though. From his new perspective, the wider angle let Sam's eyes pick up a subtle stiffness that he'd missed that night. Dean held his arm closer to his body and tugged at the sleeve of his shirt uncertainly when he thought no one was looking. Was there a hint of a white bandage peeking from the buttonholes?

"Dead man's blood," John said, and Dean nodded. There was something different about John, too. The way he looked at Dean, not anything like the father who regretted spending his college fund on ammunition that Sam had been talking to only minutes prior. This John looked at Dean the way he'd looked at him earlier that day.

I'd have never given you the damned thing if I'd known you were gonna ruin it.

Sam's stomach roiled as the moment came flooding back to him. What kind of father talked to his son like that after a year of separation and worry?

Sam watched as the image of himself on the video screen reached out to take the jar of blood in an effort to prepare the arrows they'd need to hunt the vampires. As the hand of Video!Sam touched the thick glass, his head turned to meet the eyes of the Winchester who was propped on a motel bed watching. "Alea iacta est," his alter ego rasped.

The jar was warm. Sam had forgotten. How had he forgotten? Indeed, how had he dismissed the fact to begin with? Staring into the eyes of his pixelated image, Sam distinctly remembered the way his fingers had been surprised to find the glass so warm, almost as though the blood inside had been fresh.

Dean *brokenbleedingmangled* dying. *He's different... He's not to be trusted, Sam. He ruined the car. Alea iacta est...*

"No!" Without thinking, Sam tightened his fingers around the plastic casing of the phone and flung it across the room. It met the wall beside the television with a sound that resembled a fluorescent light bulb exploding and fragmented, raining down onto the wall and carpet in a shower of plastic splinters.

The recoil was instantaneous. Whatever connection he'd broken by destroying the phone reformed in his head, tendrils of livewire electricity gripping and squeezing

behind his eyes. "Ahh!" He bent forward again, clawing at his temples with both hands as fresh blood spurted from his eyes.

He knew it was stupid to smash the phone, but the alternative would have been to accept... "NO!" Sam gasped, panting at the constriction in his chest. Mom was gone. Jess was gone. Who the hell knew where Dad was? None of that mattered, not really, because as much as Sam had struggled to deal with those missing pieces of his life, he'd done just that – dealt. But there had been that one thing that he'd always known, in the back of his mind, that he wouldn't be able to get past. That one thing that had sent him hunting down a faith healer and later, a reaper. There had always been Dean.

Sam's stomach roiled as his vision went white with the pain reverberating in his head. He reached out for the nightstand in an attempt to pull himself up and try to get out of the room. Whatever was attacking him, he'd brought it with him when he'd brought the phone in. There were salt lines across the doorway. If he could cross the line...

But it wasn't to be. Sam felt something pop inside his skull, like a bare wire shorting out, and his vision exploded into a blank white canvas. He fell to the floor, knees burning on the threadbare carpet as a fresh gush of blood painted his lips. He was all but choking, and the effort to breathe past the obstructing fluid overrode any muscle control he had left. He curled into a fetal position, shaking uncontrollably as a new message downloaded into his brain and played out on the projection screen of his snowblind inner eye.

The letting is easy. A glint of steel, an edge that slips, just so, through a solitary, rubbery vein, crimson and rosy, bleeding. It's painless, creates its own warm, anesthetic haze.

"Invisible Man," by Queen plays on the periphery of the fog within his clouded mind. It's not his usual mullet rock, but it has wafted out of his subconscious unbidden, a melody upon which he's never dwelt but which has made its mark, sans recording tape, upon this emotion. This is a darker time, a darker night, a darker deed, and the accompaniment seems appropriate, if not nearly distracting enough.

The jar fills slowly, too slowly to keep his mind from drifting into the darkness. The air is pungent, metallic, and thick, not conducive to any train of thought but that which finds him, that which always finds him when, alone, the stillness settles over him. He remembers, now, why his cynical humor, charm, and sarcasm are such important parts of the illusion that is Dean Winchester. Once they protected him, but now they are a means by which to protect Sam. There is nothing left of Dean to protect but Sam. Even his soul is no longer his.

Sam writhed on the floor in agony. His normal visions were painful, like what he imagined the skinwalker had felt downloading his brother's memories. But this, this was what Sam imagined Dean had suffered, alone in that basement as the charge raped his synapses and tore through his mind. His jaw clenched involuntarily around the denial as his head twisted to ward off the attack.

He has plenty of time to reflect, too, since funeral homes are so hard to find out here in the Colorado sticks.

Sam was forced to watch, an unwilling eavesdropper on his brother's private anguish, as the blood dripped from the sliced vein and into the familiar jar. He didn't know how Dean could be so calm, how he could just sit there and wait for the jar to fill.

That was when he saw the pen. It was a pen Sam recognized, the one Dean kept for writing in his journal. They had pens all over the place. More than one pair of their jeans had been ruined by exploded ink cartridges in Laundromat machines, and there were enough in the door pouches of the Impala to translate the Koran into handwritten manuscript. Only this one was ever exactly where it belonged, tucked into the hidden inner pocket of Dean's leather coat, and Dean only used it to write in his journal.

Sam's perspective shifted. A wave of vertigo flipped his stomach maliciously, and he wrapped an arm across it, quieting the muscles before he hurled all over himself. He looked over Dean's shoulder as his brother sat in the Impala, pen poised over his journal while his other arm bled a dark trickle into the waiting jar.

He wanted to look away. While they had both read every word in their father's ledger, even the embarrassing entries made about them when they were too young to know any better, no one but Dean had ever seen what went between the pages of his own journal, and Sam had allowed him that, the same way Dean had allowed him to keep his life with Jessica to himself.

Sam struggled to turn his head, but the icy fingers of whatever it was in his skull, gripped tightly and pressed him closer, forcing him to read.

*Dean is dirty. John is dire. They're lonely and tired, but John is never **Daddy**, and Dean is never **home**.*

Sam gasped as though he'd taken a hit to the solar plexus. There was no way, no way in hell his brother, the wise-cracking, crass, cynical son of a bitch who'd tried to pawn him off on a gay man in a bar less than twelve hours ago, had written that.

Of course, it was true.

Somewhere along the line, I stopped being your father and became your drill sergeant.

I want Dean to have a home.

It was twenty-three years of turmoil and bottled-up emotion in twenty words. And not a one was sarcastic or twisted ironically into witty denial. But it was Dean. It was exactly what Sam saw in his brother's eyes when his brother was saying nothing. Did Dean tell his journal the things he couldn't tell Sam?

A fresh wave of anguish swept through the youngest Winchester as the slide projector in his mind advanced one frame.

Forever is a long, long time to be alone; Not long enough to be together.

And that was Dean, too. Dean's journal, Dean's hand, Dean's pen scratching across the page while Dean's blood dripped into a jar beside him. And it was what Dean had said to him in Chicago.

"I want you not to leave just as soon as this is all over."

The pen continued to scrape along the paper in Dean's shaky cursive script. Both Dean and John should've been doctors, their handwriting was so bad. They tended to write as quickly as the thoughts formed in their heads, whereas Sam thought out each phrase before putting the pen to paper and made each letter clear and articulate, with purpose, to be heard. Dean wrote as though the thought would escape if he didn't mark its passing, and Sam wrote to be heard. Sad, though, if this was what Dean wrote, Sam wished he'd gotten the chance to hear.

He wondered if Dean had written in his journal before...when he was still *his* Dean.

Alea iacta est.

He curled in on himself as every muscle in his body contracted at once. "Not Dean! Not Dean! Not Dean!" A voice screamed in his head.

The blood dripped, and the paper rustled. Dean turned the page and continued writing.

The gun is cold and hard. It's heavy and glows like victory. The gun is peace and rest. Salvation should be softer.

Sam gasped as the tendrils in his mind drew back slightly. As the images faded behind his retinas, Dean closed the journal and slid the pen back into his jacket. The older brother picked up the jar of dead man's blood, *Dean's blood*, and gazed into it sadly, eyes a shade of green that Sam knew too well. Dean's gaze lifted to the rearview mirror, and in the reflection, Sam saw the dead stare of everything they'd ever hunted.

Sam, your brother, he's different.

Sam sobbed as the wave of energy receded and left him to come to terms with what he'd been shown. It wasn't true, it wasn't... But could it be? Could he have really missed the fact that his own brother was a monster? Had he really been so oblivious? And if it was true, what was he supposed to do with the information?

A long, long time to be alone...

God, Sam didn't know if he could do "alone" anymore. He didn't want to try at the moment, either.

Not long enough to be together.

And what if he'd missed goodbye?

When the tingling finally stopped, the numbness was so heavy in his bones, the shock so thick in his mind, that Sam could do little more than curl into himself on the carpet as unconsciousness finally gave him rest.

"Sam."

Sam's brow furrowed, his entire face crinkled against the dim ambient light of the room as he struggled to open his eyes. The voice, it was so damned familiar.

"Sam, baby, open your eyes for me." This time there was a touch to accompany the dulcet tones. It was feathery light, a ghost caress, but warm, cherished somehow, and missed. It stroked along his cheek, behind his ear, and down the back of his neck. "Saaaam," it repeated, distinctly female now. The fingers found that divot in the back of his neck just under his skull, weaving through his hair to press warmly inside. Two small hands lifted his head, tilting it back, and cradling it between them, pressing in behind his ears just the way Jess's had when he'd kissed...

"Jess...?" He ventured, still unable to open his eyes.

"Sammm." It was just a breath, a whisper that parted the hair over his ear, and Sam knew it was Jess. Even with his eyes closed he could feel her voice stroking against his face, soft and reverent the way it had been when they'd made love. It was the way he'd always imagined she'd answer when he asked her to marry him. He wished he hadn't waited. "Sammm. Yesss."

His heart leapt into his throat, and the thudding was visible behind his eyes as the last vestiges of the earlier attack fizzled in his synapses. His eyelids were so heavy, like every other part of his body, but she was there, he felt her, and he'd be damned if he laid there like a lump and didn't answer when she called his name.

"Jess," he whispered, choking on the coagulated blood in the back of his throat. He opened his eyes, and the light wasn't as harsh as he'd feared. The sharpest rays were diffused to a manageable intensity through the silky strands of her hair, and the glow in her cheeks was just the way he'd remembered her soul shining through.

She leaned over him, smiling and wiping at the blood on his cheeks with the hem of her flowing white nightgown. "Oh baby," she cooed, "what did he do to you?"

"He?" Sam asked, confused.

"Dean," Jess said, moving his head into her lap and brushing his hair back gently. "I'm so sorry. I couldn't get to you. I couldn't warn you."

Sam closed his eyes again and shook his head in disbelief. He moved a hand up to his forehead, pressing it into his skull as if to force away the memory of the earlier revelation. "No. No, I can't believe...not Dean."

Jess smiled softly, a pained expression, knowing she was breaking his heart. "I know it's hard. I'm so, so sorry, Sam, but it's true. He's a monster. He died in a wreck before he ever came to get you. Your father did this. He has connections, and he acted rashly. He just couldn't let go. Dean couldn't let *you* go, either. Even *after*, his first thoughts were of you, but that's just an echo. That thing is not your brother."

"I would've noticed," he protested. "I've been hunting all my life. I know what to look for."

"So does he," she said, pressing a thumb into his temple tenderly, other four fingers stroking into his hair. "Sam, you have noticed. Remember, the homemade

gizmo..." She looked up, searching for a word she wasn't sure she'd ever known. "He made it out of a broken Walkman."

"The EMF detector?" Sam choked. "Yeah, he made it, but..."

"It took him forever to rig one that didn't alert on HIM."

Sam's hand dropped with a thud as his eyes flew open. *Shit, shit, shit.* His throat constricted and he rolled his head into Jess' soft stomach, wrapping an arm over his head and behind her, pulling her around him like a blanket. His eyes burned with tears as he choked back a sob of anguish the likes of which he'd never known, not since Jess.

"I know," she whispered, rubbing circles on his back. "I know, but he's the one hurting you, Sam. He doesn't always mean, doesn't even know he's doing it sometimes, it's just his nature. He's the reason for all of this." She sat silent for a moment, just rocking him in her arms as he trembled with grief. "He's like a magnet, Sam. Evil sees him and follows like a beacon, because where he is, you are."

She paused, her head falling into her chest as soft tears slid from her eyes. "I hate seeing you hurt, Sam. You follow him blindly into the hunt, and when you fight those...things, they don't even see him. They'll always go for you first. Your own mother barely saw him, and she was sorry she couldn't protect you."

Sam shook his head in protest. Dean took plenty of abuse from the monsters they hunted. Sam had stitched him up enough times to know the scorecard was pretty even. But the more he thought about it, the more it seemed that Jess was right. How often did the creatures attack Dean, and how often did Dean get hurt attacking them?

"But he gets hurt all the time," he said, ignoring the tickle in his mind that thought she was right. "He almost died, twice..."

"All part of the ruse," she insisted. She lifted her chin and gazed into the darkness, searching for the words that would convince him. "Did you know he let it touch him, Sam?"

"What?"

"The reaper? In Nebraska? Did you know he let it touch him, waited for it when it came for him? Do you know why?"

"No. Why would he? Why would he do that?" Sam's chest hitched behind a violent clench of his stomach. He did remember. Dean had been shaken and pale when he'd found him in that parking lot after releasing the reaper from Sue Ann's spell. Sam had known something had happened, but he and his brother didn't ever talk about the near-misses. Why tempt fate? Knock on wood.

"He's angry," she explained leaning forward so that her lips brushed his ear, the words warm like summer sunshine, melting the cold freeze that had settled over his heart. "He never asked for this. His death was an accident, but he'd been ready for a while. He was a very broken man, Sam. He carried too much, and he was tired. It was his time. But your father wouldn't let him rest. He was overcome with grief, and he made a poor decision. Dean never got to choose. He's stuck with a life he never wanted, stuck with forever, because he can't die, and he hates that."

Sam's gaze rose to meet hers, his eyes dark and conflicted. His throat jumped as his head still rocked back and forth, his protests much weaker than they had been. Jess met his eyes, her face stretched with grief. "Dean's afraid, too. You know what scares him more than anything. You know he hates alone. Now that's his fate, his destiny. Eventually everyone will die and leave him, and he'll still be here. He has real issues with Death. He waited for that reaper in Nebraska. He wanted to know if he could kill Death with death." She laughed like tiny soap bubbles. "It didn't work. So he seals himself away, guarding himself so that alone won't seem like such a blow when it happens. The darkness around him grows by the day."

Sensing Sam's faltering resistance, Jess continued. "He's how the demon found me, Sam. He's how Meg found you in Burkittsville, how she found you in Chicago. They found you at the hotel because he leaves a trail of darkness behind him that draws them like light to a black hole. Dean's the reason your father got hurt that

night, the reason you had to send John away. He makes a show of saving you, but he's the one who puts you in danger to begin with. Everything he touches is ruined, like us, Sam."

"Us?" His throat convulsed around the word.

Jess rubbed her thumbs over his cheekbones as she gazed down at him, a nostalgic faraway gleam in her teary eyes. "We were happy. Remember? Until he came, we had forever."

"But why are you telling me this? What am I supposed to do with it?"

"You can kill him, Sam. Someone who loves him can kill him. He wants you to do it."

"No..."

"Sam..."

"No." He shook his head weakly, cringing as his battered mind moved inside his skull. "I can't." *I won't.*

"Sam." She reached her slender fingers around his chin and turned his head up to face her. "I want you to. I wasn't supposed to die. He was supposed to die, and stay dead. If he had, I would be alive still. We'd still have forever." She caressed his chin with her thumb gently, leaned in and kissed him, and he didn't resist. "I can't rest Sam. Not knowing he's here with you. Hurting you. You have to end him. For both of us. And for you."

He opened his mouth to protest again, but she leaned in and stifled the words with her lips, chasing her breath with her tongue. He tilted his head back and met her, trading kisses for sobs as his resistance melted away.

Dean turned the key and felt the engine stutter to a stop beneath him before he swung open the Impala's door and stepped out of the car. He'd only gotten a couple of leads in his research at the library, all of them stodgy at best, but he'd cut his session short. He was worried about Sam, and despite the fact that Sam's out of service phone was getting a perfect signal for some reason, Dean's fully functional phone was refusing to cooperate. Nationwide really wasn't, and it wasn't the first time he'd been tempted to use that friggin' X the Cingular people had for their logo as a target for a voodoo hex.

Anyway, in his experience, research only got you so far. When it came right down to it, usually the situation explained itself when given the chance. And Dean wasn't leaving Sam alone any longer than he already had.

He crossed the parking lot swiftly, noting that the blinds were still drawn. Mr. Sammy Sunshine would've thrown them wide open if he were feeling better, further evidence that he probably had a concussion.

Dean slid his key into the lock and pushed the door open carefully, eyes on the salt line behind the door. He noted with satisfaction that it was still intact, and raised his gaze to the interior of the room.

His satisfied expression melted quickly to one of confusion and betrayal as he met the barrel of a gun with his forehead. The hammer clicked back, and Dean felt the vibration through the steel.

"Gig's up. Get your ass in here and shut the door."

Sam stood behind the door, pressing the cold barrel of his Glock into the glazed skin of his brother's forehead as adrenaline coursed through Dean's veins and constricted the sweat glands along his hairline. The older brother raised his hands submissively, feeling Sam's solid mass pressing the door into him hard enough to rule out the possibility of forcing it inward and trapping the young man behind it. The action made him wider than he had been as his elbows pointed outward, and the duffel bag full of books and research materials he held in his hand snagged in the narrow opening as he tried to move through.

"Drop it," Sam ordered, his voice thick as though he'd been eating syrup coated ice cream. He sounded choked up, and even with a gun pressed to his forehead, Dean felt a twinge of worry.

The duffel bag dropped heavily to the floor. "Look, honey," Dean deadpanned, "I know I said I'd call if I was gonna be late for dinner, but I couldn't get a signal. Don't get your panties in a..."

"Shut up," Sam snarled. His voice was close to Dean's ear as the press of the gun barrel kept his head turned into the wall. There was something about the room that was different; a hint of ozone in the air and a static charge that prickled the short hairs on the back of Dean's neck, making his hunter's senses thrum beneath his skin.

"Saaaamm," Dean said, "If this is about me going off to the john and leaving you alone with the Jerry Springer castoffs last night..." His words were cut off as he felt his body thrust forward roughly. He impacted the wall with a whoosh of air from his lungs as he felt his brother press against him, pinning him tightly to the cracking plaster.

"I said shut up," Sam growled, parting the hair on the crown of his head. Dean heard rather than saw the duffel bag sliding through the door behind him as Sam dragged it with the toe of his foot and kicked the door shut behind them. The scratching of the nylon across the carpeting reminded Dean of the salt line he'd been so careful to preserve as he'd entered. The line was no doubt broken now, but Sam didn't appear to notice the grains trailing beneath his feet as he pushed the duffel up to the wall beside his brother.

If it was possible for Dean's blood to run any colder than it did with gunmetal pressed to his skull, then it dipped several degrees. *No aversion to salt*. That was one negative acid test. "Christo..." Dean stammered between lips that were nearly bloody from the force of his brother's hand pressing his face to the wall. Not a flinch. *Not possessed then*. If anything, Sam's grip tightened and became steadier.

Dean felt the younger Winchester's weight shift behind him and heard the zipper on the bag sliding open even as the gun remained embedded in his hair. Sam had the arm span of King Kong and used every inch of it. The younger brother rifled through the bag, books and papers rasping raucously as he grew more agitated. Without warning, the entire content of the bag was emptied at Dean's feet. The slight twitch of surprise that the movement elicited from Dean was rewarded with a shoulder pressing into his back painfully. After a few more seconds of pawing through the mess, Sam seemed to find what he was looking for and began to straighten.

"Do it, Sam...For me..."

Startled, Dean jerked toward the sound of the voice. He hadn't realized there was anyone else in the room. He could deal with Sam, as long as he wasn't possessed, but Dean was starting to feel outmanned and wondered who else was lurking in the shadows. "Look, Sammy, if you wanted a little more time alone, all you had to do was shut a towel in the door. C'mon, college boy, get a clue." Dean huffed, finding it hard to breathe in the crush.

Neither Sam nor the source of the voice behind him seemed to notice Dean had spoken.

"You've got the gun. Use it," the voice instructed, and the air seemed to crackle with energy. The tainted scent of ozone grew stronger.

"No," Sam answered, his words trembling and thick with emotion. "Someone will hear."

"You have to do it, Sam. Please." The voice was soft and sweet, and *damn*, Dean almost wanted to give her what she wanted himself. He had a feeling, though, that what she wanted was not in his own best interest. He held his breath in an attempt to expand his ribcage enough to force himself some wiggle room against the wall. He could take Sam, most days, given adequate space to gain momentum and leverage,

but his not-so-little baby brother was at least forty pounds heavier, and Dean didn't stand a chance in a static battle of mass.

"You're right," Sam agreed, pushing the articles of junk from the bag around with newfound purpose. "But a knife's quiet, and you need silver to kill a revenant anyway. I have something..."

As Sam rose from the heap on the floor, one of his giant hands caught at Dean's ankle, and Dean froze. The small knife sheathed beneath his pant leg had become such a familiar fixture on his body that it was almost another finger or toe, forgotten until it was stubbed. The blade inside was small, not very useful against large adversaries, but it was pure silver and had saved his ass more than once.

When Sam had been bitten by that hellhound and dragged into its lair when he was fourteen, Dean had used that knife to cut out the poisoned tissue and cauterize the wound. When Dad finally made it into the lair almost two days later to rescue them, he'd said the silver in the blade had counteracted the poison and saved Sam's life. Dean had never been without it since.

"Dean, you're a walking arsenal, man. You're going to end up in jail on a concealed weapons charge one of these days."

Dean shrugged. "Maybe," he said and kept on walking.

Dean felt a sharp tug at the leather sheath and heard the distinct pop of the snap coming unfastened from over the hilt. Then, as smoothly as those long fingers had found the weapon, they slid away as though it were suddenly invisible.

Sam shook his head indignantly, turning and walking backwards as they head home from school. "And that doesn't bother you?" He asked. "You don't ever want to go to Phys. Ed. and not have to wait for everyone to leave so you can change? Or walk into Chem Lab without scoping out a way to pilfer the silver nitrate?"

Sam's hand traced roughly up the leg of his brother's pants the way an officer would frisk a captive. He had no trouble finding the .45 tucked in the waistband of Dean's jeans or the dagger at his wrist. Seeking, finding, and moving away, approaching and retreating, like a prey animal to a waterhole full of crocodiles.

"Dean, you're seventeen. Don't you ever wanna just be a kid?"

"Can't, Sam." Dean's voice was easy and resigned, his step unfaltering.

Sam moved deliberately, the way a deaf person moved in sign, speaking in touch, a language the brothers hadn't used since they were kids and baby Sammy's colicky tummy only quieted under his big brother's hand.

"You ARE a kid. Why can't you just be one? Can't you just let your guard down for a little while? Just while you're at school? I don't carry all that stuff with me."

"Exactly."

"Exactly what?"

"Exactly. YOU don't carry all that stuff with you. When your baggy-assed jeans got caught in the escalator that time, you coulda lost your foot. But you didn't, cuz I cut it loose with one of my concealed weapons. And when you got jumped by those creeps in Atlanta that time while we were buying gas, who had your back?"

"You can be a kid, Sam. I want you to. But I'm your big brother, and one of us has to be prepared for anything."

In recent years, even when they were hurt, they spoke in a kind of closeness that never actually touched, not more than incidentally or was necessary. It was just what they did. But now, Sam's huge hand stayed open and flat, tracing a path over Dean's body that never lost contact. How else could he speak and be heard when the air was crackling around them? He found all the secret weapons the way he had always found the chinks in Dean's armor, and yet, he left them be.

The message was cryptic at best, but Dean understood as the touch was replaced with the hard press of a blade into his back, not one he'd had on him, but the one he knew had been in the duffel bag he'd brought in. Dean's bag of goodies, as it were, was always a catch all for everything from itching powder to tape. He'd almost forgotten about the knife.

"Do it, Sam," the female voice demanded. "Do it now."

Dean had time for only half a breath as Sam suddenly ceased pressing him into the wall and spun him around. He caught a glimpse of an apparition in the corner, a familiar face haloed in flowing blonde hair, but could do nothing in his own defense as he was shoved backward and Sam's bloody face came into his line of sight. He met his baby brother's eyes for only a second, more time than they'd ever really needed. After a lifetime of sleeping only feet from each other, a second was all Dean needed to understand as something wet and sticky spilled down his shirtfront.

"Who's gonna prepare us to live a normal life? Teach us to fit in?"

"Look, Sam. I'm not asking you to do what I do. But I'm always gonna have your back, and this is how I do it. Don't ask me to stand down."

"You know, if we stayed in one place long enough to have friends and family besides the three of us, we wouldn't HAVE to rely on just ourselves. There could be other people in our corners."

"Well, we don't. That's just the way it is, the way it's always been."

Sam's Glock had somehow found its way into the waistband of the younger brother's jeans. Dean saw it as his gaze fell from Sam's to the hand brandishing the knife that had replaced it, slicked to the hilt and bright red. A little too bright, a little too red - the same color as Dean's shirt and the waistband of his jeans. The gun too, had red fingerprints all over it.

"You ask me to let my guard down around you, Sam, then you might as well ask me to stop being your brother. As long as I'm around, I'm gonna have your back. I'm gonna have my guns blazing and my knives sharpened, and I'm gonna carry everything I can fit on me if there's even a chance that something I have is gonna keep you safe. That's what big brothers do. And don't you ever forget it."

Soon Dean's hands were red as well, fisting in his t-shirt as he slid to the floor. There was no fight in him, only surrender and understanding, and he let his eyes fall shut.

Sam watched his brother slide to the floor in a heap atop the books and miscellaneous Dean junk. He looked down at the red covering his hands, grimacing at the stickiness and sickening brightness of it. "I didn't."

"Why are you still here? I did what you asked. You can leave now. You can rest." He was standing over his brother's still body, waiting, but he could feel her crackling presence behind him.

"I can't leave you here all alone, baby," Jess said, her voice lilting and sweet like a lullaby.

Sam choked around an ironic laugh as he shook his head. "My brother was all I had left after you. You told me he was a monster, that he wanted to be set free, that YOU wanted to be set free. You told me to kill him, and NOW you worry about leaving me alone?"

"Of course I worry about you, Sam. I love you." She seemed to hover before him as he turned, her presence graceful and flowing. "He had to die, so you could be safe, but I don't want you to be alone." She was close enough to breathe in his hair, and she traced a ghostly finger under his strong jaw. "You don't have to be. You can come with me. We can be together."

"No. That's not how it works, Jess. I can't..."

For a moment she was silent, almost contemplative, but the atmosphere strummed hot and electric around them, belying her inner turmoil. She gazed into Sam's eyes intently. "Yes, you can," she said. Her eyes flashed white, fingers tightening at his throat. "You willlllll."

Jessica's voice lowered several octaves, and the sunny strands of her golden hair darkened to near black, crackling with static electricity at the edges. Sam's high school science teacher had once made a pickle glow by taking the end off an

extension cord, fixing the bare wires to a nail and impaling the hapless dill upon it before plugging the other end of the cord into the wall outlet. The resulting show had lit up an entire darkened lecture hall and had been only a fraction as bright as Jess was right then.

"C'mon, lover," she hissed. She leaned forward, her grip suddenly steel-like as she pulled him closer. "A kiss before dying, Samuel?"

His lips met hers covered in coppery red as his eyes and nose started bleeding anew. Her kiss was no less cold or vacuous than the kiss of the shtriga. She swallowed his screams of protest and agony as fiery tendrils erupted from her lips and fingertips and clawed into his brain. There were no visions or false memories on the backdrop of his mind, just a spreading darkness that traveled through the grey matter, cutting deep swathes in everything he was and everything that made him Sam.

Her mouth was like a cave that housed langoliers, and her kiss unleashed them to devour whatever it was that made a man human, heroic, and good. It friggin' hurt like hell.

Sam's world went white around the edges, his heart pounding. Every muscle in his body contracted simultaneously, and he felt bile rise in his throat as his stomach constricted like a python. He was sure he was being turned inside out as he felt fibers snapping beneath his skin, the bruises welling blood and turning him purple.

The gun in his waistband, his only actual weapon besides the one he'd just left in a heap on the floor, was suddenly foreign and cold. His hands were twisted into claws, and he couldn't grasp the Glock, let alone switch off the safety, aim, and fire. His knees buckled, and he collapsed forward into her. He forgot how to fight as numbness spread from her open mouth down to his toes and sapped him of the will to do anything more than breathe which was automatic and required no will at all when he wasn't having the life sucked out of him.

His body braced against her, more from the reflexive response of the tearing muscle fibers in his limbs than from the actual need to break the connection, and Sam never knew it was possible to be both stiff and profoundly limp.

A second before unconsciousness could claim him once more, Sam thought he felt a rush of air zing by him, parting Jess' hair. A hollow thunk sent a poof of plaster dust scattering from the wall beside them as though a tiny asteroid had crashed into the surface of the moon.

"Ooh, you kinky bitch," Dean's voice teased. "Where have you been all my life, beautiful?"

Jess, or rather the thing that looked like Jess, broke the kiss, hissing angrily as she turned toward the sound of the voice.

Sam slid to the floor bonelessly, sighing in relief as Dean drew away his attacker. Dean stood across the room, grinning so crookedly beneath the coating of red that it was very nearly a snarl. He stared down the creature that had attacked his baby brother. "If you were looking for a little action, sweetheart, you got the wrong phone. Cuz this right here," he said, cocking his .45 and aiming it, arm stretched out and turned as though he were using the gun to beckon her closer, "this is all action." He fired.

Despite the fact that she was clearly solid enough to hold one very large Winchester tightly in her grasp, the consecrated round passed through her as ineffectually as the knife had seconds earlier. She blinked out for half a second, disappearing completely, and reappeared a moment later, completely unscathed and obviously pissed. The beds began to tremble and shake, the cheap frame poster prints on the walls rattling against the plaster.

Dean did the only thing he could think of.

Stooping, he grabbed Sam's arm, hoisted him up off the floor, braced the younger brother's weight against himself, and dove for the nearest doorway. A second later they were locked in the bathroom, as the lights flickered above the sink. From the

other side of the door, a crackling noise filled the room like a hundred flies in a zapper on a summer night. Both brothers were breathing hard as they tried to gather their wits and formulate a Plan B. Or was it a Plan C? Sometimes their propensity to make things up as they went along left them up the proverbial creek without a paddle. They were ready to try round pegs in square holes at that point.

"Took you long enough, Sleeping Beauty," Sam growled, wincing as the sound of his own voice reverberated through his brain.

"I was waiting for some kind of a signal," Dean retorted, looking at his useless gun with disgust. Sam only saw the grimace for a second before the flickering light bulb ceased to flicker and the darkness closed around them.

"Hello, little brother getting his ass handed to him by creepy ghost chick. Sounds like a big, red, flashing 911 call to me."

"She's not a ghost, and I thought seducing her was part of your plan. If I'd known your whole brilliant idea was to get me to play dead and see if she'd leave peacefully, I'd have told you to kill me for real and spare us having to huddle together in a bathroom the size of a closet like a couple chicks in a bad horror flick. Not to mention saved my favorite AC/DC t-shirt. You know this fake blood never comes out."

"Hey, it was the best I could think of in a pinch. You came back before I had time to really come up with a plan. When I saw the fake blood and the prop knife in your bag, it was the best I could come up with."

"Not exactly one of your shining moments, little brother. Pun intended."

Sam groaned. There wasn't any part of his body that didn't hurt. "Well, when I pack the gear bags, I put useful things inside, like flares, for example. Not my entire arsenal for the next prank war."

"Hey, prepared means prepared. And war is war. My bag, my tricks."

"Well, I hope one of your tricks is walking through walls, because I don't think she's gonna let us hide in here for long."

"Might not have to."

"Whattya mean?"

"You got that phone on you? The one that you got the creepy messages on? Something sorta occurred to me while I was doing the research. I thought it was a long shot, but now that I know that silver and consecrated rounds have no affect on her, I figure it's worth a try."

"What is?"

"No time to explain. You're just gonna have to trust me."

"You know I do...but..."

"But what?"

"The phone...it's kinda smashed to smithereens all over the carpet out there."

Sam felt his brother tense beside him just as the light flickered back on. The room became deathly silent on the other side of the door.

Dean turned to Sam who was curled in a fetal position against the cool tub, his head leaning heavily to the side and blood running from his eyes and nose. He cleared his throat before he spoke again. Time to get choked up later. "Smashed, huh? What happened, too many calls from bill collectors?"

Sam smiled weakly without opening his eyes. "Very funny." He paused briefly as though his thoughts needed reorganizing before he could speak. "Anyway, I don't think she's making tea in there. Whatever plan you've got..."

"Yeah, you just sit tight, all right? Where would you say most of the pieces of the phone landed?" There was no answer for several long seconds. "Sam? Stick with me little brother. Any idea where the computer chip that was inside the phone might've landed?"

Sam shook his head, wobbling on his neck like a bobble head doll, then stopped as a thought seemed to break through the haze. "By the television, I think."

"Got it," Dean said. His hand twisted on the knob, and he ducked out into the room, shutting the door behind him.

“Going somewhere?” Jess hissed, and she appeared before him, her hair waving like Medusa’s snakes as she glared at him. Her skin was a roadmap of electrical current, and the air sizzled around her, the ozone stench stronger than it had been even seconds earlier.

Dean suddenly felt like Indiana Jones in a crypt full of snakes. *God, why did it have to be electricity?* He stared her down briefly as she hovered before him, trying to spot any vulnerability she might be hiding. As he looked on, he followed the tendrils of electrical current down her flowing gown and out her toes to the outlet in the wall. It made sense that she was drawing her power from the wiring, but it didn’t give Dean much hope of cutting her off.

“That depends,” he said, raising his hands submissively and smirking. “Baby brother’s kinda out of it at the moment. Wanna see who’s the better kisser?” He deadpanned as he worked desperately for formulate a plan. His eyes searched the floor around her feet, picking out pieces of plastic and metal, the remnants of the broken phone. Only when she moved toward him and her gown shifted slightly did he see what he was looking for.

The arc of electricity from the wall outlet didn’t travel directly to Jess. It streamed across the floor to one spot in the carpet and leapt from there, as though an electrical switch station had been set up there.

Without hesitating further, Dean lunged across the room, wishing he’d been a fishing man. As the air crackled around him, he would have given his ass in a hat for a pair of rubber hip waders. Dean and electricity just didn’t get along.

The first wave hit him hard enough to make him crumble to the floor. His lungs squeezed shut, nearly suffocating him as the current flooded his senses. He clenched his jaw, head arching back in agony, but he kept his eye cracked open and focused on that one spot on the floor.

“Aaah!” He couldn’t stifle the scream as a second wave of electricity caught him in its clutches. He fell forward onto his stomach and continued to drag himself across the floor. The rooms they could afford to stay in were tiny to say the least, but this one seemed to span a hundred miles as he moved across inch by painstaking inch.

He was panting shallowly, and darkness filtered in around the periphery of his vision. He still had several feet of carpet to cover when he felt his strength sap to near nothing. His head fell forward, forehead brushing the carpet.

Unexpectedly, the attack ceased. The paralyzing affect of the thousands of volts of electricity released its hold, and he felt his muscles relax. Not questioning his change of luck, Dean lunged forward and snatched up the tiny piece of plastic and metal he’d been trying so desperately to reach. He turned it over in his hand once, confirming that it was the microchip from the inside of the phone, just as he’d suspected.

“Care to try a threesome?” Sam’s weak voice filtered into the back of his mind, and Dean turned his head, still trying to catch his breath. The Jess monster bore down upon his brother who was propped in the doorway of the bathroom, barely erect. *My baby brother, the cavalry. Thanks, bro.*

Dean fumbled in his pocket for the ever-present Zippo lighter. This was no ghost, and she had no bones to burn that would break her connection to the world, but she did have a connection that could be severed. Dean lit up and watched with satisfaction as the chip melted into the carpeting.

Jess spun around, screaming as the stream of electrical current that fueled her stuttered and then stopped completely. She lunged for Dean, mouth agape like a black hole, and he threw up his arms defensively. Just as she was about to fall on him, inflicting God only knew what kind of physical pain, she evaporated, leaving only the scent of ozone in her wake.

A second later, Sam collapsed beside him in a heap, and they lay together, leaning against the wall and breathing hard while the silence settled around them.

“Was it good for you?” Dean snarked.

Sam's answering laugh was more of a cough. "Not hardly." After a few long minutes of recovery, Sam turned weakly to his brother. "That was pretty smart. What made you decide to burn the chip?"

Dean shrugged dismissively. "Just occurred to me that she wasn't really here."

Sam's face contorted in confusion. "Uh, Dean, I don't know about you, but she felt pretty real to me." He winced, testing his damaged limbs individually.

"Well, yeah, she was *real*, just not really *here*, not completely, anyway. You know, like quantum bilocality, the way they make computers so fast, the reason light can be both particles and waves. She came through the phone because there was no signal to interfere. The chip made her real because most microchips are so small that they relay information in a quantum state and measure...Ah hell, dude, brain fry working here. Fire bad, tree pretty. Doesn't matter. Basically, the theory is that nothing is real unless something measures it and puts it into a perspective. The chip was the only thing I could think of that could've been measuring the signal, since you had it with you in the bar and the room both. Anyway, it doesn't really matter. It was a long shot. I took it, and it worked."

"Quantum bilocality? Dean, quantum theory? You never read your History book, but quantum theory you get?"

Dean shrugged and let his head loll against Sam's shoulder. "History is boring as hell. And you can't get anymore supernatural than quantum theory. I figured it might come in handy someday."

"My brother, the physicist."

"You tell anyone, I'll kick your ass."

A few hours later, they were packing up their things to leave before the manager came beating down the door and forced them to explain the holes in the plaster and the melted carpet. They were both moving slowly, a little worse for wear, but alive, thanks to each other.

"She told you I was a revenant? Like, Zombie!Dean?"

Sam snickered softly as he stuffed items back into the bag he'd overturned earlier. "Not in those words, exactly," he said.

"So that was how you knew she was lying, right? That's why you didn't kill me when she told you to?"

"Yeah..." Sam ducked his glance and continued stuffing bags as though he hadn't really heard the question.

"Sam?" Dean asked, fishing for a more decisive answer.

"Dude, she made a pretty good argument. Guess she made me realize I might not know you as well as I thought."

"But, dead?"

Sam shrugged. "Hey, you're the one into quantum mechanics. You never heard of alternate universes? Let's just say, she made a strong enough argument that I wouldn't be surprised if there's a universe out there where you really are a revenant."

Dean thought silently for a second, a grin breaking across his face. "That'd be what? The Necroverse?"

Sam rolled his eyes.

Dean's brow furrowed. "So, if she made such a good argument, then how did you know she was lying?"

Sam cleared his throat reflexively. "I didn't. I just..." He paused and shook his head. "I know you'd never hurt me, man. We get into a lot of trouble together, but we get each other out. I couldn't let her put all the blame on you."

Dean sat on the bed roughly and looked down at his brother who was picking up the mess he'd made on the floor. "So, in your mind, there was a possibility that I was undead, like one of the things we hunt, and you didn't kill me?"

"Do you really have to ask that?" Sam looked back at him incredulously. "You're my brother. If it was me, and you thought there was a chance that I was Zombie!Sam, would you have done it?"

Dean's expression took on a faraway, thoughtful glaze. "Let's hope we never have to find out."

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "Besides there was a doubt in my mind. I mean, you mentioned that it could've been one of the Demon's 'kids' trying to reach me through the phone, messing with my head the way that one had in Missouri. It made me think of some of the research I did that suggested Haris, or Iblis, or Azazel, or whatever the hell his name is, was the one that tested Job. You know, tried to turn him against God? When she tried to turn me against you, it just seemed a little too coincidental to me. I was pretty sure she was connected to the Demon after that."

Dean's face twisted wryly. "So in your twisted head, you're God's chosen one, huh Sammy? His most faithful servant?"

Sam shook his head, wincing slightly at the residual throb behind his eyes, but smiled despite the pain. "Well, when you put it that way... Anyway, if it makes you feel better, since she was trying to turn me against *you*, that sorta makes you God in this analogy."

"Well, then, Job, you owe God another AC/DC shirt. This one's shot to hell." When Sam didn't answer with a comeback, Dean turned his gaze to see his brother fingering the edges of a familiar book contemplatively. "You're not thinking about reading your big brother's journal there, are you?"

Sam drew back as though he'd been caught with his hands in the cookie jar. "No, uh..." he stammered, "noooooo."

"Dude, you can look if you want," Dean chuckled. " 'Ts not like I have anything to hide."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. It's just like Dad's, and we both read that all the time. Whattya think I keep in there, love letters?"

Sam turned red and looked away. "Well, it's just...the Dean she showed me wrote things in his journal. Not poems really, but kinda poetic, and they were kinda true. Made me wonder..."

Dean cleared his throat and stood up, continuing with his packing. "Yeah, your big brother the physicist poet. That's some altered perception of reality you've got working there," he dismissed. Nevertheless, he glanced warily at his brother out of the corner of his eyes as Sam opened the book and thumbed through it.

"Uh, Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"What's with all the blank pages?" Sam held up the book and flipped the pages, displaying large chunks of text in Dean's sprawling handwriting, broken up by glaring blank space.

"Oh," Dean shrugged, "that's just in case I have to go back and add something to an entry later. You know, if we find out more about it on another hunt or something."

Sam nodded. "Makes sense, I guess." He thumbed through the book for awhile longer, relishing the fact that Dean had allowed him to look even though he hadn't really found what he'd been looking for. A crooked grin quirked at the corners of his lips.

"What's so funny?"

Sam chuckled. "A thought just occurred to me."

"Well that's new."

"Shut up. I was just remembering when we were kids, when credit cards were harder to get, and Dad used to pay the motel bill with hot checks. He never landed in jail for writing 'em though, cuz he kept that special pen with the vanishing ink. By the time the motel clerk took 'em out of the drawer, they were blank. You needed another special ink to prove that anything had ever been written there. Luckily, no one ever

figured it out. For a second there, I just thought, 'what if you really did write that stuff in here, and I just can't see it?'

Dean turned abruptly, reaching for the doorknob. "I'm gonna take this out to the car, dude." Sam watched him go, slightly taken aback by his rush. Something seemed just a bit off with his brother, and it took him a second to realize what it was.

"Dean is that *Invisible Man* you're humming?"

Dean quirked an eyebrow at him and kept walking.

"Dean?" Sam shoved the journal into the bag and hoisted himself slowly to his feet, bracing against the end table and cracking his knee in his pained clumsiness. "Dean...where's that pen you always keep just for writing in your journal? Dean?!"

The End