

## **Episode Six: Company Policy**

### **By BurstynOut & Tracer**

#### **Break Room**

The night shift poker game was on a "need to know" basis, but even the "suits", as the gathering of security guards liked to call them, got in on the action, placing bids and gambling on the outcome during their lunch breaks.

It was always a thrilling spectacle, complete with beer and cigar smoke, although both were strictly prohibited in the Taliean Inc.'s employee manual. The thick, paperback guide to proper work ethic served only as coasters down in this hole of an office and held no jurisdiction of any kind in their realm.

All in all, the job was an excuse to get out of the house and hang with the guys. The dimly lit complex held no over-achievers that burned the midnight oil, or starving kids, fresh out of college, desperate try to climb the ladder. They could play in uninterrupted peace. Something none of them could do at home.

"Read 'em and weep, boys!" The sandy-haired new hire laughed, his shiny company badge bearing the name Jack Stanton. A smug smirk was plastered on his face as he laid the cards down with a flick and displayed a full house before stretching his arms out greedily to collect his prize.

"E'ther you jus' lucky, or you been cheatin!" The gray haired, lined man to the "freshie's" right, growled.

"Ah, shut up, Earl. You just mad 'cause he's taking all your money!" Another wizened employee shot back, his name badge declaring him as Mike. Chuckling wickedly, the salty-haired man locked eyes with Stanton, jutting his thumb out in the direction of Earl.

"Don't you mind ol' Earl there. He's been here since the dawn of time and is just mad 'cause God ain't killed him yet."

"Like to see him try!" Earl stated cockily, shifting his shoulders and polishing his fingernails on his shirt.

A round of laughter filled the smoke-filled room, and a man in the back yelled out the announcement that new bets were being taken seeing as the "freshie" had just won his sixth game in a row. Several employees jumped at the chance to toss in their wagers, and the volume increased ten-fold as they shouted out their biddings.

"Well, I'm sorry to disappoint," Stanton shouted over the crowd, "but I'm out."

"What?" Mike questioned, "Whattya mean 'out'?"

"I mean, I was hired to be a security guard, not a card shark," Stanton clarified, ignoring the deep voice bellowing. If none of the guys knew that the kid was a new hire, they sure as hell did now.

"Damn, I think the boy's serious!" The fourth player chimed in, cocking an eyebrow and studying Stanton's face for a long minute.

"Well, someone around here should be, Ricky," Earl shot back, rising slowly from his chair, the light creak of bone on bone accompanying his movement. "A'right, boy, if you're serious, lets go."

"You gonna show him around?" Mike inquired, almost worriedly.

"Yeah, got a problem with that?" Earl snapped, and a series of heads shaking 'no' met his glaring eyes. "Good. Now, c'mon, I wanna get back before the final game."

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Two sets of footsteps resounded off the linoleum flooring which bore the Taliean insignia, echoing in the wide, open gallery. Dim fluorescents outlined the edges of the hallways, and circles of yellow light bounced off the office doors, glaring brightly off of the thick glass.

"So, how long have you worked here?" The younger guard spoke up, breaking the eerie silence that had hung in the air since they'd exited the break room over thirty minutes ago.

"Boy, don't small talk me. If you ain't got something important to say, you might as well just shut up," Earl fussed, fiddling with the retractable key chain that hung from his belt. "Now, I'm gonna take that wing over there, and you sweep the side offices."

"Uh, if you don't mind me asking, why do you need to check out the supply rooms?"

"You a smart ass, son? 'Cause let me tell ya, I ain't got no liking for any smart ass. Damn punk kids come in here thinkin' they know what's up. Well, I've been here as long as Taliean's owned the joint," Earl mumbled angrily, giving Stanton a firm look before heading off to the supply rooms. "Now do as I say, boy, else you gonna be moving back in with your momma."

The two security officers headed out to their posts in silence, but less than twenty minutes later the sounds of panicked screams were heard as the young officer searched frantically for his missing mentor. After years of loyal service, Earl had seemingly vanished into thin air.

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## IMPALA

Sam rested his throbbing head against the cool passenger window, swearing to himself that if one more Black Sabbath monstrosity blared through the speakers, he was salting and burning Dean's collection whether his brother threatened him or not.

Not that Dean could really hurt him all that bad. At least not at the current moment. He'd gotten a lot better, and most of the cuts and abrasions had healed nicely, leaving only small, white scars along his hairline.

"Dean, pull over," Sam commanded, shifting in his seat to face his brother and taking in his state.

"Uh...no," Dean replied, a smirk on his face as he shot his little brother a side glance before refocusing on the road.

"C'mon man, you need a break. And—and it's my turn." Sam shot back, feeling all of about ten years old. The comeback was juvenile to say the least.

"Nope. Sit back and relax, stilts."

"Can I ask why?" Sam muttered, clearly annoyed. He was so not in the mood for this and was getting damn frustrated by Dean's continued insistence that their partnership was still a sixty-forty split when it came to the sharing of responsibility.

"Yes, you can," Dean answered laughingly. "One, the second I pull over, you're gonna demand the keys, and two, you're only telling me to do this 'cause you're hoping I fall asleep, and then you can change the music to that sissy indie crap you love so much."

"T-that's not true," Sam protested, mouth gaping slightly at just how well his brother knew him.

"Whatever, Sammy," Dean shot Sam a knowing look, and shrugged his stiff shoulders.

"Look, Dean, we're in--" Sam craned his neck to read the bright green road sign and nearly choked on a laugh, "Humansville—ha, what the hell is wrong with people?"

"Maybe they're aliens. It's a good cover," Dean quipped, receiving a reprimanding scowl from Sam.

"That's still another fourteen hours from where we need to be, Dean. And contrary to your popular belief, you can't hold out in that driver's seat that long. Sooner or later, you're gonna have to give me those keys," Sam stated smugly, crossing his arms and leaning against the door.

"You drove enough over the past couple of months, and besides, my baby likes me behind the wheel. Says I drive far better than you ever will," Dean argued, although his tone was smooth.

"This hunk of junk talks now? Are you sure they didn't say something was wrong with your head?" Sam questioned, his face red as he tried in vain to stifle a laugh.

"Real funny, college boy. You're lu--" A high pitched series of rings pierced through the guitar riff, and Dean hastily turned down the volume and snapped his phone open.

Sam pretended not to be trying to eavesdrop on Dean's conversation, but his brother's tone had turned near menacing after he'd asked who was calling. Dean's brow was furrowed, his face tense. A series of 'no's' and one 'I'll see what I can do' later, Sam had a friggen' Spanish Inquisition prepared for his brother.

"Who was that?" Sam questioned, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Frank Taliean," Dean muttered, shaking his head as if in disgust.

"Wait, as in, the billionaire Frank Taliean?" Sam pressed, excitement and confusion wrapped throughout his words.

"Yeah. How'd you know?" Dean inquired disbelievingly. Leave it to his geek brother to pull that random fact out of his ass.

"I read your mind," Sam stated, feigning seriousness but unable to keep the grin off his face when Dean shot him an irritated look. "Ah, c'mon, Dean, the dude's face is plastered on almost every business magazine, and his company is about to undergo the second largest merge in history. Any idiot who watches the news or browses the Internet would know who he is."

"Any idiot, huh?" Dean pursed his lips and twisted the volume knob back to its original position before leaning back in the driver's seat.

"So?" Sam drawled, eyes wide in impatience.

"So?"

"You going to tell me what he wanted? And how the hell did he get *your* number?"

"He offered us a job," Dean answered slowly.

"And you told him no?" Sam screamed. He really couldn't help it. Dean wasn't exactly Einstein, but he wasn't stupid either, well at least little brother hadn't thought so all of about ten seconds ago.

"Yeah, Sammy, I did. Okay? Trust me on this one. You don't want to get involved with this guy," Dean snapped, tossing his phone to the floor and wiping a hand across his face in attempts to calm himself and prevent a battle between him and Sam.

"Uh...yeah I do. Dean, the guy would probably pay us more than a couple thousand. I mean, he's a billionaire for Christ's sake," Sam reasoned, banging the back of his head against the leather seat at his brother's stubbornness.

"It's nothing but blood money, Sammy," Dean murmured, and Sam nearly missed it over the powerful melody humming from the speakers.

"What do you mean?"

"Taliean was a former hunter, a good one, almost as good as Dad," Dean stated off-handedly, his voice reminiscent.

"So?" Sam pushed pointedly.

"He abandoned us," Dean spat heatedly.

"He quit? You're not gonna help him because he stopped hunting?" Sam's tone was damn near condescending of Dean's reasoning, and the elder didn't like it one bit.

"No, Sam, I'm not gonna help him. His priorities are totally messed up. He didn't have the class to make up his mind about where he was in the game, and his Charlie Brown, wishy-washy B.S. got a lot of people hurt. I can't respect a guy that takes everyone down with him because he wants to play both sides of the fence. You're either in it or you're not Sam. You play the fence, people get hurt, and that's not how this works." Dean's eyes were ablaze with fury, and his face twisted in anger at the bitter memory.

"Dean," Sam began cautiously. Now would definitely not be the time to piss his brother off. "There was no way he could've known what was gonna happen. You said it yourself, he left

before the whole thing went down. And look, man, if nothing else, our cash is nonexistent, and unless you reapply for a card in the next 24 hours, we are in trouble, because I know that between Sam Michaels and Dean Bonham, we have about a hundred dollars left.”

“I know,” Dean breathed, his forehead creasing pensively.

“Then turn this car around. A simple haunting can wait if the dude’s gonna pay us.” Sam smiled widely, and waved his hands, simulating a U-turn.

“I just have a bad feeling about this, ok?”

“No, you have an ‘I hate this guy’ feeling,” Sam retorted. “Now turn this bad boy around before I get out and hop a bus to go help this dude.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“Wanna bet?”

“Fine,” Dean snapped, “but just so you know, I’m not responsible for any action I may take in that traitor’s presence.”

“Whatever, Dean,” Sam exasperated, rolling his eyes.

“I’m serious,” Dean replied, a smile tugging at his lips as he whipped the Impala around. “And Sammy, if you ever call my car ‘bad boy’ again, I’m kicking your ass.”

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### **Taliean, Inc. Office Complex**

“Wow,” Sam murmured. Dean eased the Impala to a stop alongside a Porsche and what looked to be the newest model Corvette on the market.

“Yeah,” Dean breathed, stepping out of his car to get a better look at the pristine, jet black sports car, doing his best not to drool on it.

“Not the car, dumb ass,” Sam laughed, shaking his head and grabbing two IDs from the dash.

“Right. Because why think about taking a joy ride when you could be staring at *that*,” Dean replied in relative disgust, waving his hand in the direction Sam was staring in.

Dean would hardly consider the business complex of Taliean to be the 8th wonder of the world—the Porsche maybe, but the massively tall, steel gray skyscrapers jutting from the middle of a small patch of green ground surrounded by concrete, definitely not. But that image was all to be seen for what appeared to be miles. He could imagine why Sam would find it impressive, though. His brother probably had wanted to work in a huge firm like that—saving the world from a steel cage, locked behind a mahogany desk. It was living, breathing, normal, white-collar America.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Dean huffed, trudging over to passenger side and snatching his ID from Sam.

“Would it kill you to try and look a little more like you want to be here?” Sam asked heatedly. They needed the money, and so far Taliean was the poster child for everything he had wanted, which gave Sam no reason to hate the man, much less piss him off. Who knows? He might need one hell of a reference some day.

“I look fine, thank you very much,” Dean snapped, tugging on his jacket.

“You look like someone’s making you walk ‘the green mile’,” Sam stated pointedly, eyebrows raised in disapproval. “Now, c’mon, we told him we’d be there before closing.”

“The things I do for you, I swear,” Dean muttered, pushing past Sam. His quick strides created a steadily growing gap between the brothers, and Sam’s long legs burned as he hustled to close it.

It wasn’t hard to locate the HQ building. The large, black marble sign emblazoned with the silver emblem of the company gave that one away. Sam gave Dean a glance that screamed ‘behave and don’t say anything stupid’ before pushing his way through the revolving door.

Stepping out into the wide open lobby, Sam worked to silence the gasp forming on his lips and quell the nagging feeling of being completely out of place that knotted in his stomach as the mass of young and middle-aged men passed him in droves. The incoherent chatter of voices reverberated off the marble walls to almost deafening proportions, and the blur of suits prevented the youngest Winchester's eyes from taking in a good layout of the foyer.

The thriving corporate world was almost scary in and of itself, and Sam struggled to take himself out of his current state of gnawing panic and confusion so that he could act like it was all good for his already lagging brother—who apparently was nowhere to be seen.

Sam whipped his head to either side frantically, temporarily losing his calm and indifferent façade as every horrible reason why Dean wasn't standing at his side as he should be flooded his mind.

The younger brother had never wished more that he had that whole psychic/telekinesis thing completely in his control. He really wanted to pick up the nearest brick and smack some sense into that idiot who claimed to be related to him when he turned around, scanning the incoming crowd, only to see Dean still standing outside, clearly visible through the glass revolving doors.

"What the hell, Dean?" Sam snapped, barreling through the doors and back out into the square, not even hearing the startled employee's responses through the pulsating beat of blood in his ears.

"Doors aren't supposed to spin like that, Sam," Dean stated, head hanging low. Although, by the way it was bobbing, Sam could tell his brother was trying not to laugh and had to lock his hands to prevent an impulsive punch to the smug face when it met his gaze and a shaky voice inquired of him, "What if they're possessed?"

"You're a jerk," Sam declared angrily, although it was drowned out by Dean's roaring laughter.

"Your...your face, S-Sammy," Dean gasped, trying to do his best impression of the expression that had contorted Sam's features, his face red and his body hunching over as he gave into the fit of laughter at his younger brother's expense.

"This isn't some hick town, Dean," Sam chided, fists clenched at his side, "You can't pull this crap here. These people expect you to act somewhat civilized, and I'm not letting you stall your way out of meeting this guy. Will you *stop*?"

"Civilized. Got it," Dean nodded, biting his lip to stop the grin threatening to break through when he saw just how much Sam really looked like he wanted to kill him.

"Good. Now, c'mon, he's expecting us." Sam waited for Dean to make the first move, and then filed in behind his brother.

"I really don't want to be here," Dean muttered under his breath, although loud enough for his brother to hear.

"So you've said." Sam shot back, ignoring the pleading in the elder's eyes and stepped up to the reception desk.

"Hello. My name is Sam--"

"Samuel Connors. And I assume this is your business partner Dean Watson," the perky, brunette receptionist rattled off lightly, her huge smile fading when she noticed their eyes widening in shock and confusion. "Oh, I'm sorry. Mr. Taliean told me you were coming. Hang on one sec, and I'll page him for you."

Sam shot a wary glance at Dean who merely shrugged.

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Chrome, black, and modern silver faded into walls washed in pale yellow and adorned by chestnut beams as the brothers followed the petite receptionist, her red locks pulled into a smart ponytail. The highlighted number declared the level as 75th, better known as the company business suites and home to the president of the corporation and Taliean's governing board.

Dean's mouth formed a tight frown as he entered the luxury comforts of the upper white-collar lifestyle. Sam's face was the exact reciprocal. The younger was damn near gaping, his eyes lit with anticipation and what Dean guessed people referred to as wonder. Usually, he liked seeing Sam stunned, dumbfounded, and just at a plain loss for words, mostly because those scenarios were usually due to his own perverted comments. No one or nothing else was allowed to elicit that particular expression from Sam without express permission from Dean. It was in the big brother handbook.

Certainly nothing like this place was allowed to tweak Sam's awe bone. This...all of it, was bought in blood, hunter's blood, and Dean couldn't understand how anyone could just step over the fallen bodies, simply forgetting in order to embrace all the trappings of wealth. Sam's fascination came from his ignorance to those past events, and Dean had to constantly remind himself of that fact in order to prevent himself from giving Sam the treatment Taliean deserved, and if he had his way, would receive.

Rich, colorful paintings graced the light sandy hallways, contrasting Dean's crappy mood, each hanging a foot from the next. Their deep hues of blue, red, and darkest green accentuated the collection of antique vases and statues resting along the reddened brown tables aligning the walls. Dean huffed at the extravagance and eyed a green-blue collage the receptionist and Sam both chimed in to be an early impressionist piece. The sad thing was that the monstrosity hanging from the wall was probably worth more than a lifetime of hustling would ever garner Dean.

Dean was about to offer a comment on how women looked better in certain types of paint and, well, certain foodstuffs for that matter, but he chose not to when he saw Sam fully engaged in a conversation with the art literate, short-skirt wearing, red-head. He so needed to take an Art History class.

"Wait here," the woman instructed. Her name, Sam informed, was Laura. Dean and Sam followed her command and momentarily stared at the deep, scarlet, leather couches that formed an L-shape in the waiting area before settling down on the nearest one.

Sam grinned when Vilvadi's "Spring Movement" began playing softly throughout the room, replacing the Mozart piece before it. He rubbed his nervous hands along his slightly dust brushed jeans. It was one of Jess's favorite classical pieces, and the bars that signaled memory were bittersweet to his ears.

The steady hum of "Sad but True" that interrupted the classic moments later was just plain annoying.

"Stop," Sam ordered irritably, his gaze hard and firm.

"Make me," Dean countered, switching melodies and opting for something from his Black Sabbath repertoire.

It was to big brother's benefit that Laura chose to return at that exact moment, because Sam had about had enough of Dean's attitude. He was sure that Dean's recounting of the story, or what Dean had actually told him, which amounted to all of about three sentences, was true, but getting out is a hard choice to make. He knew that personally, and well, what happens afterwards is not your fault. Dean had been preaching that to him for the past year and a half now. So why was he suddenly being selective in the "it's not your fault" category was beyond him.

"Follow me," Laura chirped, flashing a Crest-ad worthy smile at Sam who returned the expression as he jumped up from the couch. Dean rolled his eyes and stood alongside his brother, silently shuffling behind the two flirts and scratching the always present itch that seemed to reside in the short spikes at the top of his head. He really didn't want to be here. Had he said that already?

Several steps and a hard push against the heavy wood doors later and the brothers were once again waiting impatiently in the middle another huge room. Two oversized wine-colored chairs faced the long glass desktop which was held up by thin wrought iron pieces that

were interwoven in the center and stretched outward to the sides. It was probably the ugliest looking desk Sam had ever seen and just, well, strange.

Ever the one to find such things interesting, Dean tilted his head, squinting against the midday light that flooded in from the tall bay windows. He walked stealthily towards the desk. Crouching down along side, he ran his hand gingerly against the iron grain, turning and gesturing for Sam to come down beside him.

"Zia Sun," Dean clarified with a satisfied smile and ran his fingers along the intersection of the many supporting strands, quite pleased to have grasped the designer's intent.

"So?" Sam pressed, eyeing Dean questionably. Damn, his brother was weird.

"Strong body. Clear mind. Pure spirit. Devotion to the welfare of his people." Sam stared blankly at Dean as the elder rattled off the meanings of each of the extending lines. "Ah, c'mon, college boy, you don't recognize this?"

Sam looked over his shoulder nervously to ensure that no one was watching their exchange. "Uh...no."

"Seriously?" Dean questioned, creasing his forehead in disbelief.

"Yes, seriously, Dean," Sam said, exasperated. "Look, if you're gonna tell me, now would be a good time."

Dean's eyes visibly dulled, and for a second, he looked as though he was deep in memory. "Caleb used to use it. It's a symbol of brotherhood."

"Oh," Sam murmured, eyeing the design more intently with newfound understanding. To his surprise, his brother rose quickly, and little brother shot up rapidly to join him.

"That bastard," Sam watched his brother carefully for a moment as the hushed phrase escaped Dean and the elder merely shook his head in disgust.

"So...uh...what's that mean? That he has it?" Sam stuttered and searched for the right words to quell the tense moment.

Dean smirked and with a serious voice replied, "Justification, or so he thinks."

The cracking of the door startled the brothers out of thoughtful silence and they turned sharply to see the intruder. Sam's eyes widened, and he couldn't help but feel nervous when a familiar countenance, brushed with pepper-gray hair and bearing eyes of sea blue, lined with age and experience, entered the room. The man's frame was thin, although not lacking in shape. Once a hunter, always a hunter, whether by title or not, and Sam figured that Taliean, much like himself, couldn't escape the workout regimen.

"If it isn't the great Taliean himself," Dean announced with sheer mockery, resolved to be unimpressed with anything the man had to offer.

"Dean," Frank greeted tersely, extending his hand for Dean to accept. The elder made no motion to do so. "Personable as always I see."

"Hi, Mr. Taliean." Sam cut in and shook the extended hand, his voice falling into the usual soothing "trust me, I'm normal" tone it always held when meeting people. "I've heard a lot about you."

"I trust, not all good," Frank returned, gesturing for the boys to sit and then circling and coming to sit in his own chair, "considering your brother's apparent distaste for me."

"Can you blame me?" Dean quipped lightly, smug smile in place.

"Dean," Sam rebuked harshly and turned apologetically to the business executive, "I'm sorry for my brother's apparent disregard for manners in general."

Frank shifted forward in the chair and rested his forearms on the desk, folding his hands. "No need to apologize. The anger rises from the details. It always does."

"I wasn't there," Sam shrugged resigning to let the issue rest.

"Stanford, right?" Frank inquired knowingly. "Your Dad told me that. He was quite proud."

Sam shifted awkwardly in his chair under the reiteration of praise. "Thanks."

"Just stating the facts," Frank replied offhandedly, shifting through a stack of papers, pulling out a file, and plopping it down on the desk with a thud. "Now, to the business at hand."

Dean straightened in his seat. Regardless of the man, at least they wouldn't be in Hell Hole, USA searching for a job. "So what's the problem?"

Frank sighed heavily, and deftly flipped through the mound of papers, selecting a few. "I got a spook," he said flatly. "Why else would I call John Winchester's boys?"

"What makes you think it's our kind of problem?" Dean asked, not amused.

"There have been a few sightings by our night security guards, and one of our most senior watchmen up and disappeared a few days ago. They're taking bets in that department that he saw the spook and high-tailed it outta here. Earl wasn't exactly the kind of guy to admit he was freaked out by something. The men think he's probably vacationing in Bermuda about now."

"Maybe it's your dynamic personality. It has that affect on people," Dean quipped. Sam shot him a warning look, but really what could he do? It wasn't his fault he had an open door policy, and if someone was stupid enough to open it, he was inclined to step in.

A smirk flittered across the former hunter's face, and he shoved the folder in Dean's direction. "I doubt it."

Sam had to give the man credit. He was visibly bristled, but not deterred. No wonder the guy had been able to hunt with his father and their friends. "So you think this is a ghost... poltergeist?"

"I'm not sure." Frank rubbed a hand over his face pensively. "I haven't been out of the game that long. I managed an EMF sweep of the security sweep on lower level, and I did get some strange readings."

Dean pursed his lips and scrunched his forehead. "So why do you need us? If you can handle it?"

"It doesn't look good for the company head to be sneaking around laying salt lines down in the security department," Frank answered condescendingly. "And I'm pretty sure it's an inherited problem of sorts. I got the building pretty cheap after an IRS seizure. It's rumored that the place was the cover operation for an organized crime syndicate with ties to the mob, the mafia, even the yakuza. Tons of suspicious activities associated with the place, and more missing persons tied to it than I care to think about. I don't have time do the kind of research it would take to determine the actual source of this problem. And when I don't have time, I hire outside help."

"That's where we come in," Sam chimed in, giving Dean a nervous, 'please remain calm' smile.

"Right," Frank agreed, pulling another blue manila folder from the side drawer and meeting the brothers' gazes firmly. "I need this done quietly and efficiently. I expect it to be completed in such a way that no one other than I knows who you really are. Is that clear?"

The automatic response hit the air before either brother registered saying it. "Yes, sir."

"Good," Frank nodded shortly, handing the second folder over to Sam. "I know how much secrecy and a good cover works to the advantage in such matters, so I took the liberty of arranging those for you. Since the security department is in need of a new hire, I filed the paperwork for a Dean Watson to fill that position."

"So, wait. Dean's gonna serve and protect?" Sam scoffed, laughing openly.

Dean shot a heated glance over to his brother and retaliated. "Can it, geek boy. Chances are, you're mopping floors."

That shut Sam up instantly, and he shot a desperate look at Frank for any chance of escaping a janitor's attire and a stinky mop. The executive came through—in a big way.

"Actually, Sam here is going to take part in the Taliean Advance Program."

Confusion crossed Dean's face as he got the impression that he was supposed to have heard of the program, but Sam, well, the kid's eyes were as big as saucers, and a huge, stupid grin was plastered on his face.

"A corporate internship? Me?" Sam gasped disbelievingly, eyes blinking slowly.

"With the best business lawyers stateside," Frank bragged proudly, clearly reveling in Sam's response.

"Thank you. God, thanks." Sam breathed, chewing on his bottom lip as he mulled over the chance that any of his college buddies would've killed for. He didn't even have his undergrad diploma, and this guy was giving him a dream opportunity.

"Yeah...thanks." Dean muttered. If he didn't hate the guy enough already, roping Sam into the Frank Taliean Fan Club was pushing it.

"You'll start tomorrow," Frank continued, raising a hand to silence Dean's upcoming comment, when the intercom buzzed and an electronically altered version of Laura's voice declared some pharmaceutical company was on the line. "I need to take this. Laura has your required uniform, Dean, and Sam, shirt and tie. Okay?"

Dean stared blankly at Frank for a moment. "Uniform?"

"Got it," Sam nodded, grabbing Dean's arm to yank him out the office as, apparently, the idea of required clothing made the elder immobile. "Don't worry we'll figure this out."

"Oh, and I booked you a room at the Marquis," Frank called out to their retreating forms. "It's on 5th and Townsend."

"Fine," Dean responded shortly, raised his eyebrows and allowed Sam to semi-drag him from the room, all the while thanking the man like he'd just created water, and waited until the door closed before commenting further. "I don't care if we're staying in the friggen' Waldorf. I ain't wearing any uniform."

The heated statement did nothing but send Sam into a new fit of laughter.

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### **The Marquis Hotel, later that evening**

Sam emerged from the extravagant bathroom, the size of which surpassed the proportions of most of their usual motel rooms, sleeping quarters included. He caught himself almost expecting to find a bow-tie wearing gentleman waiting outside the shower (complete with two massaging shower heads and an auto-clean sanitizing system) with a fresh towel and a spritz of some manly cologne. A dude like that would fit nicely between the computerized toilet and the intimidating bidet like just another luxuriant fixture in the house of polished brass.

The younger brother stifled a Cheshire grin as he ran a towel through his still-too-long hair and caught a glimpse of Dean.

"What're *you* lookin' at?" Dean asked, looking up from the room service card, a huge white towel wrapped, turban-style, around his head and the rest of his body swallowed inside a thick, terry robe.

Sam was suddenly thankful they hadn't taken Taliean up on his offer to get them separate rooms. They'd used the excuse that it would be harder to do research that way, but honestly, they just felt safer in the same room. And now, Sam would have this image of his brother burned into his brain and ready to lord over him at will. Life was good.

Sam quirked an eyebrow, pausing his scalp massaging to gesture a hand toward Dean's uncharacteristic attire. "You really need to ask?"

"What?" Dean retorted. "Friggin' Taliean set us up in a hotel where the towels are way too big to smuggle out in a duffel bag, so I'm wringing every penny's worth out of these babies before we check out."

"And the robe?"

Dean snickered, glancing back down at the menu, leaving only his lifted brows to focus on his brother. "Well, the chick from housekeeping came by with the extra towels while I was getting dressed, and she looked kinda freaked out by my scars, so. . ."

"Rrrright," Sam said with an exaggerated nod, clearly not believing the excuse.

"Whatever," Dean shrugged, unimpressed with Sam's dismissal. "Besides, I was fixing to order something messy from room service, and I wouldn't want my nice clean body to get all sticky. Well, I would, but I don't really have a food fetish."

"Haven't tried the right food, then," Sam teased, ignoring his brother's approving eyebrow twitch.

Sam went back to rubbing his wet hair and turned toward the closet, pausing to admire the several new suits he'd purchased, on Taliean's tab of course, from the men's clothing store that was located off the lobby of the hotel. "Can you believe five hundred dollars was the least expensive suit they had in my size?" He asked incredulously.

"Is that all?" Dean asked darkly. "I'm surprised you didn't buy more than three then. Since you're so gung ho about this corporate internship thing, might as well suit up for the long haul while Taliean's footing the bill."

Sam ignored his brother's downward mood spiral. "No point. They'd never survive being crammed in the trunk of the car for however long it takes us to find and kill the Demon."

Dean flipped through the channels on the big screen projection TV that came out of the wall at the press of a button like something out of the Jetsons. He was pretty sure Sam hadn't seen him pushing the button over and over again when they'd first checked in, grinning with amusement until he'd ventured too close and nearly had his foot closed up in the wall. The newness had already worn off as the somber, melancholy of bad memories filtered into the room.

"Never know," Dean suggested quietly, "you might like it so much you'll forget about hunting the demon."

"No way," Sam retorted, both appalled that his brother would suggest such a thing and surprised that Dean had picked up on his enthusiasm for the chance to role play what he'd imagined so many times would become his actual life. "I'm not going to just forget about the demon and what it's done to us, Dean. Nothing can keep me from finishing this."

Dean sighed, unimpressed with Sam's conviction. "Yeah, Frank said the same thing, right up until the day he didn't show up to take care of his commitments to us and to the hunt."

"Bad things happen in our line of work all the time, Dean. It isn't anyone's fault."

"It is when that anyone promised he'd be there, Sam. It is when he promised that his business wasn't going to interfere with the job, and it did." Dean tossed the remote control to the far end of the queen sized bed and snatched the room service menu back up from the end table.

The older brother felt the weight of Sam's stare piercing the top of his head, and he lifted his gaze with an intense glare fixed in his eyes. "You might not care that Frank left and got people killed that you never met, never knew. But I was there, too, Sam." His eyes darted away once more, his throat twitching convulsively around an invisible knot. "It's not just about the ones who died there that day. It's about the ones who *almost* died."

He looked up at Sam, eyes narrowing with intensity. "This is about Dad."

"That's so typical," Sam huffed, sitting on the edge of his own bed hard enough to shake two of the totally girlyie satin-clad throw pillows onto the carpet, "Dad doesn't like the guy, so you don't like the guy. I thought we were getting out of the whole 'Dad's always right' mode, Dean."

"It's not like that, Sam," Dean retorted, his voice calm despite Sam's obvious attempt to draw him into an argument. "Dad never said a word against the dude. He couldn't, because he was the one that convinced everyone that Taliean could be trusted in the first place, and he was the one who almost died because your buddy, Frankie boy, showed up late to the party."

"I don't believe that," Sam scowled. "A guy doesn't get to be a billionaire by shirking his responsibilities."

"That was the issue," Dean clarified, flipping the channels on the television without stopping on any one long enough to actually see what was playing. "He never had a problem keeping his business appointments. It was his obligations to the brotherhood that he let slide."

"How so?"

Dean unwound the towel from around his head and raked his fingers agitatedly through his wet hair, a clear sign that he'd rather be doing anything other than talking about the past. "It started out as just a few little quirky things, a slip-up here and there," he ventured. "The dude would do absent-minded crap like leave his friggin' phone on during a hunt, or show up late because of business meetings. Caleb and Joshua, hell, just about everyone else didn't want Taliean getting involved in hunts anymore. They didn't think they could count on him to have their backs."

"But Dad did?"

"Yeah," Dean shrugged. "Dad and Frank were close; they both trained with Elkins, and they were good at what they did. So, when we got word about some mysterious fires in Texas, Dad thought it might be the thing that killed Mom, and Frank was the first one he called for backup."

"Was it?" Sam asked, scooching closer to the edge of the bed.

"Was it what?" Dean repeated absently.

"Was it the Demon starting the fires?" Sam asked exasperatedly as though he shouldn't have to explain himself.

"Oh. No," Dean answered distractedly. "It wasn't the Demon. A demon, though. Turned out it was a pyre demon that had been disturbed by some oil drillers, and it was burning the houses of the oilfield workers in retaliation. The oil men were tapping the natural gas pockets that the demon was feeding on. . ." Dean paused, realizing that was all irrelevant. "Anyway, it was still a tricky situation."

"Yeah," Sam agreed wholeheartedly. "Anytime there's a demon involved, it's pretty hairy. So what happened?"

"Like you said, it was pretty hairy, so Dad called up some of the brotherhood. Only, no one wanted to come as long as Taliean was involved," Dean rubbed the heel of his hand over his forehead as though the memories erupting from within caused an itch between his eyes. "But they finally caved. They all trusted Dad, and he gave them his word that Frank would come through."

"And he didn't," Sam extrapolated.

"Right," Dean sighed. "The SOB didn't even bother showing up. The demon got into a gas line and blew the oil rig sky high, and when Frank finally showed up, all he could say was that his meeting ran over. His meeting ran over, and a man died, Sam. One of the brotherhood, a good man. And the ones who managed to drag themselves away from the disaster would've ripped Dad a new one. . ."

Dean stopped, his eyes darkening as his gaze dropped to study his bare feet.

"Would've?" Sam asked, confused.

"Yeah," Dean muttered, "they'd have never let Dad live it down, except they figured the fact that he landed in the hospital for almost a month after risking his own ass to save all of them kind of made up for it." He went back to changing channels.

"Wait," Sam said, his face wrinkling in disbelief, "Dad got hurt?"

"To put it mildly," Dean sighed, not bothering to elaborate.

"But I. . ."

"Never knew," Dean completed. "We didn't tell you. You were just coming up on finals or something, and Dad didn't want you distracted."

Dean stood decisively and made his way over to the mini bar. Before Sam could even digest the story, his brother had opened and emptied two of the tiny bottles and slammed the cabinet shut again.

"Dean. . ."

The elder dropped his robe, leaving him only in his boxers, and flung the girlie throw pillows into the corner of the room before yanking back the covers and climbing into bed. "Drop it, Sam," he grumbled. "You wanted to come here, so we're here. You can play white collar superhero if you want, and I'm not gonna stop you. Just promise me something."

Sam shook his head, realizing that he would be in for a long argument if he spoke up in Taliean's defense. "What?" He asked, trying to sound genuinely inquisitive rather than coerced.

"You decide you like it here, and you wanna follow in old Frankie's footsteps. . .do me the favor of just bowing out. Don't jerk me around." He turned to face the opposite wall away from his brother's droopy eyes.

"Dean, I would never. . ." Sam realized it was pointless to drag this out. Dean had a relevant point, and though Sam would never abandon his brother with things still up in the air the way they were, he knew it would be best just to acknowledge his brother's concerns. "Sure," he sighed and picked up the room service card that Dean had been studying earlier. "Aren't you going to eat before you go to sleep?"

"Not hungry anymore," Dean dismissed, and as if to emphasize his point, he flopped over onto his stomach, shoved his hand under his pillow, and went to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

"Will you quit pulling on that?" Sam whispered tersely, jerking an elbow into Dean's arm, the same arm that held the hand and fingers clawing and jerking at the tight knot secured at the top of Dean's black uniform tie.

"I would if I could breathe!" Dean shot back heatedly, dropping his arm in exasperation and tugging on the cuffs of his sleeves as if they were cutting off his circulation.

Sam rolled his eyes at his brother's constant fidgeting, thankful that at least Dean was wearing the required uniform. From the instant his big brother had unzipped the garment bag earlier that morning and caught sight of the long sleeved, collared silver shirt with pockets and large Security patch on the right sleeve that came complete with black uniform pants with a thick silver stripe down each leg, it'd been nothing short of a battle.

Sam had more or less been prepared for the adamant refusal; prepared meaning that, having snuck a peek at the outfit the night before, he'd rushed down to the gift shop and purchased the first camera in sight. Dean in uniform. This was the stuff of legend.

"Ugh, this is ridiculous!" Dean huffed, jerking on the wrinkleless material clinging to his skin. Sam couldn't deny those pants were pretty tight, and had to laugh because Dean usually was fine with that kind of thing. Granted, girls were usually wearing them.

Sam secretly hoped there might be a gay receptionist at the desk, preferably one named Josh, just to bring a blush of embarrassment to his brother's cheeks.

"And you were wondering why they didn't let you in the internship program," Sam teased and flashed a big smile in opposition to Dean's murderous glare.

"Well, at least I don't look like I'm going to my junior high dance," Dean snickered waving a hand towards Sam's neatly pressed suit.

Sam fiddled nervously with his navy blue tie, straightening it unnecessarily. "Better than Andy Griffith."

Dean scowled then countered. "Yeah, well, I don't have to carry a briefcase to feel important. Whatcha got in there anyways? Dirty mags?"

Sam wrinkled his nose in disgust and got damn near defensive. "No, law documents I printed out last night," he retorted, "and FYI, this happens to be genuine Italian leather."

"Yeah, I bet," Dean replied with a knowing smirk and pretended to shine his gold-plated badge. "Girlie leather comes from Italy. The good stuff comes from Texas."

"Wait...You have a problem with my carrying a briefcase, but you're fine wearing *that*? I mean, just what's wrong with my briefcase?" Sam questioned rapidly, self-consciously looking over the deep brown leather case Taliean had provided for him.

"You mean minus the geek alert, right?" The younger's face grew red with embarrassment at Dean's ribbing, and he squirmed under the remark. He was nervous enough as it was. He didn't need his brother adding to the amount of apprehension he already possessed at the notion of being scrutinized under some of the top lawyers in the country. First impressions mattered, and geek wasn't one he wanted to leave.

Sam mustered the best and most adult response he could in retaliation. "Shut up."

"You, Dean?" A gruff voice from behind startled the two brothers and they turned around to face the tall, white-haired man smacking a piece of what looked to be chew. Each noted out of habit that his company ID declared him to be Mike.

"Actually, no...I'm Taliean's hired boy toy--Ricardo. He likes role play," Dean snarked, ignoring the stunned gape on his brother's face and relishing in Mike's throaty laugh. He knew he'd like this guy.

"Ha! You gonna be ten times better than ole' Earl." Mike slapped Dean's shoulder, rolling his chew between his teeth, and gave another sharp laugh. "I'm Mike, but I bet you've noticed. Call me Mikey, everyone else does. Welcome to the team, son. Well, more like the slave ship, but hey, you get a gun."

Dean's eyes flickered with excitement and he turned to give Sam a boasting glance. His job was going to be infinitely cooler. Well, minus the uniform. "Hear that, Sammy, he's gonna give me a gun."

Sam darted his gaze around and prayed to everything holy that the man Taliean sent to get him hadn't heard the childish nickname and wished that Mikey would just take Dean away, the sooner the better. "It's Sam!" He grumbled, just as a suit-clad arm projected itself in front of him.

"Good then you're just who I'm looking for, I think," the arm's owner declared, shaking Sam's hand prematurely. "Sorry, you must be Samuel Connors, if I heard right, and I'm George Jacobson, your supervisor in the Taliean Advance Program. Nice to have you aboard."

"Glad to be here, sir," Sam breathed excitedly, "honored, actually."

"I'm sure you'll be fine," George said, turning to Dean. "And you must be Dean Watson, the new night security guard." He held out his hand to Dean, who shook it and decided it was a decidedly limp handshake at best. "You'll do best to stay out the way of our up-and-coming young executives, Mr. Watson. Mike here will show you around," he dismissed.

Turning back to Sam, Jacobson added, "I'm sorry that you had to wait down here with the riff-raff. You can come right up the executive elevator from now on, Sam." The younger Winchester didn't know whether to clap the guy on the back and thank him or punch him in the mouth for referring to his brother as riff-raff. He looked over his shoulder at Dean as he was led away toward the elevators, and the puzzled cock of his brother's eyebrows had Sam walking a tad faster before the inevitable Dean Winchester comeback line could escape.

"Whatever," Dean drawled, turning his attention back to Mikey as Sam headed across the lobby. "So what am I doing today?"

"Well, I'm s'posed to give you a tour. But if you ask me that's kind of a stupid thing to do 'cause I'm pretty sure you wouldn't pay attention. No one ever does," Mikey reasoned aloud. "I'll show you the ropes though. Head Man wants you on shift tonight."

"Works for me," Dean shrugged and took to scratching the itch rising under his forearm. *Damn starch.*

"You gonna fit right in, boy." Mikey declared loudly and jerked his head to the side. "Let's go then, eh?"

"Okay, sure." Dean complied, gesturing for the older man to lead the way.

\* \* \* \*

For the years apparent in both Mikey's build and face, the man's gait was that of a freaky speed walker. Dean had to hasten his step and apologize frequently as he tried to barrel through the crowd with the same pace as his new coworker only to collide with most of them.

The wizened employee led him through the lobby and past the corporate elevators to a long back hallway aligned with plaques and pictures declaring the company's fame. Dean studied them the best he could along his half-sprint/half-walk but found it hard to do so because, at the moment, he was wondering if Sammy had retaliated for the itching powder incident and laced his uniform. Whatever the coarse material held, it was worse than sandpaper to his skin, and itched like a hoard of mosquito bites.

"You got a problem, boy?" Mikey's booming voice startled Dean, who quickly adjusted his posture so he wasn't bent over and raking his fingers over his knee.

"Uh...no," the older Winchester replied quickly but hardly convincingly.

Mikey's lips curved into an understanding and somewhat smug smile. "Damn thing itches like hell, don't it?"

"Kind of tight, too," Dean confessed, to which Mikey chuckled. Maybe this all wouldn't be too bad, as long as the other employees were like this guy.

"Yeah, I know. But the ladies love a man in uniform."

Dean raised his eyebrows at the insinuation. "They love me anyway."

"Alright, boy, no need to get cocky," Mikey chided jokingly, coming to a stop in front of a small black box that held a gray-topped, thin shelf underneath. "This is how

you clock in everyday. You see here--," he pointed to the black box, and Dean noticed the numbered keypad, "is where you type your ID number, and then you put your hand on the scanner."

"That gray thing?"

"Yeah," Mikey replied absently, punching in what Dean assumed to be a code on the keypad and then looking at Dean. "What number you want? Got to be 5 digits. Could do like a birthday or something."

"No!" Dean refuted loudly, trying his best to smile innocently when Mikey gave him a skeptical glance. "Just uh...no birthdays, too easy." *And way too tempting to certain lottery-loving demons.*

"Oh, you one of *those* types?" The man mumbled. "Well you got to pick something."

"Right...um, okay so eleven, two, eighty-three."

"1, 1, 2, 8, 3?" Mikey repeated as he punched the numbers in and was rewarded with a series of beeps. "Sounds like a birthday to me."

"Trust me. It's not." Dean shifted his stance, and his eyes studied the linoleum floor.

Mikey sensed the discomfort, and immediately gave an order. "You're in. Put your hand here."

Dean complied and watched in semi-fascination as the gray top turned a light blue then faded back to gray. "That it?"

"Yep," Mikey nodded. "So all you got to do when you get here is type in the number, then place your hand on that, and it'll clock you in. Just make sure you do it when you leave, too."

"Got it."

"Good. So that's all I got for you. Somebody'll be waiting for you when you get back at three. Okay?"

Dean shook his head yes. "What time is it now?"

"Almost 11:00." Mikey answered, gazing down at his watch. "You think you can find your way out?"

Dean nodded the affirmative and turned to head back into the massive lobby and the sea of people when Mikey stopped him. "Hey! You like poker?"

"Hell, yeah!" Dean exclaimed. God, he was going to like this job.

"We play tonight and need a fourth. I'll see if I can get you in seeing as you're on shift."

"That'd be great, Mikey. Thanks for everything." Dean shook the man's hand, and mulled over what the night held and what'd he do with the next four hours. He wanted out of the scratchy uniform but then he'd have to put the damn thing right back on. He could find Sam. See what the big intern was doing, maybe give him some grief....yeah, he could do that.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Sam and George stepped into the corporate elevator and turned around to face the crowded lobby, Dean had already disappeared in the throng of people. Sam felt about ten feet tall when the doors silently slid shut behind him. *Real*

*Italian leather.* He fumed silently, still a bit perturbed by Dean's brotherly teasing. *Geek boy, my ass, Andy Griffith. And God, if anyone heard you call me Sammy . . .*

Truth be told, unless they were in a public place or in the middle of an argument, the name Sammy had a sort of endearing quality to it that Sam didn't mind, coming from Dean. It was the same brand of Winchester speak that made 'bitch' a perfectly acceptable substitute for 'love ya man'. But Roget, Webster, and the general public were not privy to the secret Winchester decoder ring that they'd fashioned over years of trading quips and insults, so those things were best left unspoken when other people could hear them. He was so gonna remind his brother of that fact the first chance he got, too.

As the glass elevator slid up to what Sam had only casually noticed was the second floor from the top, he subconsciously took half a step back from the wall, as though he might fall through the glass and plummet several stories to his death. George noticed the motion.

"Scared of heights?" The man asked with a hitch of a smirk.

"No, just not used to this perspective," Sam replied, coughing nervously into his fist. "I feel like one of those canisters going through the vacuum tube to the drive-through teller at the bank."

"Really, I thought a golden boy like yourself would be used to being on top of the world," Jacobson countered, staring blankly at the digital readout that ticked off the ascending floor numbers with his hands clasped neatly behind his back. "Well," he coughed into his own hand, mimicking Sam's gesture, "unless you got here by more questionable means."

"I'm sorry?" Sam asked, turning his head with a confused scrunch to his brow.

"Yeah, me too," George answered, not bothering to meet Sam's gaze. "I had a perfectly good executive assistant this time yesterday morning, and yesterday afternoon they told me he had to go, cuz they needed the office space for a new inductee into the program. Never mind the fact that the positions were all filled months ago," he said bitterly.

The elevator lurched to a stop, and the doors opened. Sam felt about six inches tall when he stepped out, and it had nothing to do with the altitude. This was so not the welcome he'd expected.

George took a few minutes to show Sam his office. It was small, but all the interns had similar accommodations. The young Winchester was just about to lay his briefcase on the desk when his mentor motioned for him to hold up.

"Nice briefcase, Sam," he offered. "Italian leather, I take it?"

Sam nodded, uncertain how to take anything the man said after the little jab he'd made in the elevator.

"Good, you're gonna need it. I got an errand I need you to run for me." He grabbed a post-it off the desk and wrote down a number. "Bring the briefcase, and run down here to pick up some items I have reserved. They'll know what you're there for if you tell them my name."

"Yes, sir," Sam nodded obligingly and glanced at the paper. His face fell. The lobby. *Dude we were just in the lobby, you couldn't pick it up then?* And so started the day of yet another unsuspecting corporate intern.

Ten minutes later, Sam exited the elevator for the third time in thirty minutes, glad that he wasn't paying for the mileage on that baby. He walked slowly, carefully balancing the ten large coffee cups he'd been presented with in the lobby Starbucks to which he'd been sent. His face scowled in determination as he made his way tentatively down the hallway, willing not a single drop to leak from the sippy cup tops onto the revered Italian leather.

As he approached the end of the hallway, he carefully planned his movements, angling out a bit so as not to take the corner too sharply, and hunched protectively over the cups as he rounded the bend.

WHAM!

The sound was nothing short of a bad sound effect from an old *Batman* rerun, and as he tumbled forward, managing to clasp a few of the cups to his once-white shirt, he couldn't help but think sardonically, *Holy smokes, Batman, I never saw that coming.* And there were no paper towels or bottles of Resolve carpet cleaner in his utility belt the last time he checked.

Sam slouched back against the wall, as one of his fellow office mates, probably had a name like Chip or Buzz or something, Sam couldn't remember, sidestepped around the mess he'd helped create by running around the corner at full tilt. "Uh, nice one, newbie," the jerk grinned, then grimaced at his shoe, which was covered in what looked to be a double mocha, half-caff, latte. "These are three hundred dollar shoes. You better hope they're not ruined," he said, stomping off.

Sam was just rising, balancing the four cups of coffee he'd managed to save against his chest, when old George himself rounded the corner. Spying one of the untipped beverages, George helped himself. "Thanks, Sammy," he grinned. "Nice save."

*Oh God, can this day get any worse?*

By the time eleven o'clock rolled around, Sam was more than glad to make his way out to the car in the parking garage where he could eat his lunch and meet his brother to discuss their progress, or in Sam's case, lack thereof. They couldn't really meet inside the building as no one was supposed to know their affiliation with each other, bar the receptionist who thought they were business partners. He reminded himself to ask Taliean what business the man had told her they were actually in.

All in all, Sam was ready to take back every thought he'd had about the name Sammy being endearing, or the idea that 'bitch' could ever mean anything other than lowlife corporate peon. His expensive suit jacket was wrinkled and flung over his arm, bare forearms exposed due to his shirt sleeves being rolled up to his elbows, and his fingers were all black, because apparently, the new guy was responsible for changing the toner cartridges in the copying machine. And, by the way, it was also some sort of sick tradition to initiate the newbies by directing them to the drawer full of leaky cartridges that they kept on hand for just such occasions. *The bastards.*

*And if one more person calls me Sammy.*

Sam sat on the front seat of the Impala, his legs outside the door, briefcase on his lap, with a scowl pursing his lips. He opened the expensive case for the first time that day, planning to catch up on reading some of the law papers he had inside while he waited for Dean to show up so they could get lunch.

*Sammy.*

The brown paper sack with his name written in what looked to be black sharpie stood out like a sore thumb. He recognized Dean's handwriting instantly, and wondered if his brother had actually planted dirty magazines in there as he'd suggested earlier. But he knew better. The anger that had welled up within him at the mention of his hated nickname and the humiliation of having it spelled out in bold black inside his big boy briefcase vanished instantly.

Without looking, he knew what he'd find inside the paper sack, and he wondered how Dean had found time to sneak down to the hotel lobby in order to prepare it. He opened the bag and dumped the contents out on the top of the briefcase lid. A peanut butter and banana sandwich. One twinkie. And a bottle of apple juice. It was the Dean Winchester sack lunch special, the same one his brother had made for him on his first day of kindergarten and every school day thereafter. Always peanut butter and banana, and always only the one twinkie, because those little delicacies were expensive.

He bit into the sandwich and looked up to see Dean approaching, a self-satisfied swagger to his step. He could tell by the expression on Dean's face that he'd seen Sam eating the lunch he'd packed.

"Hey, kid, you need any milk money?" Dean asked, smirking broadly.

"Bitch," Sam said.

And he didn't even care that crumbs sprayed out of his mouth as he said it. *The hell with the Italian leather.*

\* \* \* \*

The rest of the day passed as a blur to Dean. Security work turned out to be a lot of responsibility, to say the least. For the most part everyone was laid back, but he quickly learned the importance of a mask of seriousness and respect when approaching anyone in the upstairs offices. Polite nods to the scrutinizing glances. Yes sirs to the insane and stupid requests that really could be handled without aid.

Demeaning was a term he would've used if he'd thought he could get away with it and really he was beginning to feel the part, but then he'd met Rebecca, the charming blonde haired bombshell who chatted his ear off about how gray was one of her *favorite* colors and that reception work was a lot harder than people realized. Dean immediately sympathized in his signature flirting ways, and his mischievous grin at her invite to dinner, which he poutingly declined, was all he needed to get out of his funk and back in the game.

By the time he finished his rounds and responded to the slew of day's requests posted on the work board, night had fallen and it was time for lockdown. It was then the list of security guards he'd seen listed as on duty finally emerged from the woodwork and the whole process was done in a speed that was truly impressive.

Before he could comment on it, Mikey had appeared behind him, clapping him on the shoulder, and ushering him back to the break room with a knowing smirk. There was no mistaking the deep green felt and clatter of red, blue, and white accompanied by the flick of cards in the dealer's hands. The game was on.

"Oh, hell no!" Mikey exclaimed, slamming down his pair of tens in annoyance but laughing at the smile gracing their newest member's face.

"You should've called," Dean chided lightly, his white teeth clearly exposed as he placed down an even lower pair of sixes and gathered his winnings. Bluffing was his game, and these guys were suckers for it.

"You bitchin'? I had a friggen' pair of kings on the river and still folded." The man the guards dubbed Ricky shouted out over the jibes and jokes being made at the loser's expense.

No one had expected the new guy to be this apt to the game, and the damn kid had 'em all believing he had a full house by the way he was bidding. Not only that, but the sandy-haired boy had won the crowd by the end of the first round, making it all the more difficult for the seasoned workers to beat him amidst the constant chatter and praise of their newest player.

"You need to get a spine, Ricky. Take the boy on instead of foldin'," a deep voice from behind Dean chuckled and he turned to see what had to be the hugest man this side of the globe hovering over him.

Dean smiled nervously as the man shoved Ricky out from the side chair, and the Winchester swore he heard the chair groan as the man known as Big Tom sunk heavily down in it. "You in?"

"Prepare to lose your shirt, boy." The statement issued a round of laughter as well as a 'I'd pay to see that' from one random coworker in the back.

"Well, we're all praying you don't," Dean teased. He was rewarded with a jovial response from all in the room for the snide comment, which turned hysterical when Mikey reached over and patted Big Tom's pot belly.

Round after round was played, the games taking on a tournament style. Dean was up four hundred dollars before he even thought to glance at the clock clouded with dense cigarette smoke and remember that he was supposed to let Sam in at one to do a sweep of the building. *Crap!*

"Uh...bathroom?" Dean questioned, nudging the guy next to him in the winner's circle as they awaited the next game.

"Down the hall. 's on the left," the man obliged, his eyebrows furrowed in slight confusion as to why the man didn't know that but then smoothed out again when a loud yelp was heard from the table.

Dean mumbled a 'thanks' and pushed his way through the crowd of workers to the exit. Then, once clear of the large glass windows encasing the break room, Dean hustled his pace. It was after 1:30. Sam was going to kill him.

Even with that knowledge in mind, Dean took his damn time fiddling with the keys and then unlocking the door, opening it with head bowed and arm gesturing entrance. If he was going to piss off his brother, he might as well go all out.

Just as he thought, Sam looked less than pleased. "What the hell took you so long?"

"Ah, c'mon, Sammy. You know I was working," Dean taunted, locking the door as Sam entered.

"Right, so what? You thought I'd like staring at the mass of 'Vettes out there while you just joked around playing cards?" Sam pressed, his nostrils flared in irritation. This hadn't been his best day and he wanted sleep. Now.

"What year?" Dean asked curiously to which Sam rolled his eyes in exasperation. "What?"

"We got a job to do, remember?" Sam flicked his fingers against the side of Dean's head, and then dropped the bag of supplies on the linoleum floor. "Don't you need to get back?"

Dean didn't move, rather watched as Sam unzipped the bag. "Did you remember the infrared thermal scanner?"

"Yes, Dean." Sam gritted his teeth in annoyance.

"Do you know how to use it?" Dean inquired seriously, his posture indicating he wanted a true response. Damn man and his gadgets—almost as bad as the Impala.

Sam snatched the device from the bag, balancing it precariously on his knee, and zipped the duffle back up just to get Dean riled. "I think I'll manage."

Dean gave a resigned look. "Okay, well, the guards won't do a round for another hour and a half, but there are two stationed at the elevators and three at the main desk."

"Got it."

"Alright, you sure you got everything?" Dean asked, he took Sam's hard glance as a yes. "I get off at three. I'll meet you then."

"Whatever," Sam huffed, hoisting the duffle onto his shoulders yet again, and turning on his heel to head in the opposite direction.

Dean waited until his brother had cleared the corner and then started off towards the break room with necessary haste. Too long of a bathroom break always warranted suspicion. They so didn't need that.

\* \* \* \*

*Do I know how to use it? Excuse me, one of us went to Stanford, big brother. I think I can manage to find the ON switch.*

Sam's face was contorted with disdain as he whipped out the digital infrared thermal scanner Dean had suggested he go over the place with. He'd had about enough of being talked down to for one day, and just being his brother didn't buy Dean a pick on Sammy free card.

His scowl tightened noticeably as he realized that he really did have no idea how to work the damned thing. His long fingers moved frantically over the device searching for anything that would pass for a power button. It was then that he realized that, like the EMF detector Dean was so proud of, this gadget appeared to be homemade as well.

Sam huffed forcibly. No way in hell was he gonna call Dean and tell him to come back and show him how to work the thing. Worse came to worst, he'd just tell his brother that it hadn't picked up on anything. *What the heck did he make this out of?* Closer inspection revealed the contraption to be a mishmash of what looked to be parts of a handheld digital video camera and some laser pointers fitted with servomotors.

Sam cocked his head to the side a little, eyebrows raised, and chewed on the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. *Not bad.* He'd really have to give his brother a little more credit for his handiwork.

Just not today. Not after the Sammy incident. Damn him.

A little more blind fumbling yielded some results at last, and the gizmo whirred to life, emitting that high-pitched electronic squeal that supposedly only dogs were supposed to hear, yet somehow, Sam always managed to hear just fine when Dean had the television muted in the middle of the night.

He took a few minutes to study the screen, getting some idea of the base readings and patterns before he started moving quietly down the hallway. Unconsciously, he bent slightly at the knees and slunk along like a hunting cat, his shoes moving silently over the vinyl flooring.

Half an hour of slinking without uncovering a trace of anything unusual had Sam's legs burning from the controlled exertion. He would never question the effectiveness of tai chi as a form of physical exercise ever again. He had a feeling the scanner's battery was running low and was about to switch it off and do an EMF sweep, when a bluish-white smudge appeared in the upper right-hand corner of the screen.

Sam looked up, and saw that there was a door on his right that was just coming into the viewing area on the screen. On closer inspection, he realized it was a supply closet. He remembered reading something about the security guard disappearing after going to check out a supply closet, and a tingle of anticipation prickled down his spine.

He glanced back down to the screen and saw that the cool tones were definitely coming from under the closed door. As he moved closer, he thought he detected an icy breeze across the tops of his sneakers, but wondered if it was just the power of suggestion. Hesitantly, he put his hand up to the door, his fingers brushing across it inquisitively. As he did so, the scanner blinked unexpectedly and went blank. *Damn, lost the battery.*

He shook it a few times and tapped on the screen, but it failed to restart, and he dropped it to his side. Long fingers extended, he grasped the door knob, noting that it was abnormally cool to the touch. He glanced around for an air conditioning vent that might be inadvertently blowing on it but didn't see anything to explain the icy chill.

Heaving the duffel bag to the floor, he placed the scanner inside and stood, unburdened, before the door. He reached into the waistband of his jeans, grasped the comfortingly solid steel of his Glock, and drew it as his free hand turned the knob ever-so-slowly.

Hunter's senses tingling, he let the door fall open and entered, gun drawn, as a blast of cold wind sucked the air from his lungs. His eyes widened as his mouth opened in the shape of a mute shout.

Before him, the spirit awaited, dead, black shadows, spilling from empty eye sockets, and as the apparition moved slowly and confidently toward him, Sam cursed himself for not knowing better than to open the door.

Sam's finger quivered on the trigger of his salt-loaded Glock, and his jaw trembled with the force of the silent cry for help that froze inside his throat. His vocal chords, shocked by the cold of the room, refused to vibrate. His lips pulled back in an open-mouthed grimace of frustration as the entity approached.

Spying the weapon, his perceived assailant halted its forward progress and raised its ethereal arms in apparent surrender. The shelves, stocked to the ceiling with reams of paper and office supplies, vibrated with the tension of the standoff, the clash of living and dead transcending the empty space between them as though the two were physically locked in battle.

Sam's finger steadied on the trigger as the spirit halted and then retreated to the back of the room. As it stepped into the stream of light that poured in from the hallway, the young hunter couldn't help but notice the familiar uniform it wore. He'd spent enough time that morning prying his brother's fingers away from that offending gray and black fabric to know it inside and out. The glittering gold of the badge and the arm patch were not necessary for Sam to deduce that the man before him was not some remnant of the building's previous occupants and their questionable dealings. This man was one of Taliean's own.

The lights in the hall began to flicker and blink out as the spirit's turmoil forced its way through the physical barriers of concrete and rebar. Sam twisted his head back and forth a few times, working his jaw as he tried to decide how to proceed. Before he could come to a decision the fluorescent lights in the hall behind him began to explode, one at a time, showering the floor with shards of translucent white glass. Sam flung his hands over his head and ducked down behind the door to protect himself.

There was a sudden change in the air pressure around him as paper and thumb tacks flew out the door and into the hall, swirling together with the broken bits of glass and blowing through the building, leaving silence in its wake.

Lowering his arms tentatively, Sam noticed that the spirit was gone and heaved himself up from his crouched position behind the door. He gazed around the tiny closet room in shock for a few long seconds, certain that the entity had been there for a reason.

Shouts from distant corners of the building spurred him into motion. He quickly flicked the safety back into place on his Glock, slid it into his waistband, and peered out into the hallway. He heard footsteps approaching but decided to take his chances on making it out to the parking garage. The last thing he needed was to have his cover blown by a simple recon assignment.

He stooped quickly to snatch up the duffel bag that he'd dropped outside the door, and lunged out into the hall, slipping momentarily on the powdery glass dust before gaining purchase on the waxed floor and sprinting for the exit. He hit the steel fire door that led to the parking garage with enough force to wind himself, as his sweat-slicked hand slipped off the handle. He fumbled with it for a second more, his heart pounding in his throat, and flung it open.

When the massive door opened, it opened hard and twanged off the concrete wall behind it. As the crash echoed through the cavernous structure, he dove past the expensive cars that apparently belonged to the rest of the security guards, and crouched down behind the Impala, breathing hard. He could only hope that his brother, who apparently couldn't be dragged away from his poker game in order to let him in earlier, had at the very least, remembered to cut the feed to the security cameras on that level as he'd promised. One of the menacing contraptions was trained right on him at the moment, and Sam was too wrung out to care. If he'd been seen there was no point in running. They'd recognize him for sure.

He didn't want to risk opening the squeaky old car door to climb inside. Instead, he waited behind the classic car's massive steel frame as his heart pounded in his head, forcing himself to breathe quietly enough to make out the sounds around him. He felt like a child caught in a game of hide-and-seek, whose breathing always seemed loud enough to wake the dead at the exact moment that he needed to be silent.

Just as Sam was starting to think he was clear, a beat in perfect counter rhythm to the pounding in his ears reverberated through the garage. The footsteps had a plastic, clicky tone that Sam recognized as cheap patent leather security guard dress shoes, and they grew steadily louder, heading right for him. He reached for his gun. . .

"Sammy?" Dean appeared from around the back of the car and immediately knelt beside his brother. "Dude, you were supposed to do a thermal scan, no open the gates of hell," he huffed, obviously both worried and relieved. "What happened back there? It looks like the friggin' Tasmanian Devil was making rounds."

Sam slumped against the car in relief. "Dean, man, we got it all wrong. There's a spirit all right, but it's not some Jimmy Hoffa stand-in like Frankie made it out to be. I got a good look at our guy, and let's just say, the two of you have the same taste in fashion."

"What?" Dean asked. "Another security guard? The missing guy? Earl?"

"No," Sam said with a shake of his head. "This guy looked younger, but he was definitely a security guard. I hate to say it, but I think Frank's keeping secrets from us."

"And you hate to say this why exactly?"

Sam shook his head and reached for the door handle, confident that the rest of the guards were distracted elsewhere. Using Dean as cover, he opened the car door and slid inside to wait until the coast was clear. "'Cause God, I hate it when you're right."

\* \* \* \*

### **Marquis Hotel 6:00a.m.**

Sam looked up from the screen of the laptop that he had resting on his outstretched legs as he sat against the headboard of the queen-sized bed. The door of the room opened, and Dean stepped in tiredly, tossing his keys and badge onto the nightstand.

Sam could relate to the exhausted haze in Dean's eyes. Their first day on Taliean's payroll had run through the night, and neither had yet slept.

The original plan had been for Sam to meet Dean back in the garage after his sweep, but the spirit's destructive temper tantrum had led to Dean staying late. Sam had taken a cab back to the hotel without him.

"You find anything?" Dean asked, rubbing his hand over the top of his head.

Sam grinned weakly, not having slept a wink himself, and spun the laptop around so that it faced Dean. "Only the name of our spook," he said, pleased.

Dean squinted past the haze in his eyes. "Richard?" He smirked, quirking an eyelid.

"What?" Sam asked, noticing the cocky expression.

"Nothing," Dean dismissed. "Just, after spending the last few hours cleaning up after his cranky ass, I can think of a whole lot of more nasty things to call him than Dick."

Sam's brow raised in that way that said he could top that comment. "You sure about that?" He asked, hiding his own crooked smile with the back of his hand as he bit his thumbnail expectantly.

"What?"

"Dude's last name was Shaft," Sam explained, eyes twinkling with impish glee. He knew that, even dog-tired, Dean could never pass up a door that was that wide open.

Dean met his brother's gaze with an expression of, 'no way in hell', to which Sam responded with innocently raised eyebrows and a one-sided shrug.

"So, I take it back," Dean said. "Guy's parents musta hated him way more than I do right now."

The elder sat on the end of his bed, his shoulders slouched, and leaned forward to untie his shoes. "What else do we know about pursqueter boy, besides the fact that his parents listened to 'A Boy Named Sue' one too many times?"

Sam sighed tiredly, changing mental gears as Dean changed out of his uniform. At least he didn't have a headache, which was no small blessing, considering the thrashing he'd taken from Bianakith a few weeks prior. He pressed his thumbs over his eyes and blinked spastically a few times as he focused back on the screen.

"Dean, a little respect for the dead here, dude."

"I'll respect 'em just fine when they finally stay dead for a change," Dean huffed dismissively.

Sam shook his head and went back to his research. "Well, he worked for Taliean all right," he finally answered. "He was Head of Security, hired on as soon as Frank bought the building. Seemed like an outstanding employee; perfect attendance, no write-ups. . . Just up and disappeared a year ago. No body, no suspects."

"So, basically, you've got nothing."

"Not nothing. I guess we can safely say the guy is dead. Or that was one hell of an astral projection back there. Possibly, our man Earl is deceased as well, because other than the new guy who was with Earl when he disappeared, the same security staff was in the building at the time of both disappearances."

Dean looked at his brother, head tilted sideways, probably more from lack of sleep than curiosity. "What? You think one of the security guards killed our spirit boy, and now he's taking out men in uniform?"

Sam raised his eyebrows. "Makes sense, I mean, he didn't come after me. I guess he could've been put off by the gun, but he really didn't give me the impression that he wanted to hurt me. He reminded me of that ghost in the asylum who tried to warn us about Ellicott."

Dean looked up, tossing his socks into a hamper for the hotel laundry service. "Well, you might be right about him trying to tell you something," he said, a leading tone in his voice.

Sam put the laptop aside and leaned forward. "Why? Did you find something?"

Dean twisted his head to the side and closed one eye slightly in consideration. "Maybe. Maybe not. But I went into the supply closet where you saw the ghost, and the shelving was all tipped over. The wall behind it wasn't painted, just bare cinder blocks. I asked one of the guys about it, and he said there was some major reconstruction done to that part of the building, including the wall bordering the parking garage, and the elevator in the garage about. . ."

". . . a year ago," Sam finished for him. "So you think the body's in the wall?"

"Maybe," Dean shrugged noncommittally.

Sam noticed his brother seemed lost in thought. "What?" He asked. "We found our ghost, now we can get rid of it, collect our money, and leave, right?" He prodded.

Dean shrugged and shook his head slightly. "I'm not saying the ghost ain't in the wall. I'm just not buying that one of the security guards is a murderer. They just don't seem the type to me."

"What? There's a type now?"

Dean's expression changed quickly as he looked down, shuttered his eyes with his dark lashes, and cleared his throat nervously. "No, I guess not." He quietly worked at unbuttoning his shirt for a few seconds and added, "But before we go ripping through the wall, why don't we see if we can't find out what really happened to Richard Shaft? Who knows, maybe if we catch the killer, the spook might leave on its own."

Sam looked at his brother incredulously, barely masking his surprise with concerned consternation. "Man, you've been watching too much 'Ghost Whisperer'. We both know the only way to be sure with a ghost is to salt and burn the remains."

Dean tossed his shirt in the hamper, atop his sweaty socks, and rifled through his duffel bag agitatedly. "Any thoughts as to how we're going to do that, college boy? Closet may be small and dark, but it's not exactly a deserted graveyard."

Sam glanced at his watch and realized he needed to get dressed and go back to work. He stood abruptly, grabbing his own duffel bag. "That's never bothered you before, Dean, and it's not like we don't have permission from the building's owner."

"And how do we know Taliean isn't the murderer himself?" Dean argued. He undid his belt and started to unbutton his pants but stopped and sat back on the bed heavily. "I just think we need to find the killer, Sam. If someone kills another person, he shouldn't be walking around like nothing happened. He needs to pay for what he did," he finished, looking at his bare feet as though they held the meaning of life.

"Dean, it's not our job to catch murderers."

"And it's not our job to look the other way either."

Sam studied his brother intently. By now, he was fairly certain that Dean wasn't talking about Shaft anymore. Of course, if Sam asked what was really on Dean's mind, he figured he'd get some answer about more exciting uses for dark supply closets.

"All right," Sam granted. "I'll see if I can't find out something between getting coffee and changing the toner in the copier. You should try to catch a few winks," he hinted.

"No," Dean snorted, standing and undoing his pants. "That thing almost got the drop on you last night, Sammy, and there's a murderer walking around. Leave me the laptop, and I'll do some research after I grab a shower," he said with finality. "I want this over with as soon as possible."

Shaking his head, Sam unzipped his garment bag and proceeded to dress as Dean strolled into the bathroom and shut the door.

### **Taliean, Inc. 1:00 p.m.**

Sam pinned the phone between his ear and his shoulder, glancing around nervously as his fingers worked feverishly over the keyboard. He wasn't nervous so much because he was supposed to be on a coffee run instead of hacking into private company files, just because he knew even the man who'd hired them would probably object to what he was doing.

"You're sure?" He asked, scanning the files as quickly as he possibly could for relevant information.

"Dean you still there?"

"Yeah, you in?"

Back in the hotel room, Dean leaned forward over the laptop intently as he clasped his own phone to his ear. *"You need to find anything you can about OSHA violations charges that have been brought up against the company."*

*"OSHA?"*

*"Yeah, Frank's got factories all over the country, and if half of the news articles I've dug up are accurate, more than his fair share of employee accident claims and deaths. There was even a fire in one of his plants last year that killed ten workers. Everyone who survived claimed that the sprinkler system never kicked in to give them time to get out of the building. Yet, all I can find is case dismissals. OSHA could never make anything stick."*

*"And you think Frank's got his lawyers covering something up?"*

*"Well, that, . . .but there's also this. . . After the fire in Toccoa, there was a story that OSHA had a surprise witness that claimed he could prove that Taliean knew the sprinklers were faulty. And get this. . .the newspaper article is dated two days before Shaft's disappearance. And three days after he went missing, the OSHA charges were dropped."*

"So, you think Shaft knew something, some inside information maybe, and someone on Taliean's staff killed him to shut him up?"

*"Most likely. I'm guessing, if we can find out what he knew, we can find the killer."*

Sam leaned closer to the computer screen. "Hold on. I think I'm onto something here. Let me check out a few things on this end, and I'll meet you in the parking garage when you come on shift at three."

*"Fine, Sam. Just be careful. Don't let anyone catch you snooping around."*

*"Yeah, you too, jerk."*

*"Bitch."*

\* \* \* \* \*

Sam bit his lower lip and creased his eyes in concentration as he stared into the white blur of the computer screen covered with rows of tiny mock manila folder icons. Well, he'd thought he'd got something and made progress. Apparently, hacking into the system was one thing, deciphering and locating the correct files proved a new challenge in itself.

After scanning thirty separate articles involving citation and notification of penalties sustained from the Department of Labor, Sam was absolutely bewildered as to how a company could remain in business after all those investigations. OSHA wasn't known for being light-handed in their fines, but the scrawled signatures at the bottom of the reports proved him wrong. Its presence claimed all necessary corrective action had been taken and documented for future reference without major repercussions, in some cases none.

Sam frowned pensively and set about opening the correction files. The click of keys echoed in his search, but was soon punctuated by a stumped huff as Sam opened yet another corporate account--this one dealing with the fire at Lennox Chemical, a small division of Taliean, Inc. The signature at the bottom of the corrective action statement belonged to one Michael Price.

The dark-haired intern leaned back in his chair and chewed his thumbnail as he wracked his brain for where exactly he'd seen that name before. Like a jolt, it hit him and Sam snapped back forward, reopening the list of witnesses and interrogation reports for the OSHA lawyers as well as Taliean's own. A satisfied smile crossed Sam's face when the name Michael Price appeared yet again, this time under the Taliean company list.

In the blink of an eye, Sam had the employee list up and the name entered into the database. Sure enough, the search proved its worth and a hit appeared on the screen. Clicking on the file, Sam's eyes widened to the size of saucers when a familiar face appeared on screen. The report declared the employee's start date with Taliean, Inc. as no more than a month after the Lennox investigation, and his pay seemed overly generous for a security guard position.

"Whatcha doing there, Sammy?" Sam jolted as the curious, yet insinuating voice met his ears, and he jerked up sharply, graced with the most innocent smile he could muster, although his reddening cheeks almost betrayed it.

Sam cleared his throat and quickly exited out of all the open programs before rising to full height and answering his prying coworker's question. "Well, Jake...I, uh, I was just looking up some of the details for that Taylor case Bob has me working on."

"In Archives?" Jake pressed incredulously, and Sam struggled not to shift under the scrutinizing gaze. However, a deep laugh soon replaced it. "Interns..."

Seeing as it worked to his advantage, Sam opted to do something he rarely ever did. Play dumb. "What? It's not going to be here?"

"No," Jake replied, shaking his head, "That's gonna be in Class Actions down the hall."

Sam laughed tightly, playing into Jake's game. "So that's why I couldn't find anything..."

As soon as Jake turned his back and headed for the exit, Sam's eyes shot death rays, scary enough to take down Superman. Jake must've had superpowers of his own, because he stopped in the door frame and looked over his shoulder, "You coming, kid?"

"Uh, yeah." Sam nodded, striding quickly past the man and to the nearest elevator on the floor, waiting impatiently for it to rise to meet him, incredibly thankful, however, that it was time for him to clock out. That was almost too close.

\* \* \* \*

"So, wait, you're saying that Mikey's in on this?" Dean questioned doubtfully, his eyes slit in suspicion at Sam's accusation.

Sam rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Quit looking at me like that, okay? I saw the file. It's not wrong."

"Didn't say it was." Dean retorted, raising his hands in mock surrender. He got a pretty good feeling this day hadn't been all too good for Sam either.

"Well, you're acting like it!" Sam protested, taking a deep breath when Dean raised his eyebrows at his outburst.

Dean leaned against the Impala and crossed his arms over his chest pensively. "Mikey's a nice guy, Sam. Doesn't really seem to fit the profile."

"So, first there's a type. Now, there's a profile?" Sam countered, scrubbing at his tired eyes, "Look...we got two missing security guards. One of which is dead, and from the looks of it another security guard is taking hush money from the company. I'm not

saying Mikey killed anyone, okay? Just that he knows something about what happened, and I don't think he's the only one being compensated for silence here."

Dean scratched the top of his head and then met Sam's gaze with a knowing glance. "You mean the cars."

"Yeah," Sam nodded. "I mean, what kind of security guard can afford a Hummer, much less a Porsche."

"Okay," Dean resigned, although Sam could tell by his face that his brother agreed with his assumption, "I'll talk to Mikey tonight and see if I can get some info out of him."

"That'll work," Sam muttered, drumming his fingers wearily against his briefcase. "I think I'm gonna go to the hotel and sleep."

"Don't get too comfortable, princess," Dean laughed, although taking in Sam's slumped posture and drooping eyes with brotherly concern. "If I don't get anything from Mikey, then you know we're going to have to break through that wall, right?"

Sam dropped his head heavily. "Yeah, I know. But I plan on sleeping a week after this is over. I don't know how people do it."

"Well, they ain't hunting ghosts in their spare time," Dean pointed out and pushed off from the car.

"No," Sam agreed, "but they do have families and hobbies."

"Don't forget murder and corporate cover-ups," Dean added with a smirk and tossed Sam the Impala's keys, which were caught with a stunned look. "What?"

"No 'be careful or I'll kick your ass'?" Sam asked skeptically. For a brief instant, the younger wondered if superglue laced the wheel of the beloved car, but dismissed the idea just as quickly as it had come. Dean wouldn't harm his own baby...not even for revenge. He didn't think.

Sam's worry subsided when Dean just shook his head. "I know you value your life, and you should know that it can be shortened anytime."

"Is that a threat?" Sam smiled tiredly and unlocked the driver's door.

"Take it as you will, Matlock," Dean replied and waited until Sam had driven out of the parking level, Dean's music blaring, before heading off to work.

\* \* \* \*

The large office space was eerily quiet save for the crackling bars of Bad Company playing from the small earpiece that was disregarded with an angry clink against the glass desk. Several thoughtful moments later brought the buzzing of the intercom and the voice of the perky secretary, chipper as always, from the other side of the chestnut doors.

"Yes, Mr. Taliean?"

"Page Michael Price from the Security Department to my office immediately," the executive commanded firmly, taking in a deep breath to steady his tense nerves.

"Yes, sir."

"And Lisa?" the company head waited for a sign he had the secretary's attention before continuing firmly. "Send a runner. Don't use the PA."

"No problem, sir."

Frank Taliean leaned back in his leather chair, spinning it around to face the large bay windows and the city that bustled beneath them. His face revealed his years in that moment, the lines of past battles made clear and defined. The former ally to the

Winchesters placed his elbows on the arm rest, interlocking his fingers and bringing the jointed first to his lips in thought and did what every hunter can do with vigilance--waited.

\* \* \* \*

Dean shone his flashlight against the glass doors leading to the upstairs complex. He played with the beam for a couple of minutes, letting it dance along at the shaking of his hand. Tonight sucked. That was basically all there was too it. The epitome of boredom.

He couldn't play in the game because of the work rotation, and apparently the cheaters were always fair when it counted. And he had no friggen' clue where Mikey was. Neither did anyone else for that matter.

With a final look around the room, Dean stalked to the elevator and let the steel box take him down to basement level. A small sliver of light caught Dean's eye as the doors chimed open, and he cocked his head in curiosity. The annoying clicking of his shoes off the tile announced his approach. He knew the area had been checked earlier on shift but also knew that the guys were ignorant when it came to the whole 'hey, you need to call Ghostbusters' kind of thing.

Rounding the corner, Dean didn't even feign surprise when he saw the light was drifting in from behind a door reading Supply Room. He was beginning to think pursqueeter boy had an office supply fetish. Gave a whole new meaning to the Rubber band Man, in his opinion.

He stilled his advance when the small stream of light was interrupted by a passing shadow. Dean waited quietly until it had passed and removed his company-issued automatic from his its holster, clicking off the safety. Real bullets wouldn't do shit against a pissed off spirit, but it would have to do for now.

In one quick move, Dean jerked open the door and barged in, gun raised and ready.

"Whoa, there, Rambo!" Dean startled back when the voice boomed from his left and quickly adjusted his stance to meet the intruder head on.

He felt his cheeks instantly redden and lowered his gun, deflated when he saw his potential malevolent entity was none other than his 'missing' coworker, standing there with one arm raised in mock surrender and the other placed over his heart, "Mikey, god, man!"

"Scared you, eh?" the coworker chuckled.

Dean holstered his weapon and shifted his eyes away from Mikey's laughing ones. "I thought you were something—one else."

"Most days wish I was, kid," Mikey stated, his tone almost serious as he placed a hand on Dean's shoulder and glanced down at the boy's gun. "We probably should've thought a bit more before giving you one of those, huh?"

"Whatever, man," Dean smirked, shrugging off the man's hand and letting his gaze drift around the small closet. Everything seemed to be in order. "What are you doing in here anyway? The guys and I have been looking for you all night."

Mikey's joking face turned serious in a flash. "There a problem?"

Dean quickly shook his head. "No, nothing like that. I...uh...just needed to talk to you about some stuff, and I think Ricky did too, but he said it could wait."

"My office okay?"

Dean flashed his 'absolutely perfect—you're the best person I've ever met' smile, "Yeah, that'd be great."

"Alright then, give me a minute and I'll be right there. Oh, and don't shoot nobody on the way, you hear?" Mikey chided as he was unable to pass up a laugh at his new hire's expense.

"Can I use the cuffs?" Dean asked lewdly, stepping towards the door.

Mikey scoffed heartily. "You something else, kid."

"See you in a few then?" Dean confirmed again, ensuring that the man would really show up.

"Yup."

Dean nodded in thanks, and stepped out of the supply closet, casting looks in both directions before proceeding down the hall to Mikey's office. He made it all of about two feet before a searing pain rocketed through his head, bringing him to his knees as it turned the dark corridor to a blinding white and ushering in a new unconscious black as Dean slumped limply to the floor.

## **Marquis Hotel**

Sam paused as he hung the suit back on the hanger and considered whether to put it in the laundry or zip it back into the garment bag and stash it in the trunk. He looked at it, bottom lip pinched between his incisors forlornly.

He had a sneaking suspicion that they were going finish this case up tonight, and he doubted anything they put in the hotel laundry would be returned before they checked out in the morning. It would be a shame to lose the expensive wardrobe he'd just acquired, especially since it had been free. Of course, it would also be a shame to see it ruined after months of being stuffed in the trunk of the car, given no more regard than one of their cheap costumes. But really, wasn't that all it was?

He hated to admit it, didn't really like to dwell on thoughts of the future much anymore, but he was really starting to doubt that he'd ever have the life that would allow a suit like that to be anything more than a costume. He tore the suit off the hanger and tossed it into the hamper.

Wearing only his boxers, he stalked over to the bed and grabbed the sweatshirt and jeans he'd laid out to change into. Realizing that he'd forgotten clean socks, he opened his duffel bag, dropping it heavily onto the bed beside his briefcase. He shook his head with a quirky grin on his face as he pulled the EMF detector out of the bag. No doubt Dean had put it in there, knowing that the majority of their arsenal was in the car, and not wanting Sam to be caught unprepared.

He tossed the gadget somewhat haphazardly onto the bed beside his briefcase and didn't notice that the toggle switched the power to ON. He sat on the edge of the bed and rolled the clean socks up over his long calves and pushed his feet through the legs of his jeans. He was about to stand and pull the jeans on the rest of the way when he noticed a faint squealing noise, somewhat muffled but audible, coming from behind him.

His face contorted in suspicion as he pulled the jeans on quickly and spun around to investigate. A brief scan of the bed behind him dragged his eyes to the flickering red light of the EMF detector and the faint alert that it emitted. *Huh?*

He reached over and picked up the device, his chin crinkling in wonder. As soon as he picked it up and lifted it off the bed, the alert silenced and the light dimmed to near non-existent. Alarmed, Sam began to move the detector around, trying to force it to spring back to life. *Can you hear me now?* He moved it again. *Can you hear me now?*

He lowered the device to near the surface of the mattress once more, and as before, it started to alert. Now, if it had been one of their usual cheap motel beds with the twenty-five cent vibrating feature, that would not have surprised him. But the Marquis didn't provide cheap thrills. There was not even an electric blanket on the bed to explain the strange readings.

He lowered it again, nearly touching the hasp on his closed briefcase as it lay atop the mattress. At that moment, the detector sprang to life, squealing more loudly than it had to that point. *No way.*

Sam dropped the gadget beside him and picked up the briefcase harshly, not showing one iota of concern for the Italian leather. He tugged it up to chest height and studied the clasps and handle closely. There was a keyed lock on it, but Taliean hadn't given him the key that he could recall. He'd thought it just an oversight at the time. He didn't have anything to lock up anyway.

On a whim, he clicked the hasps open and flipped the lid. He turned the case around to examine the back side of the closures. *Son of a . . .*

Sam reached his long fingers in and pulled the listening device off of the back of the lock mechanism. *Bugged.*

Finding the bug made Sam's head swirl with the implications. He struggled to recall every instance in which he'd had the case in his position while he and Dean had been discussing the case. Sam had clung to the damned thing the way he'd clung to his hopes of a normal life. It had been practically glued to his side, and no doubt, whoever had placed the bug inside had heard every word. . . *Dean!*

Buttoning his jeans hastily, he spun around and grabbed his cell phone off the end table.

"C'mon, Dean," he whispered desperately, chewing his thumbnail. "Pick up."

\* \* \* \*

### **Taliean, Inc.**

A shrill toned pierced the darkness, sound accomplishing what light could not.

"Geez, Sammy, since when do you sleep late enough to need an alarm?" Dean grumbled, fighting to open his eyes. *No alarm. . . Phone? Ow!* "Sam, answer that, would you? I think I had a few too many last night. . . Sam?. . . Ow!"

He inhaled sharply as a stabbing bolt of pain sliced through his skull, piercing the haze of unconsciousness that clouded his mind. He groaned weakly as he tried to lift his head from its forward-bent position and felt his neck muscles protest violently. He could feel cool cinder blocks digging into his back. "Son of a . . ."

A half-sobbing moan rumbled through the pitch black of the closet's interior and alerted Dean to a warm presence in the darkness beside him. After a few seconds of blinking hard, he recognized the shape of Mike's slouched form. The man was shaking, crying softly to himself.

Dean felt the urge to grab the security guard by the shoulder and shake him out of his emotional haze, but an attempt to raise his hand drew his attention to the fact that both wrists were tied behind his back. An experimental shift of his stiff legs proved that his ankles were bound as well.

"Dude, I said I wanted to talk to you," Dean groaned as his head thudded back against the wall, "not get freaky with you in your little S & M love nest."

"Sorry," Mike choked, and Dean thought he could catch a glimpse of dampness on the guard's cheeks, reflecting the sliver of light that was creeping under the door.

"Sorry for what?" Dean grunted as he pulled at his bindings. "You hit me over the head, dragged me in the closet, and then tied *yourself* up? Just please tell me there's no crazy-assed pagan god coming for us."

"No one was supposed to get hurt. I didn't want anyone to die," Mikey stammered, his tone penitent.

"Whoa, no one is gonna die. Let's not go jumping the gun," Dean assuaged. Whatever the man had done, Dean liked Mikey, and he was usually a good judge of character.

"I didn't mean us. . . God," Mikey choked. "People are dead because of me." He took a shuddering breath. "I'm a murderer."

Dean froze, steadying himself against the wall and letting his hands stop fighting with his ropes momentarily. "Wait, *you?* *You* killed Shaft?" He asked, voice tinged with disbelief.

Dean heard Mikey inhale sharply at the mention of the dead security guard's name.

"Shaft? No. . .no. . .How do you know about him?" Mikey asked. He shifted to a straighter position and turned slightly toward Dean. Even encased in darkness, his posture was accusatory. "You're a Fed or something, aren't you? Look, man, I swear I only signed off on that faulty sprinkler system because my boss told me to. I needed that job, and I never thought anyone would die."

"Hold up," Dean said. "You mean that factory fire in Toccoa that killed all those people? You're telling me that you and your supervisor *knew* there was no sprinkler system in the plant, and OSHA still dropped the investigation?"

"Why wouldn't they when Taliean got half his staff off OSHA's payroll to begin with?"

Dean stopped pulling at his ropes again and leaned his head against the wall. "What kind of security guard can afford a Porsche?" He said absently, repeating Sam's observation from earlier. "A security guard that's not a security guard at all. Damn! So how many ringers has Taliean got working security?"

"Pretty much all of the night shift," Mikey admitted. "Most of 'em were OSHA inspectors 'til Taliean 'recruited' them to help cover up any potential violations."

"Because who better to hide any evidence of violations than the guys who used to write the rule book, right?" If his hands had been free, Dean thought surely he'd be smacking himself upside the head for not making the connection sooner. He thought for a moment. "You, too?"

"No, I was just in maintenance at Lennox. I was the guy who signed off on all the safety checks even though I knew full well that things were not up to spec." Mikey smacked his head against the wall angrily. "Dammit! I even told my boss the paperwork

was fudged. He told me to just keep signing off. Hell, Taliean even had one of his boys come out there and show me how to keep just enough water in the lines for the sprinklers to come on long enough to pass the checks. They knew exactly what the inspectors would look for in case of an investigation. Didn't matter that there wasn't enough water pressure to put out a birthday candle."

He sighed heavily. "I knew I'd done the wrong thing; knew I'd gotten those people killed, and I was ready for them to throw the book at me. Hell, I deserved it."

"But they didn't," Dean deduced.

"No. HELL no. I came up here to the corporate office to make a deposition to Taliean's lawyers, and the next thing I knew, I got a job offer to come here for more money than I made in five years at my old job."

"Hush money."

Mikey shook his head sadly. "Blood money. Still. . . those people were already dead, you know? I couldn't do anything to change that."

"So you took the job," Dean grumbled, a little more bitter than he knew was probably fair. Then he shook off his anger. "For what it's worth, I think most people would've done what you did. I mean, it's pretty messed up, but we're not exactly living in humanity's shining hour these days."

"Would most people have helped their boss get rid of a body?" Mike hissed in an angry whisper.

"Shaft?" Dean asked, squirming his hands around in his bindings once more.

"Yeah. I came in one day and the guy was dead at the bottom of the elevator shaft in the parking garage. The elevator was being built at the time, so there was no car. From the looks of him, he had to have fallen all the way from the top." He shook his head to clear the image from his mind. "Taliean just told me and a couple of the guys to burn the body and get rid of the ashes, or we'd lose our jobs, and he'd make sure we were brought up on charges for knowingly violating OSHA regulations." Mikey took a shuddering breath, his larynx warring between rage and grief. "I was in it so deep by then. . . I just didn't see any way out."

"You didn't do it, though, did you?" Dean asked, filling in the missing pieces of the puzzle.

"What?"

"You didn't burn the body. It's in the wall, isn't it?"

Mike turned toward him, and even in the darkness Dean could feel the gaze of surprised disbelief burning into him. "How the hell do you know that?"

"Doesn't matter," Dean dismissed with a grunt. He sighed, making no progress at unraveling the ropes from around his wrists, and leaned back to rest for a moment, gathering his thoughts. "Look. . ." he said softly. "You were in a tough spot, but you didn't kill those people. . ."

The door opened suddenly, and both captives squinted tightly against the glare as an ominous silhouette filled the doorway. Without pause, Taliean raised his arm and fired a shot directly to Mikey's forehead, killing him instantly.

"No. . . I did," Frank said flatly. "And I'd be lying if I said I was sorry."

"Sorry son of a bitch," Dean sneered.

"Now, Dean, is that any way to talk to the man holding the gun?" He pulled the hammer back, his hunter's preference for a reliable revolver over an automatic showing despite his corporate façade. Elkins had taught him well.

Dean shrugged defiantly, "I don't know. Mikey didn't say much of anything to you, and you killed him anyway. So, I'm thinking you're gonna kill me regardless. I might as well get a couple jabs in, seeing as I can't exactly defend myself here."

Frank laughed cynically. "You always were a smartass. I respected that about you. Couldn't have been easy with that drill sergeant daddy of yours. It really is too bad that it's come to this. . ."

"Yeah, right."

"Really, I called you boys here as a way to mend some bridges. I always felt bad about the way things ended up between your father and me."

"That was kinda stupid don't you think? I mean, you had to have known we'd find out about Shaft."

"Actually, no, I didn't," Frank sighed. "Shaft's death was. . . unfortunate. . . He just couldn't understand why all the new hires in his department were making more money than he was. He did some after hours snooping and found out about my ringers. For what it's worth, he fell down that elevator shaft. I didn't kill him." He chuckled weakly. "Granted, I was chasing him at the time, but. . ."

"And what about Earl? What did he do?" Dean asked.

Frank shrugged again. "That's what's ironic. He called up this morning to file for early retirement. . .from Bermuda. Guess that was the only thing about this whole fiasco that wasn't a lie. Said he saw the ghost and couldn't come back to work."

"So you really didn't know that Shaft was your ghost, then?"

"No," he said, shaking his head in disappointment. "See I specifically told them to salt and burn that body. Should've known better than to trust a job like that to the men I pay to cut corners."

The lights in the hallway flickered, and Dean's eyes darted toward the door.

Frank noted the glance. "Don't bother yelling. I sent them all home and turned off all the cameras. Plausible deniability, you see. I make sure no one knows anything, and they don't have to lie. Cover everyone's asses at the same time. . ." He raised the gun once more until Dean was staring into the barrel. "That's company policy."

Before he could pull the trigger, pop, p-pop, pop, pop, every light on that level of the building burst. Glass rained down like jagged ice shards from a thawing treetop.

Dean threw himself sideways across Mikey's slumped body, and Taliean fired his weapon.

\* \* \* \*

Sam slammed the Impala to a stop, twisting the wheel hard to the left as he sped across the parking garage. He caught sight of the Security Entrance and made a straight shot for it. Brake. Shift. Park. The motions were lightning fast, and Sam flung the driver's door open, snatching up his pack from the passenger seat before starting a dead sprint towards the steel door.

He was all geared up to break the damn thing down, and adrenaline would've allowed it, but instead the door was surprisingly unlocked. Not even thinking twice about the coincidence, Sam rushed into the building, scanning the hallways for any sign of his brother, or danger.

What he found was nothing and no one. It infuriated him. With heated motion, Sam punched in his brother's number yet again, frantically hoping for an answer as he stalked down the long corridor. As he waited impatiently for Dean's deep voice to come across the line, a dull ring resounded in his free ear.

\* \* \* \*

The quaking earth intensified and a sharp ringing followed by the snapping of the metal shelf brackets flooded Frank's ears. Before he could shift to see what was to come, the creaking collapse of the entire wall of shelves plummeted down over him, accompanied by the dull thud of thousands of loose boxes.

A familiar chill circled within the air, one that Frank recognized from his many days in the hunt. Methodically, he tried to turn his head and get an idea of where his enemy could be, but it weighed a ton at the moment, and the pain of merely trying to keep it off the floor was too much. It was with resigned defeat that the company man allowed his body to go slack once more, his eyes blinking heavily as black seeped in from the corners.

If it weren't for the succession of light, hollow clicks against the floor, Frank would've let his lids slide shut, but as it was, he groaned as he tightened up his muscles once again and ordered them to support. His gaze widened when he saw the transparent white Richard Shaft, clothed in perfect uniform. The dead man's head hung low, his glassed opaque eyes leering down at him.

"W-wait," he gasped and struggled against the fiery hold, digging his heels into the ground as the ghost of his angered employee pressed onward. "Wait."

His plea died unheard as Shaft passed through the supply room door without a glance in response, vanishing down the hallway with the struggling body of Frank Taliean dragging behind.

\* \* \* \*

Sam paced on, resting the phone against his shoulder and whipping out the EMF. The ringing persisted, and Sam cursed when realization hit him. He stopped, hung up, and dialed again. This time, he followed the ringing down the hallway.

Tentatively, Sam approached the wide-open supply room door and gulped down the worry and fear seeking to latch hold. His first step in sent him sprawling forward, and he stretched his hands out quickly to brace himself. Shaken, Sam squinted his eyes in the darkness, ran his hand along the zipper of his pack, and quickly retrieved his flashlight.

Sam gritted his teeth as the pale beam illuminated the mess of shelves. Slowly, he maneuvered his way through it, quietly whispering his brother's name. No reply met him, but that didn't deter him from his search. Dean was here. Somewhere. He just knew it.

He flitted the light across the room, almost missing the fisted appendage jutting out from underneath a small mound. Sam rapidly flicked the light back, and his heart hammered in his chest as he neared it. His fingers brushed the skin, and he swallowed hard at the deep cool that inhabited it.

With renewed worry and gnawing fear, Sam started digging into the mound, jerking back when the known sandy-hair appeared two shelves and a box later in the small flashlight beam.

"Dean?"

Sam called shakily and moved closer, grimacing when he lost his balance. His hand contacted something sticky and wet as he steadied himself. A curse escaped his lips, and Sam brought the hand up to his irritated face. His expression shifted to one of horror and disbelief when deepest red clouded his vision and faintest copper wafted in the air.

His body convulsed as he jerked forward to spill his lunch and every other thing he'd eaten in his entire life. Sam clamped his mouth shut, willing the bile down. His body shook from the restraint, and hesitantly, he reached out toward his brother's too-still head.

"Dean, please," Sam murmured, his light contact warranting a limp roll of Dean's head as it lolled down off its resting place. The younger brother snatched his hand back instantly. "Oh God."

Tears pooled in Sam's eyes, and he fell back on his haunches in stunned realization. A brush and shift of movement thudded in the darkness from somewhere else in the building, but he ignored it entirely. It was probably Taliean coming to finish what he'd started. And Sam wouldn't stop him.

A muffled whisper spoke his name, and Sam jerked from his grieving stupor. When it was repeated again, longing and confusion were evident in just two syllables. "Sammy."

And God, Sam swore he would never hate that nickname ever again.

Sam rocked back onto his feet and cautiously crouched back towards his brother's body. "Dean?"

"Pretty sure," Dean smarted and coughed when he started to take slow, deliberate movements in an effort to turn and face his younger brother, his green eyes half-lidded.

Sam smiled weakly at the snark and placed a quaking hand on his brother's shoulder, needing the contact to establish that this was real. Dean was alive. "Who knows? You could be the reincarnated spirit of Frank Sinatra."

"Not possible," Dean slurred, cracking his eyes open fully. "Green eyes. Plus, I don't do chic songs."

"Yeah, you do," Sam protested lightly and assisted his brother into a sitting position. He watched helplessly as Dean tilted forward with dizziness and placed a hand against his temple with a groan. "You alright, Dean? I mean, uh..."

Dean turned squinted eyes to Sam as the younger let his voice trail off, his attention suddenly drawn to his hands. "W-what? Oh, Sam, no. That's not mine...Mikey's."

"Mikey's?" Sam questioned curiously, a gasp escaping him when he followed the slow directional nod Dean gave and saw the gray-scarlet mess that used to be Mikey's face. "God...Taliean?"

"Yeah," Dean muttered spitefully. "Fired one off at me too."

"What?" Sam demanded, his hands immediately scanning Dean's chest for any sign of a wound.

"Dude, get off!" Dean demanded and pushed himself up to a standing position, "He missed."

"You sure?"

Dean rolled his eyes. "I think I'd know."

Dean crinkled his nose up distastefully and turned to look at the wall behind him. The scent of long-dead flesh filtered into the tiny room, stifling in its stagnant aroma. He pointed knowingly at the gaping hole in the wall directly behind where his head had been when Frank took his potshot. Hollow walls apparently didn't hold up against hollow-point .357 Mag rounds.

A shattered long-bone, probably a femur was just visible inside the opening, partially shrouded in black and silver cloth. "Talk about overkill," Dean miffed bemusedly.

"Guess we were right about the body," Sam drawled knowingly, too sickened by the discovery to take any pride in his victory of logic. "So, where'd he go?"

"Who?" Dean asked as he rubbed his temples to dispel his throbbing migraine.

Sam huffed exasperated. "Tallean, who else?"

"You didn't see him?" Dean brought his head up to meet Sam's a little too fast, and the room swam as he stumbled.

"No," Sam replied and offered a steady hand.

"Well, maybe Shaft took him. The room got cold right before..." Dean didn't finish and he didn't need to. Sam got the message loud and clear. He was going to kick Tallean's ass. "Mikey said something about the body being found at the bottom of the elevator shaft."

Sam chewed his bottom lip pensively. "Okay, we'll start there. We need to find him and take care of this."

"You think?" Dean spat sarcastically.

Sam sighed and looked his brother over skeptically. "You sure you're okay?"

"I thought we covered this, Sammy," The cool metal of his favorite rifle filled the palm of Dean's hand as Sam thrust it towards him, and a lop-sided smile graced his lips, "Didn't want me shooting you on accident 'cause of this head thing, huh?"

"That's not funny," Sam chided, shouldering the bag and leading his brother out of the supply room. "Now, officer, which way?"

"Not a clue, but my guess would be left 'cause it looks like Dickie boy threw another temper tantrum." Sam turned his head and agreed the second he saw the path filled with broken shards from the lights and every piece of furniture demolished.

"Okay, let's go."

\* \* \* \*

Sam eyed the metal door skeptically, having followed the ghost's path of destruction all the way to the roof access hatch. "I thought you said he fell from Tallean's office."

"He did, but there was no elevator in the shaft then," Dean shrugged. "Ghost's gotta improvise."

Sam rolled his eyes and gingerly opened the roof door, nodding to Dean to go through first. Dean complied, and quickly made his way through the exit, rifle cocked and ready. Sam was barely through the door when he saw Dean launch into a run.

The ghost of Richard Shaft moved silently toward the edge of the rooftop, dragging Tallean helplessly behind it and taking slow, but deliberate steps.

"Stop!" Dean shouted, realizing what the apparition was up to. Without hesitation, he raised his gun and fired.

The apparition screamed in angry protest as the rock salt cut to its core and sent it spiraling toward oblivion. Shaft dropped a groggy Taliean to the rooftop with a thud, as he dissipated and lost his grip. But the ghost was as stubborn as any Winchester and clung to its shredding existence.

Dean raced forward as Taliean struggled to stand and move away from his captor, but the young hunter couldn't approach any further with the spirit still screaming its angry protest. Dean raised his gun to fire again, but Frank was now in his line of fire, and as much as he despised the man, Dean didn't want to kill him.

The ghost was torn apart one molecule at a time, held together only by its mad desire to complete its vendetta against his murderer and summoned one last remnant of strength. Shaft concentrated his last remaining substance, rammed into Taliean's already trembling frame, and laughed victoriously as he disappeared into oblivion.

Frank's eyes widened in terror as he felt himself fall over the edge of the roof. He flailed his arms helplessly and opened his mouth to scream.

Reacting with hunter's reflexes and an unclouded heart, Dean tossed his rifle aside and lunged forward, snagging one of Frank's waving arms. He grunted as Taliean's momentum dragged him forward, pulled by the extra weight. Dean stumbled and lost his balance, hitting the rooftop with a crash that knocked the wind from his lungs. Still, he held tightly to Frank's arm.

"Dean!" Sam yelled in horror as he watched his brother slide over the edge.

One hand still twisted in Frank's, Dean clung to the lip of the building with just one arm. The tendons in his arm, chest, and neck stood out prominently, twisting and popping beneath the over-stretched muscles he used to keep from falling to his death.

Sam reached his brother in two long-legged strides and squatted down, latching his strong hands beneath Dean's arms, grasping him behind his shoulders. He sat back on his haunches, straining with every muscle in his body but failed to make any progress. He could feel Dean sliding further away from him as Taliean's dead weight pendulumed below them.

"Dean," Sam gritted between his clamped teeth. "You gotta let him go. I can't pull you both up."

Dean didn't answer, just fixed his hazel eyes on Sam's in defiance. No way in hell he was letting go, and Sam's stomach twisted with fear. The harder he pulled, the heavier the weight settled against him, and in his mind, the only foreseeable outcome was Dean slipping from his grasp and falling to his death.

"Dean. . ." Sam pleaded, his feet scrabbling on the loose pebbles of the eroded concrete.

Looking into his brother's eyes with complete trust, Dean screamed. A guttural moan of determination tore from his throat like a bullet from the barrel of a gun, and he let go.

Sam echoed his brother's scream, suddenly entrusted with both men's lives as well as his own as he strained against the slipping grasp he had under his brother's arms. Dean's gaze remained fixed on him, pleading for Sam to hold on just a moment longer, and the older brother extended his freed arm farther up onto the escarpment. Fingernails separating from their cuticle beds, he clawed his way up one inch farther.

And it was enough.

The small shift in the center of gravity gave Sam the leverage he needed heave his brother up far enough to get a better grip. With a groan and gasp of exertion, the three men slid across the concrete and ended up slouched in heaving exhaustion.

Breathing almost convulsively, Sam fell back on the rooftop and let his head loll in Dean's direction, expecting a trademark Dean Winchester snark about Sam's reflexes or too-long legs. Instead, the older brother met his gaze, sweat beading on his brow, and without a word, spoke a thousand terms of endearment. Unable to speak himself, Sam returned Dean's gaze and added a smile that clearly said "that's just what brothers do." *Got your back dude.*

\* \* \* \*

When it was all said and done, the cloud of black smoke and the pile of ash that was Richard Shaft did not provide nearly the amount of satisfaction as knowing that every desk in the Taliean Advance Program's office suite was laced with itching powder and super glue.

Payback was, indeed, a bitch, and Sam wasn't sorry at all that Frank wouldn't be writing him that sterling letter of recommendation any time soon. The look on Taliean's face as he was tossed, bound and gagged into the back of the Impala, more than made up for the fact the boys were, once again, not going to get paid.

Frank was going to pay all right. The boys dropped him in the back of a police cruiser that Dean expertly picked the lock on, along with all the files Sam had decrypted from the company's confidential computer records. And well, the guy had paid for their luxurious accommodations at the Marquis, so they took full advantage of the continental breakfast and made off with as much salon shampoo and tiny bottles of mini bar liquor as they could carry. It wasn't the same as a paycheck, but it was more than they usually got for their troubles, so they weren't complaining as they loaded up the Impala and headed out.

\* \* \* \*

With hunter's speed, Dean's right hand left the wheel and smacked into Sam's semi-turned shoulder. The controlled force behind the movement clearly signaled 'Come back to this reality' as Sam's head nearly collided with the window pane from the somewhat loving shove. "What the hell Dean?"

Dean smirked satisfactorily, "Was about to ask you the same question."

"Why?" Sam grumbled and crossed his arms over his chest all the while issuing a look that would send Satan on the retreat.

Dean widened his eyes and feigned fright, "That's why, Nolte. Geesh. No wonder no one wants to date you."

"Stop, okay?" Sam demanded; his eyes lit with something akin to fury, "This isn't funny."

"What isn't?" Dean questioned distractedly as he switched lanes.

"Just..." Sam hesitated and tried to think out his next move but fighting words flew out anyway, "You, dumbass, okay? Happy now?"

Dean's knuckles went white in their grip on the steering wheel. "Me? What the hell did I do?"

"Jumped off a roof for starters." Sam replied sharply.

Dean shrugged his shoulders and worked his neck, "I didn't jump off the roof, Sammy, more like got dragged over."

While Dean found his retort moderately funny, Sam was nowhere near amused. "You don't think, do you? I'm sick of it, Dean. You get on my case, hell, on Dad's case too when you think we're being reckless. What's makes you the exception, especially when it means risking yourself for a killer like Taliean?"

"Don't tell me you've reconsidered your membership to the fan club?" Dean provoked condescendingly, and Sam saw red.

"It was never like that Dean, and you know it! The man offered me an internship people kill for, and yeah, I thought he was great up until I found out he was nothing but a crook and tried to put a bullet in you!" Sam ran anxious fingers through his dark locks and took a deep calming breath while Dean's sole reaction was a drumming on the steering wheel.

The silence that encompassed the thin air wasn't welcome in the least, and Dean struggled to maintain a cool façade, "Comes with the territory, Sammy, you know that. There's no reason to freak out about it. Our job's not the safest, and we knew Frankie was shady."

"No, Dean. No. It's more than that. It's not the job to risk your life for some man who, if places were switched, wouldn't even give you a second thought." Sam argued intently, shifting so that his body was facing his brother entirely, and leaning forward to stress his point, "Frank would've let you go, Dean. He would've let you fall."

Dean drifted his gaze to his brother's, "Maybe."

"Not a maybe, Dean." Sam countered, "He would've."

Dean nodded slowly, letting the muttered reply sink in. "But I'm not him."

"No," Sam conceded, smiling faintly in what could have passed for pride, "you're not." He ducked his head a little shyly, hoping his brother hadn't caught the moment of adoration. "Still, it's a little weird, though."

Dean leaned forward and stretched as much as the driver's seat would allow, "What is?"

Sam sighed and studied his hands. "That people can kill like that and manipulate everything so that even good people turn into monsters as well."

"It's got to start somewhere. I mean, people don't just change overnight," Dean reasoned thoughtfully. He took to playing with the tape deck as a much needed diversion.

Sam chewed his bottom lip and debated whether or not to continue. He figured he might as well pursue it seeing as they were already knee deep. "You think, we—I'd do anything like Mikey?"

Dean thanked everything holy he'd fixed the Impala's brake line because he nearly rammed the Corolla putting in front of him when he turned to give Sam a hard but sympathetic look. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Just...that internship, you know. I mean, my whole goal when I was at Stanford was to be this big lawyer. I think I would've done anything to get or keep that chance." Sam confessed with a shake of his head.

"Not anything, Sammy." Dean refuted, "You're not like that. You know who you are, always have."

"And Mikey didn't? The other guys didn't?" Sam argued and let his thoughts do the talking, "And I hate to tell you, Dean, but I'm not so different from Mikey or Frank. Neither are you."

Dean couldn't hide his surprise at the bluntness. "What the hell are you talking about, Sam? We are nothing like them."

"Yea, we are. We basically kill for our survival. We lie to save each other all the time. God, I've created more elaborate cover-ups than Enron," Sam replied solemnly as if he and his brother would never be known as anything but frauds and murderers.

"That's different, Sam." Dean stated in his 'I'm the always right older brother' voice.

Sam adopted his 'enlighten me, o wise one' tone, "How?"

Dean scratched the patch of short hair behind his ear. "Well, yeah, we kill but only because, if we don't, people, innocent or not, die. And we lie and cover up, but we really don't have another option. Guys like Taliean kill, lie, and cover up to save their own asses after they've wasted someone else's."

"Yeah..." Sam resigned, his face lined with an accepting smile.

"So, we good?" Dean asked, pleased when his brother nodded with a small laugh. All that chic flick stuff wore him out. "Great. Hand me my tapes."

"Dean..."

"Ah, c'mon, Sam. I got a good one I been dying to hear since we took this gig." Dean waved his hand for Sam to hustle and get the worn cardboard box from under the dash. "I promise it's not Metallica."

"Well, that's comforting," Sam snarked, rolling his eyes as he handed Dean his prize.

"Hey, don't be like that," Dean chided, fumbling through the plastic until he found the right one. "I think you'll like this one, Matlock. It's perfect."

"Will you quit calling me that? I'm not a law intern anymore," Sam exasperated, a small hint of bitterness tainting the words when he realized he'd just spoken the nagging thoughts he'd had for months. He'd never get a chance to rule the courtroom, not while this Demon remained to be hunted. Maybe not ever.

"Well, maybe not, but this whole role playing gig wasn't without its perks," Dean replied quickly, popping his selection in the tape deck.

"How so?"

Dean reached into his jacket pocket and produced a familiar flash of metal. "Got me some new handcuffs. Can never have too many sets of handcuffs," he grinned, raising one eyebrow suggestively.

Sam groaned at the insinuation, repeating the reaction when Boston's "Corporate America" blared through the Classic's black speakers, accompanied by Dean's horrible Tom Scholtz impression. Although, he had to admit Dean was right once again. The song was perfect. He guessed he didn't always hate it when Dean was right, after all.

**The End**