

Golgotha

Kittsbud

Downtown Bar, Neenah, Wisconsin

10:45p.m.

Sam Winchester watched as his brother scrutinized the pool table as if his life, or at least the contents of his wallet, depended on his next move. Dean eyed every ball, calculating their positions in relation to the pockets and then let his fingers slide along the cue, resting its tip on the table as he made his choice.

"Left corner pocket," he offered with a nod. "Ten bucks says I nudge that baby right in."

Sam smiled. Dean had picked the hardest pocket on the table to sink the ball into. He was in one of his competitive, sarcastic moods, and Sam had already guessed why. Ever since he'd convinced Dean to take a job with Frank Taliean, a billionaire businessman and ex-hunter, Dean had taken every opportunity to rub the 'I'm always right' line in.

Right from the start of the gig, Dean had warned Sam that Taliean was not to be trusted, but no, Sam had still ploughed on blindly, and it had nearly cost them big time. Now, Sam was paying for that every chance Dean got, and Dean was very much enjoying it- almost as much as he'd enjoyed ribbing Sam over trashing the Impala back in Missouri.

"You know that's an almost impossible shot, right?" Sam took a swig of his beer and waited for the reply he knew would come.

"Don't you know you should always trust your big brother's instincts, Sammy? But oh wait; you'd rather trust some guy you don't know if he has money..." Dean smirked and took a quick drink from his own bottle. He looked at it, realizing the Budweiser was now quite empty, and then set it down on the edge of the nearby bar. "Twenty bucks, then."

Dean leaned forward and let his gaze fall on the cue ball. He let the cue slip back in his grasp, and then with one fluid stroke brought it forward again, potting the eight ball as if it were the easiest shot in the world.

Sam groaned. He knew dang well Dean made half the money they lived on either playing poker or pool, but he still let his own brother 'hustle' him every time. "I am so not paying up twenty. I didn't even agree to the ten bucks!"

"You're just a sore loser, Geekboy." Dean moved back to the bar and pulled out his wallet, intending to order a couple more beers. It was a warm night and with little else to do but play pool with Sam, he sensed he might need a whole keg of the stuff.

As he tugged out a crumpled twenty, he spotted a group of four young women settling into a small corner table. The bar wasn't exactly rough, but it was still unusual to see a group of girls in such a place and it piqued his interest. Heck, pretty girls always piqued his interest.

Dean paid for the beers and tossed one over to Sam. "Want another game? It's not as if there's anything else to do around here. Maybe we should have headed back to Cali and taken a look at that suspected poltergeist..." All the time he spoke, Dean's eyes remained on the women.

"I think I've had enough of giving you an excuse to empty my wallet." Sam hunched forward, his expression changing to one of mirth as he noted his brother's gaze. *He's not bothered about playing pool. He just wants an excuse to get the other side that table to flirt with those girls.* "Maybe we should head back to the motel and head out early in the morning," Sam teased, enjoying his brother's sudden frown.

"Dude, will you work with me here?" Dean half-begged in a whispered tone. "Four hot chicks at ten o'clock. Tell me even you're not that big a geek you haven't noticed?" He jerked a thumb cautiously towards the corner. "Two each." He beamed impishly.

Sam rolled his eyes, but caved to his brother's wily charms. He would play one more game of pool, and when the women told Dean to go to hell, he'd be able to tell his brother 'I told you so' for a change. "One game," he agreed. "Just no telling them we're TV execs from some reality show again. That was stooping to a new low even for us."

Dean nodded and grabbed the pool cue, making his way around to the other side of the table to set the game up again. "Ladies," he nodded, flashing his 'rogue grin' as he passed by.

His attention caused only a cursory nod from the nearest young woman, and the four continued their heated discussion.

Whoa, a bunch of tough nuts. This should be fun. Dean rolled the balls back onto the top out of the pockets, making sure to turn and smile at the women who shouldn't have been able to escape his charisma- at least not in his opinion. To his annoyance, all four seemed so deep in their own conversation they didn't even appear to know he existed.

Sam's smile broadened until his cheeks dimpled. "Shot down in flames," he mouthed before chuckling at Dean's irked expression. "Crashed and burned before take off..."

"Jerk!"

"Loser!"

Dean ignored the last comment. No way was he letting Sammy go back to the motel to rib him about this all night. All he had to do was grab the gals' attention and he'd show Sam a thing or two. First, he had to know what had gotten them so all fired up into a chatting frenzy, and why they'd chosen a downtown bar for their group meeting. It wasn't exactly a girlie place to be.

Dean looked back to the pool table, but kept his ears on the women's conversation. What he heard was far from what he had expected. They weren't drinking buddies, but co-workers at a local children's hospital.

Dean made the first break, letting Sam take over the game so that he could innocently stand back and watch from a vantage point a little closer to the girls. If it didn't show them what a great Winchester catch they were missing, scars and all, it at least gave him the opportunity to eavesdrop more easily.

"Val, you just don't get it. I was on the wing last night and I saw him again. I'm telling you it was the kid. Damn, he was beckoning to me. What if...what if..."

"Susan, you're just getting worked up over nothing. I'm sure there's some kind of explanation. There are no such things as ghosts. You're a trained professional. Hell, you were there the night the kid died. You should know better than to think he could come back from the dead."

"No, Val, Susan's right. I've seen it too. You can't expect us to believe we're both seeing things! If it happens again I'm quitting!"

Dean raised a brow but let Sam continue to control the table. The thought crossed his mind to introduce himself to the women and for once admit his real profession. Hell, it would be the first honest 'chat up' line he'd ever used. Then again, the truth was rarely as fun as what he could invent.

"So, if you think this thing is real, just tell me one thing? Why would the kid come back and haunt the wing? He has no reason to..."

"What if he was murdered, Val? Or maybe someone made a mistake, maybe a mistake that cost him his life. The doctors hadn't expected him to die the way he did and you know it! The kid wants revenge, and I don't plan on sticking around for me to be the fall guy!"

Dean watched as the nurse on the far side hastily stood up, grabbed her purse and scurried from the dimly lit bar. She was obviously angry at not being taken seriously, and so were her colleagues.

Only one of the young nurses, Val, seemed to have a cool head about her. He liked that. From what brief snippets of the tale he'd heard, he guessed she was probably right, too. The nurses worked the night shift and were undoubtedly letting their imaginations run wild once they were alone in the stark white corridors. It didn't sound like there was any real reason for the kid to come back, so it was probably all in their overactive minds. Horror movies had a lot to answer for.

Dean shrugged, but as an afterthought ambled back up to the bar as Sam watched, intrigued.

Nick, the two ton, resident bartender nodded as Dean approached. "Don't tell me, two more beers?"

"Yeah, two beers and an address." The young hunter turned and pointed to where Val now sat alone. It appeared her overwrought colleagues didn't approve of her stance and had departed with their friend. "You wouldn't happen to know where she works, would you?" Dean let an extra twenty drop onto the polished bar surface as an incentive.

Nick nodded and placed two ice cold bottles on the counter, quickly taking his customer's cash and then wiping the counter with a cloth. "I've not seen her in here too often, not exactly her kind of place. I guess this is your lucky day, though, because Val over there happens to be a friend of my cousin. She works over at the Children's' Hospital on 130 2nd Street." The bartender's eyes narrowed as a sudden realization hit him. "You ain't some kind of pervert, are you? I'd hate for me to have to deal with you..."

Dean shook his head, eyeing Nick's muscular, tattooed arms with distaste. He had no doubt the man could grind beef with his fists, and probably had the mental capacity of a ten year old. Not someone he wanted to get on the wrong side of or give the wrong impression. "No need to worry, dude, I'm just after a story..." Without further explanation he left the bar, wondering why Nick had given up the information for so little as twenty bucks if he was really bothered about the girl's welfare.

"Geez, Dean, are you getting so desperate you're trying your pick up line on the bar staff now?" Sam put down his pool cue and dodged a Bud bottle that was launched swiftly at his head. He caught the flying projectile easily with his right hand and noted it was full. "I guess those girls must have been discussing something earth-shattering to resist such a babe magnet as Dean Winchester...or maybe they need new glasses..."

"Or, maybe I was thinking with my upstairs brain, and was more interested in their conversation than getting laid." Dean raised a brow cryptically and settled down into a seat across from his brother. He pulled a face that suggested he still had every intention of winning the little 'snark competition' they seemed to have fallen into.

"You actually have an upstairs brain? When did this happen?" Sam turned to look as Val finally stood and began walking towards the door. She was unmistakably drop-dead gorgeous, and for Dean not to have pursued her more, there had to actually be a serious reason. Blondes like that didn't grow on trees, and Dean rarely let one escape his charms without much more of a fight.

"Dude, I guess your 'Geekboy' attitude is rubbing off on me. Do you think I could have it surgically removed?" Dean followed Sam's gaze as Val finally exited the little bar.

"Dean," Sam asked more seriously. "Why did you really let her walk out of here so easily? And what we're you doing with that bartender? I saw you slip him an extra twenty, and you never flash cash around like that."

Dean thought about it. He actually didn't know why he was so intrigued by what he'd overheard. It was just girlie fear talking. There was probably no kid ghost or haunting, and yet somehow, the whole thing bothered him on some unknown level.

He knew if he even mentioned it to Sam it would turn into their next gig, and he wasn't sure he wanted that to happen, either.

Ever since Missouri he'd had a huge aversion to hospitals. Four weeks trapped in a room with nothing to do but watch TV and be assaulted by the caustic aromas of antiseptics, well, it had taken its toll. To Dean, hospitals were right up there along with prisons. They stifled his free will, his freedom, and even the suggestion of being a visitor tended to freak him out, even if it did mean he'd get to see the very lovely Val again.

"Those four girls, they're all nurses at a local hospital," Dean eventually admitted, swirling the dregs of beer in the bottom of his bottle in thought. "They weren't interested in me because they're scared, Sammy. Seems like a couple of them think they've seen a ghost."

"And you think it's the real deal?" Sam hunkered forward and set his hands on the table, his hunter's sixth sense kicking in. "What kind of spirit do you think we're dealing with?"

"Whoa, slow down there." Dean eased back, leaving the bottle on the table to fix his gaze on his brother. "I'm not saying this is anything more than fear. It sounds like some kid died unexpectedly, and it could just be that the nurses are letting their subconscious play tricks on them..."

"But somehow you don't think so, or you wouldn't be telling me any of this," Sam countered. "And you wouldn't have slipped Nick over there a twenty. What did you find out?"

Dean sighed. The tables had just been turned and Sam had 'hustled' him into this gig. He might be the best bluffer and the best ladies man, but Sam was definitely the best at innocently manipulating a conversation to go the way he wanted. "I got the hospital's address from Nick, but we don't have to use it."

Sam had other ideas. "What happened to the whole, 'helping people, hunting things' line? I think we should look into this. I mean, what if it is for real and the kid needs putting to rest?" When Dean didn't try to argue he added, "How far away is it? Maybe we can just call on our way out of town, just to be sure..."

"It's three blocks away. 130 2nd Street. It's a kids' hospital. I didn't catch what wing, so we're gonna have to do a little investigative reporting to find that one out, but..." Dean's words petered out as he realized his brother had just turned a shade of chalky white.

Sam's eager expression had been instantly extinguished and replaced by a look that said he was suddenly and inexplicably scared and excited at the same time. He gulped hard and his heart began to pound erratically in his chest.

Sam closed his eyes and waited for the feeling to pass before he pulled out his wallet and almost tore it open. He rifled through its contents until he found a crumpled and slightly torn piece of paper stuffed in the back. Sam tugged it out, offering it to Dean with a trembling hand.

"What's this, little brother another IOU?" Dean quipped, but took the note almost apprehensively. He didn't recall seeing it before, and yet instantly knew it was important to Sam.

Wishing he had another beer or something stronger, Dean unfolded the paper and instantly knew what he was looking at. Sam had once told him about it back when he'd been crawling St. Mary's medical center's walls, but this was the first time he'd actually set eyes upon it. In fact, he suspected Sam had long ago forgotten it even existed until tonight.

Sam

I wish we could have gotten to know one another better, but now is neither the place nor time. All I can tell you is that I believe our paths will cross again.

Before I left I needed to make sure you take this warning to heart. Trust nothing that you see or hear. There is a darkness rising among us, and those like you and I are in great peril.

Two weeks ago I began having nightmares- visions if that's what you like to call them- of a black car and its passengers. The car was hit by a truck, and I could see no more. I came here tonight to try and save your family from the rig, but as you and I now know there never was a truck to be saved from. It's my belief that somehow because of our unique abilities I was able to see what you were seeing, even though it was not real. In essence, I saw my vision through your eyes- and it was misleading. I fear intentionally so.

Take care, Sam, for there are those who would and can manipulate even us.
The Priest

P.S. When you eventually leave this place, you may want to look up this address. I think you will find some of what you seek there.

All I've been able to see is 130 2nd Street, Neenah, Wisconsin. I always see a building. It appears to be a hospital. Go there and see what answers are given to you.

"The address the priest wrote on the note is the hospital's isn't it?" Sam asked the question, even though he knew the answer. "Dean, we're meant to be here. The priest was like me, he saw things. We're not here by accident, we're bound to this place somehow and we have to know why. What if we're meant to save someone like the priest saved us? What if that's what my gifts are ultimately for, to foresee and change the future?"

"Yeah right, you're a regular Sam Beckett. You see something, leap in and save the day and then leap out again. Sammy, you know it's not like that." Dean hated telling it like it was, but lately all Sam thought of was killing the demon and using his gifts for the greater good, because well, that's what he was sure he'd been given them for. But what if one day he found out otherwise? *What if..?*

Dean pushed the shadowy thought to one side and instead offered up more logic. "Sam, the kid is dead. It's too late to save him. Even if you're priest friend really did foretell this, we're too late to be of any use."

Sam shook his head, his long hair almost dangling in his eyes. "Not if it wasn't the kid we're meant to save." He looked almost pleadingly to his brother. "Will you at least come with me to the hospital tomorrow and check it out?"

Dean inhaled but nodded. No matter what, he would always do anything for Sammy, even if it meant confronting his own fears.

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**Children's Hospital of Wisconsin
Neenah, Wisconsin
1:47p.m.**

Dean pushed through the central glass doors of the hospital and instantly wished he hadn't. Being in the hospital, heck, any hospital brought back more memories than he cared to have.

The sterile, perfect environment just bothered him on so many levels, as did the odors that assaulted his nostrils on every turn of the corridor. Part of him suspected it wasn't the hospitals he feared at all, but more likely the possibility of death that they foreshadowed.

Not that Dean was scared of dying. He'd been close often enough already. No, what Dean feared was leaving the world of the living before his own mission was

complete. He had to make sure Sammy was safe. He had to finish the Winchester crusade against darkness and make sure his brother got some semblance of a life.

"Dean?" Sam shot a glance at the elder hunter as they headed towards a small reception desk. "You okay?" It was obvious from the lack of acerbic banter that Dean was bothered by something. It hadn't really taken Sam long to guess what.

Dean shrugged it off. "Yeah, just thinking about that blonde." He winked and flicked two plastic ID tags from his pocket, offering one up to Sam.

Sam quickly checked the text, making sure Dean hadn't given him a title even remotely embarrassing. To his relief, they were apparently both reporters from the local newspaper. That, at least made sense.

"Hi, we're with the Neenah Tribune. I was wondering if you could help us out?" Dean leaned forward on the counter, smiling at the nurse on duty so broadly she couldn't help but smile back. "We're looking for a young nurse named Val? Small, blonde, no-nonsense kinda attitude?"

The nurse nodded. Everybody knew Val. She tended to 'tell it like it was' just a little too much for some people's liking, and had gotten in trouble for it on many occasions. "You mean Val Harper. She's on the neurology wing. In fact, you're in luck, she's on duty this morning." She passed over a small, folded pamphlet detailing the hospital's work. On the back was a small map giving directions to each department. "Neurology is here," she tapped an area to the right of where they were now standing.

"Thanks," Dean stuffed the pamphlet into his jacket pocket and was tempted to offer up his cell number. Heck, the nurse on duty was kind of cute, but then, all nurses were kind of cute to Dean. Only the mildly irritated look from Sam stopped him.

As they walked away he shot his brother a look of despair. "Fun, Sammy, when are you going to understand that girls equal fun?"

Sam just shook his head and followed the directions they'd been given, smiling all the way at his brother's pained expression.

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Valerie Harper sat at a small duty station on the west wing flicking through her daily pile of charts and paperwork. As she sifted through various patients' files, she paused, thinking of the previous evening's conversation with her friends.

It was almost impossible for her to believe in ghosts or spirits. They were things to watch in the movies or on television, but they just didn't exist in reality.

Valerie had to believe that and take some solace from it, because it was the only form of comfort she could find after her husband had died in a car accident. If there was any way of coming back, Tony would have been there for her wouldn't he? On every cold and lonely night she had spent since her loss, he'd have been there watching over her, wouldn't he? No, ghosts didn't exist, or Tony would have come back. He'd never leave her if there was any chance, any form he could return in, their bond had been that strong.

"Valerie Harper? We're with the Neenah Tribune. I was wondering if we could ask you a few questions?"

Val looked up to see two young men peering down at her. The shorter of the two flashed a press card and then smiled broadly. She nodded, acknowledging her name, and then frowned as she realized she recognized the man doing the talking. "Weren't you in Nick's bar last night?"

Sam glanced at Dean and stifled the urge to wince. Apparently, his brother's flirting hadn't gone totally unnoticed after all. "We kind of overheard your conversation about a ghost..." He hoped the truth would win the nurse over.

"And you thought, hey, haunting at local hospital, great way to make a front page story and a quick buck?" Val wasn't impressed. If it was one thing she hated it was

guys out to make money from others' misfortune. She still recalled the reporters who had hounded her for days after Tony's death, begging her for the gory details.

"We're not here for a front page story," Sam soothed, sensing the woman's hostility. "We're here because we believed you."

Val scoffed, her top lip puckering in disgust. "Kid, you're full of it. I know a gold digger when I see one, and your partner here just oozes crap. Do you want to get off my wing before I call security?"

"Go ahead and call them if it makes you feel any better." Dean moved between Val and Sam, fully intent on going head-to-head with the sassy nurse if he had to. "You know you don't want to. Hell, I bet you were gonna go right back to Nick's tonight in the hopes of bumping into me again anyway..." He raised a brow, expecting a retort.

Val grimaced. "Go to hell!"

Dean's eyes twinkled. "I've been close already," he admitted a little too truthfully. "How about we come to a compromise and you tell us why your friends are so upset, then we'll be right back outta that door." He turned and pointed to the entrance they'd just passed through.

Val eyed him warily. She didn't want to cause any kind of stir for the hospital, and she hated reporters. On the other hand, they wouldn't be interested if they didn't think there was a story. She was sure there was no ghost, but that didn't mean there wasn't a guilty conscience somewhere. The kid had died in strange circumstances. Maybe she owed it to him to let these men find the truth. For once, maybe she could use a reporter for a good cause, even if it meant playing along with the flirt before her.

"I'll tell you what I know, but if anything hits the front page I'll deny every word. I'm just in this for the truth. You double cross me, I'll make sure you pay."

"Don't tell me, you have mafia connections, and I'll wake up in a concrete coffin Godfather style if I squeal?" Dean couldn't help but taunt the nurse.

"No concrete," she conceded. "But my brother works traffic. You might just find that classic of yours impounded and crushed before you even have chance to pay your fine."

Dean's color visibly drained. He had totally underestimated Miss. Harper right from the get go; they both had, and now it was biting them in the butt. In all likelihood, Nick had blabbed about Dean questioning him, but still this girl was smarter than the average fabric softener bear.

"Look," Sam offered apologetically as he pulled Dean ungraciously out of the way. "We just want to find the truth. Will you help us? All we need to know is what happened to the kid your friends think they saw."

Val checked the corridor to make sure they were alone and nodded. "The kid's name was Matthew Ismay. He was brought in about a week ago and was diagnosed with a brain tumor. He had a fifty/fifty chance if he got surgery right away; at least that's what the doctors said. It was a sad case, eleven years old and no family to be with him at a time like that."

"So, he died during the surgery?" Dean pushed.

"No, that's what my friends can't get over. He died suddenly the night of his admission. He never even made it to surgery. It was unexpected, but these things happen. Medicine isn't an exact science." Val shrugged, unsure what she believed about the case anymore.

"Do you think there could be any kind of foul play?" Sam asked the question carefully, not wanting to anger the already irked nurse more. "I mean, could some kind of hospital mistake have attributed to his death?"

Val laughed. She knew anything was possible, had even considered the scenario herself, but when it all boiled down, the kid had probably died of natural causes. It was most likely her friends were just getting spooked by the impossible. "Seriously," she admitted, "I think my friends imagined it. The corridors can get lonely at night."

I've got faith in the staff here. They're not killers, and I doubt there was any kind of negligence." Val shot a look pointedly at Dean. "Let's face it, there are no such things as ghosts, right?"

Dean flinched, his cocky exterior melting for just a second. He glanced over to Sam and then nodded. "Right," he lied, quite convincingly.

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Outside the Children's Hospital of Wisconsin

Neenah, Wisconsin

3:47p.m.

Dean quickened his stride at the sight of his midnight black 'baby' and let a hand caress the trunk as he passed it by. The Impala was precious, and Val had struck a nerve the moment she had threatened it. The car was like an extension of his own personality, and to threaten it, was to threaten Dean.

Sam noted his brother's silence and the loving, if brief touch of the metalwork. "She really got to you in there, didn't she?" He laughed, knowing it was rare for Dean to ever be left speechless by a girl.

"Shut up, Sammy." Dean didn't look at his brother but quickly clambered behind the Impala's wheel. Once settled, he felt instantly calmer. The car would be fine, and so would he now he was out of the claustrophobic confines of the hospital. *She wouldn't...*

Sam slid into the passenger seat and pulled his bag from the rear seat. Without looking at Dean, he dragged out their laptop and pulled the screen into the open position. It was time for some real work instead of teasing his already tormented brother.

"So, I'll start with a search on the kid's name. Maybe we can find out what happened to his parents." Sam began tapping at the keyboard, glad of the new wireless network card he'd invested in a few weeks previously.

"Yeah well, seeing is believing, little brother." Dean flicked out his home made E.M.F. meter from his pocket and waved it under Sam's nose. He'd apparently scanned the wing while they'd been chatting with the nurse and come up with nothing. "I'd like to see this kid before we actually assume he's haunting the place. I think we should come back tonight and scope out the west wing."

"Right, because ghost's prefer to manifest themselves in the dark." Sam nodded, continuing to keep his head down as he scrutinized the laptop's screen. Accessing the local news wasn't proving too difficult, but finding anything related to the kid's name was apparently a lot harder. "There's nothing here with the name Ismay, at least not recently." Sam shook his head and scowled. "You know, the name seems pretty familiar. I'm sure I should know it..."

Dean stowed the E.M.F. in the glove box and shrugged. "Ismay was one of the dudes on the Titanic; even I know that, Geekboy. You're confusing this kid with history 101." He let his lips curl into a smile at finally upstaging his normally intellectually gifted brother. "You're not the only one who watches Discovery Channel." He raised a brow and shot Sam his usual sardonic grin.

"Dude, you so didn't find that on Discovery. I doubt you even know how to find that channel." Sam shook his head accusingly, and hit the touchpad lightly with his forefinger, widening his news search. "And you so didn't read it in a book..."

Dean frowned. Sammy always caught him out when he tried to be the smartass. "I saw the movie," he admitted somewhat painfully.

This time, Sam just had to look up to see his brother's aggrieved expression. "You watched a chick flick? Man, that is a new low even for you." A deep chuckle escaped Sam's throat and he couldn't stifle it no matter how hard he tried.

"It was not a chick flick," Dean defended. "Besides, it was strictly research." He shrugged, knowing he'd lost the battle. "Anyway, you'd resort to it too if you were assaulted by freakin' Snuggles the bear for four weeks in that hospital. Man, whoever invented daytime TV ought to be forced to watch that crap."

Sam nodded. He knew being around a hospital again had brought back bad memories for Dean. Maybe it was time to stop the ribbing, at least for an hour or two. He looked back to the laptop instead and his brow furrowed. At last they had a lead, even if it was a vague one. "Looks like we've got something," he pointed to an article from the previous year. "Matthew Ismay was involved in a fire at the local kids' home. It says here he's been there since his parents died when he was a baby. Doesn't go into detail on what happened to them."

"What about the fire?" Dean leaned across, checking out the story whilst rummaging through a box of CD's he'd downloaded from the net.

The new player was great, and it had helped increase his library of mullet rock considerably. That being said, he sometimes still preferred the grainy quality of his old cassette deck. He squinted at his own spidery writing on the label and finally chose Metallica's 'Invisible Kid,' his face cracking into a huge grin.

Sam cringed at his brother's musical selection, but continued narrating the rather concise article before him. "It says Matthew saved all the other kids in his dorm by alerting the staff to the fire. The weird thing was he seemed to know about it before it actually started. For awhile, he was even a suspect until one of his tutors was able to give him an alibi."

Dean whistled. "Are you thinking this kid could be like you? I mean, could have been?"

Sam licked his lips. The possibility was becoming more and more likely. Maybe that was why the priest had somehow latched on to the orphan in the first place. He did seem to have a knack of seeing others like himself. "I don't know, but we have to find out." He twisted his wrist to check on the time. "It's too late to make the library and newspaper archives today. We'll check out the west wing tonight and I'll hit the research in the morning."

"Sounds like a plan." Dean cranked the Impala and turned up the volume on the CD player. It was time to head back to the motel to shower before their nighttime vigil, and he had every intention of enjoying some kick-ass music on the way.

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Children's Hospital of Wisconsin West Wing 12.01a.m.

Sam poked his head around the corridor wall and sighed. He hated skulking about as if he were a criminal, but there was little else they could do because Dean had refused point blank to wear the cleaners uniforms he'd found for them. Now, they had to try to stealthily avoid every security camera on the wing whilst they searched for the spirit of Matthew Ismay.

"I told you we should have used those uniforms," Sam grouched, looking over Dean's shoulder at the E.M.F. meter's readings.

"Dude, cleaners don't hang around hospitals at this time of night. Besides, you know I hate uniforms, especially after Taliean..." Dean pulled a face and Sam instantly felt guilty.

On their last gig Frank Taliean had given Sam a pretty cushy job while Dean had been stuck masquerading as a security guard. He'd been pissed about it ever since. "A cleaner's uniform worked for Richard Kimble," he offered innocently.

"Yeah, well I'm not *'The Fugitive'* and I don't plan on being anytime soon. So, can we get back to spook hunting?" Dean swung the E.M.F. around in another sweep, but the needle still remained static. It was picking up a big fat zilch no matter where they looked. "I'm thinking our ghost boy might be a wild goose chase here, Sammy."

Sam frowned. The priest had wanted them here. There had to be something to the nurses story, they were just missing the connection. He looked up at a small white-faced clock hanging from the hallway wall and noted it was just past midnight. Traditionally, the witching hour had begun.

"Maybe we should find out which room Matthew was in and check it out?" Sam gestured in the direction of the nurse's station and was about to suggest they approach her and ask a few questions.

He didn't get chance to even finish his sentence.

A shrill, high-pitched scream echoed down the white-walled corridor like a banshee wail. The scream repeated as both brothers spun around and realized it was the nurse on duty doing the shrieking.

"Spook ass kickin' time, little brother." Dean broke into a fast jog and quickened the pace further when he saw the terrified nurse up ahead. She seemed focused on an adjoining corridor, and at the sight of Dean began to point frantically down the gloomy passageway.

Dean slowed and sensed Sam at his side as they approached the duty station. Neither brother spoke, but put their attention where the ashen-faced nurse was still pointing.

Dean saw it first. Just a few feet down the dimly lit corridor, the apparition of a small boy hovered over the freshly cleaned linoleum floor. His features looked like a masque of pain and insecurity, and as he beckoned with his outstretched hand it was obvious he was tormented by some unknown predicament.

"Crap!" Dean tapped the E.M.F. with the flat of his hand, but it still registered nothing. Either his meter was broken, or the kid was a new kind of weird. "Sammy, I'm getting a big fat nothing here..."

Sam didn't seem to hear his brother. Instead, he moved forward as the white-faced specter called to him.

The more Matthew beckoned, the more Sam felt bound to follow his appeal for help. The sallow-faced kid was an enigma, a spirit he had to face and help if he were to find the truth about so many things.

"Sammy, stay back..."

Sam heard Dean's words, but they meant nothing. Matthew needed him, and his mind, his body, every muscle and sinew couldn't refuse the request. He was mesmerized just as if some mystical hypnotist had entranced him.

"Sammy!"

This time, Dean's words were spoken with such fear that Sam turned, breaking the bizarre psychic connection that had held him fast before. As he turned, he realized why he had been allowed to break the link. Dean was slipping a hand under his jacket to retrieve the rock salt-filled SKB he'd brought along for good measure.

As the shortened barrel emerged in his brother's grasp, Sam reached out a hand and tugged it down, stopping Dean taking aim on the manifestation before them. "No, Dean, he's not here to hurt anyone."

Dean felt his grip tighten on the shotgun and he flashed a skeptical look at his brother. Sometimes Sam had been known to be a little too soft where spirits were concerned and he wasn't taking any risks. For now, he nodded that he would hold back, but he still let the SKB line up on the kid's shimmering, incandescent form. "Watch your ass, bro," he offered, keeping a wary eye on his target.

Sam didn't answer, but felt himself biting into his lip as he moved closer to the kid.

Matthew beckoned again, his thin, bony hand willing the young hunter to follow. The kid appeared almost desperate, and his beseeching pleas were obviously now aimed singularly at Sam.

As the boy backed up, his frail form hit a wall and dissipated into the nether region beyond it.

Dean exhaled, relieved that the spirit had vanished. He may not be the visionary of the family, but the thing had obviously latched onto his brother, and he wasn't happy about it. Sam had enough to deal with facing the demon without being a spirit magnet.

Just as Dean began to let his guard down, a hand re-emerged from the wall, followed by the kid's entire ethereal form. "Guess I spoke too soon," Dean mumbled under his breath, taking aim once again with the SKB.

Sam held out a hand. "How can we help you? What is it you want here?"

Matthew cocked his head, his pallid façade visibly frowning in disillusionment. Sam didn't understand his pleas. Sam didn't grasp what he was trying to show. In despair, Matthew dipped his head and appeared to concentrate. He appeared to focus on the floor, and as his brows furrowed, Sam began to clutch his head.

It wasn't pain exactly, it was far worse.

Sam had had visions before, frightening, gory visions he'd rather forget, but this was different. The agony came first, like some huge ball in his skull pressing to get out. As the pressure increased, so did the amount of clarity to his revelation- like someone adjusting a badly tuned TV set.

Sam blinked, stumbling forward as the intensity of his vision took a hold on his body. This was no ordinary foretelling, and he had no control over his own muscles anymore.

He reached out a hand, desperate to grab the wall for support, but he was too far away, his judgment clouded by the imagery filling his beleaguered brain.

"Sam!" Dean saw his brother try to steady himself and fail, tumbling to the floor like a toddler trying to walk for the first time.

The sight was enough to spur the elder hunter into action and he raced forward, tugging back the SKB's trigger as hard and fast as his reflexes allowed.

The shotgun kicked back in his grasp, but he never even noticed. Dean's attention lay on both Sam, and the still very apparent apparition before him.

"What the..?" Dean's eyes widened in disbelief, and he began to shakily reload the shotgun.

As the rock salt had hit, Matthew's form hadn't even been shaken. He was as visible now as he had been ten seconds earlier. Only now, he appeared even more distraught.

"What are you, a freakin' tulpa?" The only thing Dean had ever fought that had been impervious to rock salt had been Mordecai Murdock, and he hadn't exactly been a real spirit. Then again, if the nurses believed it enough, had they summoned Matt back from the grave too?

Right now, Dean didn't care. All he was concerned with was his brother, and at this point, Sammy wasn't looking too good.

Once he'd hit the linoleum, Sam had curled into a ball and begun to almost convulse. He was in agony, both mentally and physically, of that Dean was sure. As he watched, terrified, Sam began to shake uncontrollably, his eyes rolling back in his skull as if he were having some kind of seizure.

The image was too much for the elder hunter to take, and he raced forward, unafraid of the ghost, but very afraid for his brother. He yanked back on the trigger of his shotgun for a second time, almost at point-blank range, filling the corridor with a powdery white mist.

Still, Matthew Ismay's flickering form refused to falter. His eyes filled with tears and he shook his head, not comprehending why Dean would try to force him away until he was ready to leave.

No matter what, he refused to release his hold on his captive until he was ready, little realizing he may be putting Sam's life at risk.

"You're killing him, can't you see that?" Dean tossed down his weapon and pointed desperately to where Sam lay shaking on the floor. If he couldn't force the spirit back the old fashioned way, then maybe he could try a little reasoning "Sammy style."

Sam was convinced Ismay wasn't here to cause harm, so maybe he would see reason if Dean could just get the kid to focus on him instead of Sam, just for a second.

Matthew wavered, not wanting to let go, not yet. He looked up from Sam's prone form and stared deep into Dean's eyes, pleading with the elder brother to let him finish.

Dean shook his head. "Let him go!" he demanded, his voice quivering with pent-up rage at the eleven-year old's spirit.

Ismay let his eyelids flutter closed, sensing the torment he was putting the Winchesters through. It hadn't been his intention. He hadn't wanted to hurt, or anger anyone. With a wan smile he backed up, his iridescent outline fading into the corridor wall as quickly as it had come.

The instant Ismay vanished Dean put his attention back to Sam, quickly kneeling at his side, all other thoughts forgotten.

The younger Winchester still lay on the linoleum, gasping for breath now that he had been freed from his mental prison. He looked paler than Dean had ever seen him- even after one of his normal visions.

"Can you stand?" Dean queried, already guessing his brother couldn't.

Sam shook his head and the action disoriented him more, flashing images filling his confused mind until he wanted to yell out in frustration and agony. He panted, pushing away his brother's hand until the nightmare began to abate.

Once Sam's breathing steadied, Dean hooked a hand under his arm and gently pulled him to his feet, taking almost all of Sam's weight as he guided him to the chair at the nurse's station.

Sam dropped down heavily on the padded seat and let his head hang low, holding either side of his temple with his fingertips to try to alleviate the weight he still felt pressing on his skull.

"What the hell did that kid do to you, Sammy? You scared the crap outta me!" Dean didn't know whether to be relieved his brother was still in the land of the living, or annoyed that Sam had let the kid control him.

"Maybe now someone will believe me?" The young nurse who up until now had been forgotten slipped a hand to Sam's neck and felt his racing pulse. He still appeared disoriented and confused, and his eyes were glazed and unfocused. "You should get checked out by a doctor," she concluded, concern filling her voice.

Sam swallowed hard and finally managed to look up, brushing away both Dean's and the nurse's fears. "I'm okay, just a little dizzy."

"A little dizzy? Sammy, you look like a case for a freakin' reaper!" Dean turned, picked up the shotgun from where he'd dropped it and began to pace, running a hand through his hair as he tried to piece things together. "Rock salt was useless! What the hell is this thing, little brother?"

"I saw something, Dean, something weird." Sam glanced at the nurse who was now gaping at them both as if they were delusional. She'd seen the kid's ghost, but had no clue who they were or why they'd be prowling the hospital corridors at gone midnight.

"No kidding it was weird. This whole scenario is weird!" Dean looked into Sam's still glassy eyes and his voice softened. "You think the kid somehow forced the vision?"

Sam nodded, wishing he had a bottle of Tylenol handy for his exploding cranium. "I'm pretty sure of it. The thing is I just don't understand what he was trying to show me. It was a building, some kind of ancient motel right out of a *Psycho* movie." He inhaled, thinking of how lucid the imagery had been while the kid had been in control.

"All I know is what I foresaw through Ismay was the realest, most intense vision I've ever been through."

Dean stopped pacing and stood in front of Sam, scrutinizing him to make sure he was recovering from his ordeal. Satisfied, he let the conversation continue. "So, the kid triggered what you saw, but why an abandoned motel room if he died here at the hospital? It doesn't make sense."

When Sam shook his head, indicating he didn't know, the worried brother looked to the still hovering and very frightened nurse. Her nametag read Susan Riley, and he recalled she'd been the one to insist Ismay's ghost was real back at the bar. "I think we should get you back to the motel and retire gracefully," he offered sympathetically to Sam, hoping the nurse would back him up.

She took the elder brother's cue, even though she still didn't know who they were. "Your friend's right. You really should get some rest. You look like hell." As an afterthought she questioned, "Who are you? Who are you really?"

Sam shot a glance to Dean and then softly answered. "We're the good guys."

Somehow, the response did little to quell the nurse's fears. While the two men before her could head on out for a shower and a soft bed, she had a night shift to finish. Right now, that didn't sound too appealing after what she'd seen Matthew's spirit do to Sam.

Dean noted the young woman's expression change and realized why. As he gently pulled Sam's still unsteady body to his feet, he smiled at the nurse, and for once there was no roguish glint to his eyes. "Why don't you call security after we're gone? Tell them you thought you saw a prowler on the wing. They'll probably leave someone with you for the rest of your shift."

"Thanks, I just might." Susan let her gaze probe the now empty corridor where Ismay had materialized and then looked back as Dean helped Sam through the wings emergency exit. She had no idea why, but she trusted the strangers were here to help, and some inner part of her expected to see them again.

* * * *

Dean eased Sam's arm from around his neck and propped his brother up against the Impala while he unlocked the doors. Normally, he had the unhealthy habit of leaving the Chevy open, but after Valerie Harper's threat he wasn't taking any chances.

"You okay, Sammy?" he asked, watching his sibling for any signs of a relapse while he slid the key in the lock.

Sam nodded. He looked tired, but some color had at last returned to his cheeks. "I'll be fine...once..." Sam paused mid-sentence as his eyes became fixated on something in the adjacent thicket.

Dean's eyes followed his brother's gaze to the underbrush and he flinched back in surprise. "Crap!" The kid was back, beckoning just like before, and once again he seemed interested only in Sam. For once in his life, Dean panicked, not for himself, but for his brother. *How the hell do I stop this thing?*

Sam sensed the psychic connection too; his mind suddenly jarred from reality back to that nether place Ismay wanted him to see. This time, Sam welcomed the illusion instead of trying to fight it, knowing it would be less painful in the end.

The pictures came in an almost kaleidoscopic jumble, colors and shapes spinning and twisting until they formed coherent scenes in his mind.

Sam clutched at his head again, feeling like he was being subjected to some Vulcan mind meld that his physical body wasn't capable of handling. The pressure forced him to his knees, and he crumpled into a breathless heap as the pictures came thick and fast to his subconscious.

The motel from earlier surfaced amid the mishmash of images, its rotting walls and decaying structure calling to the young hunter like a screaming E.M.F. meter.

Sam tried to concentrate despite the pain, and the vision sharpened, zooming in to allow him to see more. Now, he appeared inside the cobweb-filled, rat-infested building and he sensed he was not alone.

In the corner of the room stood a makeshift table adorned with strange, hellish symbols- some he easily recognized. Sam squinted, even though the physical action had no real bearing on his "dream." The act clarified the illusion further, and he realized he was actually looking at an altar, not unlike the one Meg Masters had used.

Splashes of dried blood spattered the table's surface, along with several rotting human organs that had been torn roughly from unsuspecting victims' bodies.

As he watched like some ghostly fly-on-the-wall, a figure began to emerge from the gloom. It was a man, his features hidden by lack of daylight. From what Sam could see, he guessed the stranger was about Dean's height, but more muscular. In his left hand the man gripped something tightly, and when he turned Sam noted the item was in fact a rusted blade, corroded with years of misuse.

The shadowy figure moved forwards towards a couch, his fingers flexing over the hilt of his weapon in eager anticipation of what was to come next. The motion rippled his scarred flesh, making a tiny but intricate tattoo on the back of his hand seemingly come alive with the movement.

Even though Sam didn't have full view of the room, he sensed that someone lay beyond where he could see, a terrified girl bound and gagged, lying helplessly on the shredded, ancient sofa.

Sam instantly tried to pull back from the vision, some internal gag reflex telling him to get the hell out before he was forced to witness the evil atrocity that was to come next.

Still, the young hunter remained spellbound, a hostage in his own vision, held fast by Ismay's ethereal energy.

The stranger in the vision reached the couch and kneeled until he was almost out of view, but even without being visible Sam knew what he was doing. Guttural slashing noises followed by a wry chuckle made Sam wish he could pass out and be free from the scene. Blood sprayed from the dying girl's chest like a fountain of red, and had this been a movie the camera lens would have been clouded with the thick viscous liquid.

Sam immediately felt nauseous, despite having been witness to similar acts in the past. Somehow, seeing it this way knotted his stomach in a thousand new ways. *Can I stop this? Maybe there's a chance it hasn't happened yet!* But Sam knew differently.

As the sacrificed teenager drew her last ragged breath, her slayer stood tall, grinning like some feral thing over her lifeless body. In his calloused right hand he held her still warm heart, strings of torn sinew still hanging from it where he had literally gouged it from her chest.

Blood dribbled from the freshly removed organ, spattering the floor with a new stain of red in the dust.

The killer noted the dripping sound and recalled he had a further task to do this day. With a grunt, he moved slowly towards the altar, almost afraid of what he was about to do.

The altar was a thing to be revered, a thing to be afraid of, for it summoned the dark one, and today the master would be paying them a very important visit.

"C'mon, Sammy, wake up!" Sam felt his brother's prodding before he managed to open his bleary eyes and realize the vision was over. He blinked, trying to reassert his grip on the real world, but found he was still too light-headed to move.

Dean took the lack of response as a bad sign and hovered, unsure whether to tug his brother up from the floor or shoot at Ismay's still floating form just for the hell of it.

In the end, he chose a combination of both. "What do you want with my brother you freaky Sonofabitch?" As he yelled out the question, he gently dragged Sam's arm over his shoulder and tried to haul him inside the Impala.

Sam fought his big brother's move, despite the fact that his leg muscles had turned to Jell-O. He had to see what Ismay's spirit was doing. There was more to understand if only he could force his straining body to undergo one last vision.

Dean guessed what Sam was thinking. "No, Sammy! Get in the damn car, or I'll punch you out if I have to!" The flicker of fear in his eyes and the almost panicked expression told Sam his brother meant every word.

Sam still turned as his weight slumped against the Chevy, the thick fog that his mind had been enveloped by making it a struggle to focus on Ismay one last time.

The throbbing, partially transparent shape of the boy shook its head. Even though Sam had seen so much, he still didn't understand what Matthew Ismay was trying to tell him, and time was running out.

Dean left Sam's trembling side and yanked open the Impala's trunk. He grabbed the nearest twelve gauge he knew was loaded and spun around, already settling his aim on the boy. Maybe rock salt was useless, but he couldn't just stand by and watch while some supernatural creature sucked the life out of his brother.

Ismay shook his head again, and for the first time he let his drained façade look to Dean. There was no hate, no anger, only a deep-seated loneliness and fear that the elder Winchester would remember for a long time. The kid was pleading with him for life, just like he had pleaded with his demon-possessed father back in Missouri.

Dean cringed, his brow crinkling as purposefully repressed images flashed back in his mind from the cabin. *Dad! Dad, don't you let it kill me.* His finger hovered over the shotgun's trigger, but he didn't pull back, there was no need. The kid's frail body was slowly dissipating, and as Ismay vanished, he held out a hand one last time, begging for some unknown mercy. A fresh red glob of blood slid from his nose and ebbed onto his lip and he was gone.

Dean allowed the shotgun to lower in his grasp, his heart pounding as adrenalin surged through his veins. "Sammy?" Now that Ismay was gone, his attention lay on one thing only.

Sam groaned at the sound of his brother's worried voice, and as Dean jogged to the passenger side of the Impala, Sam finally allowed the night's events to consume him. He felt his knees slowly buckle, and was thankful when Dean's strong arms were there to save him from hitting the concrete yet again.

Keeping Sam upright with one arm, Dean wrenched open the Chevy's door with his free hand and let his brother slide in ungracefully onto the leather. It was such an unusual sight it scared the elder hunter more than he would ever let Sam know.

Somehow, he was always the one to get hurt on a gig. He was the fighter, the brawn, the dependable foot soldier who took all the knocks and bruises. He was the pawn while Sammy was the king, the "wise man" to be protected.

Sure Sam got tossed around his fair share, but he never seemed to be the one put in a life threatening situation like this- not until now. Dean huffed as he slid behind the Impala's wheel and looked over to his brother.

Sam sat groggily with his head resting on the glass of the side window, his eyes still hazy from his ordeal. He was exhausted to the point of collapse, and every now and then a breath caught in his chest as if he were still seeing something he wasn't ready to share.

Dean didn't like seeing Sam this way, and he'd be damned if he was going to let some punk kid ghost keep up the torture, whether Sam wanted it or not.

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Cheap Motel

**Outskirts of Neenah, Wisconsin
02.23a.m.**

Dean carefully wrapped the chunks of ice he'd collected into a towel, creating a makeshift ice pack. He sauntered over to the edge of his brother's bed, offering up the pain-relieving item silently. He wasn't sure if he was ready to talk to Sammy yet, not when he knew his younger sibling was still hell bent on seeing what Ismay had to tell.

The ghostly kid was slowly killing Sam, and still Sam wouldn't let it go. Maybe that was what angered Dean more- Sam had quietly stolen his stubborn streak and was riding it like a bucking bronco.

"Sam, you have to keep away from that hospital until we can figure this thing out. No way is that kid a tulpa, and I'll be damned if I've ever seen anything else that can do those things." Dean perched himself on the end of the bed and stared at his hands without really focusing on them. He dared't look at Sam, not yet, because Sam was about to argue his point, and it would surely escalate into a full-blown brotherly squabble.

Sam wanted the truth. Dean wanted Sam safe. Unfortunately, it didn't look like the two things would ever go together.

"Dean, if I can just finish the vision I know I'll understand. There's more to see." Sam screwed his eyes shut and winced as he held the icy towel to his still pulsing brow. When the cooling sensation did little to staunch the pain, he leaned back, resting against the pillows Dean had propped behind him.

"Don't you see if you keep having these visions or whatever you call them, it's gonna kill you?" Dean bounced up from the bed and confronted his brother accusingly. "Hell, for all we know this freakin' kid could just be another trick by the damn demon." He shot a hand in the air and wagged it dismissively. "Your priest friend and the note? Maybe they're all part of it too. The demon tricked us once, ten to one I'm betting it just might be trying another set up."

"Dean," Sam appealed, his own voice rising as he defended his actions. "Won't you give me some credit? I'm telling you I know this is real. The kid might be physically hurting me by forcing me to see things, but he's not the bad guy in the equation."

Dean spun around. Sam just wasn't seeing what was happening with a clear mind. "Sam, hello, remember Missouri? I'm sure the whole truck thing was real then too. You gotta realize the demon can mess with your head."

Sam crossed his arms triumphantly. "Then you have nothing to worry about," he concluded testily. "If it's the demon, we know it doesn't want me dead, so I can finish this thing and you can stop playing mother hen."

"We don't know anything about what the demon wants, Sammy. Demons lie their asses off and you know it." Dean felt like getting his brother's collar and shaking some sense into him, but right now Sam looked too weak to even consider it. He exhaled in frustration and headed for the motel room door in a huff. "You're not going back to that hospital if it means I have to glue your ass to the Chevy seat," he announced as he slammed the door behind him.

Sam cringed as the door crashed closed sending new spikes of pain through his skull. "Yeah, well you never were any good with Superglue!" He yelled after his brother as he recalled a certain incident with a beer bottle. "And I'm always the early riser..." he muttered knowingly under his breath.

* * * *

**Public Library, Neenah, Wisconsin
The next day
10:56a.m.**

Sam peered across at his brother and noted Dean was watching him vigilantly. In fact, Sam was sure Dean hadn't slept at all the previous night just to make sure he was okay and didn't try escaping back to the hospital.

Sam decided this overly protective side of his brother could be completely annoying- even if he tended to be exactly the same when Dean was in danger.

"You don't need to follow me like a bodyguard. I'm perfectly capable of looking after myself." Sam looked to his brother and then took a seat at the library computer. It was a brand new machine and he guessed it couldn't have been installed more than a few weeks ago.

"Bodyguard?" Dean quipped, looking over Sam's shoulder as he began to search. "Hell, I'm thinking of having a satellite tracking system embedded in your ass. A lot less time consuming than following your geeky butt all over town."

Sam frowned, his brow knitting with concentration as he worked and chatted at the same time. "Hmnm, interesting..."

"Really?" Dean smirked playfully. "I was thinking it might be kinda painful, but I guess whatever rocks your boat..."

"Dean! I meant the archive info." Sam tapped the reports on the screen with his forefinger. "There's plenty here about the fire, but I can't seem to access anything far enough back to check on the kid's parents."

"That's because that information hasn't been loaded onto the system yet, Sonny." Sam glanced up first and was greeted by a forty-something librarian who looked like she'd feasted on cakes and chocolate for most of her life. She smiled offhandedly and gestured back to the "real" archives. "As you can see, we're doing a full upgrade of the library's filing system. Until the tech boys finish up, anything past ten years old is hard copy only."

Dean put a hand to his head as if he'd suddenly and inexplicably been attacked by their young ghost friend. Wading through newspapers and archives was so not his thing. A thought struck him and his mood instantly changed. Research was not his gig, but if he could leave Sam to dig into the paperwork maybe he could go find some real answers before his brother was seriously hurt.

"How about you wade through this stuff, and I'll go ask our favourite nurse a few more questions about spirit boy?" He wiggled an eyebrow mischievously.

"You mean why don't I do the work while you go try your latest chat up line on Val?" Sam knew there was more to his brother's reasoning, but he didn't voice it. "Just make sure you park the Impala legally," he joked, "or you might just find it compacted into an ashtray."

"Hey, that chick loves my ass. She's just playing hard to get." Dean tugged the Impala keys swiftly from his pocket and his lips curled into a cheeky smile.

"It's not your ass I'm bothered about, Dean, it's the Impala's," Sam chuckled as his brother made a hasty retreat from the library, leaving him to sift through piles of musty records.

* * * *

Dean ambled back on to the west wing and hoped Val was once again on duty. Somehow he doubted he'd be able to get her home address as easily as he'd gotten the hospitals from Nick. Val was one shrewd lady.

"Back to try a new ruse?" Dean looked to the nurse's station, and finding it empty spun around to the sound of the slightly irked voice. Val Harper stood before him with several manila folders under her arm, her left brow raised questioningly. "What kind of masquerade is it going to be today? Kids' entertainer? Clown?"

Dean made a face that suggested the latter idea was pretty repulsive. He'd had an aversion to clowns since seeing Tim Curry in *'It.'* Just because he hunted the undead didn't mean he couldn't be superstitious about anything. "Sweetheart, I don't do clowns."

"Yeah, well you should," Val countered with a chuckle. "I have a feeling you've got all the right qualifications." She walked over to her desk and dropped down the folders she held. Satisfied they'd be safe until she could file them, she turned back to Dean. "So, how's your friend? Susan told me he looked like a guy about to have an aneurysm last night." She crossed her arms, waiting expectantly for answers.

"He'd be doing a whole lot better if that kid's ghost hadn't latched onto him like a damn limpet." Dean's cocky façade melted as he thought of Sam. Flirting with Val just wasn't a priority while his brother was still in danger. "Look, I know you think we're a couple of freaks, but we need to know every last detail about this spook if we're gonna can its butt."

"Is that what you do? Some kind of ghost-busting duo?" Val looked slightly bemused. "Susan said you shot at the kid with salt?" She wanted to laugh, but smothered the urge, just managing to smile instead. "I have to tell you I think the Bill Murray movie was much more entertaining. There are no such thing as real ghosts," she said flatly. "What people think they see? I think they're just echoes from the past. Fingerprints left behind that we sometimes see but can't interact with."

Dean cocked his head and cringed. Val was a non-believer and he doubted he would sway her viewpoint anytime soon. Something had made her bitter, of that he was sure, but digging into her past right now wasn't why he was here. Maybe he could do that after the gig was over, if he could just get her to drop the hardball attitude.

"You don't have to believe. Just tell me what you know about Ismay's parents. It could be vital." Dean kept his tone serious, hoping the nurse would at least humor him enough to give up any information she might have.

It appeared to work. Val sighed and sat back on the edge of her desk. "I told you most of what I know already." She thought back to when the kid had been admitted, trying to recall any facts the orphanage staff might have let slip. "I think someone said Matthew's parents died in a house fire when he was a baby. Something about the blaze starting in his room, too. If it hadn't been for a neighbor the poor kid would have burned right on up with his parents."

"The kid's room burned first?" Dean didn't know whether to be excited or panic. It looked like Sam was right about Ismay. Maybe that was why he could reach out from beyond the grave to others of his kind. Maybe, just maybe that's why he'd died mysteriously. *Maybe the kid was murdered after all because of his gifts!*

Val nodded. "Well, that's what I was told. Of course, I don't really see how it could have and him survive. You know how stories snowball..."

"Yeah," Dean leaned past Val and grabbed a pen and paper from her desk. He quickly jotted down his cell number. "Not this time, though." He offered up the paper. "Call me if you remember anymore. My brother's life just might depend on it."

"Your brother?"

Dean didn't answer. He was already jogging out of the wing and back to the Impala. Ismay was no ordinary ghost, of that he was now sure. That meant the rules of engagement were different too, but they'd already learned that the hard way. *Sammy's not safe anywhere...*

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**Public Library, Neenah, Wisconsin
12:56p.m.**

Sam exited the library and glanced down at his watch. Dean should have been back from the hospital by now, and that probably meant he had gotten sidetracked with one very good-looking blonde nurse.

Sam shook his head but couldn't blame his brother. It was just the way Dean was made. He slid a hand into his pocket and tugged out his cell, intending to give the flirt a call, but then noted there was no signal. "Typical..."

Sam stuffed the dead phone back into its resting place and looked around for somewhere to sit until a certain black Impala resurfaced. Across the road on the adjacent sidewalk was a small wooden bench. It was the perfect place to deliberate what he'd discovered while waiting, and so he took several long strides over to it and flopped down.

The archives hadn't really proved to be very helpful. In fact, all the information he'd discovered was mostly about the fire at the orphanage. There was some small reference to an earlier fire, however, and it was that that had intrigued Sam.

Now, more than ever, he was convinced Matthew Ismay had been special. Even in death they shared a bond.

Why would he show me the motel room and the altar? Is he trying to help me find the demon? Part of Sam hoped that was the answer. Ever since the demon had admitted it had "plans" for the gifted kids, he'd known one day he would have to fight it again. After what the vile thing had done to his mom, Jess, and all the others out there, Sam would welcome the battle.

Even thinking about his visions and the demon made Sam's head begin to throb again, and he pinched the bridge of his nose in irritation. When the sensation refused to go away, he realized the cause was more than a few tainted memories.

Sam looked up, knowing what he would see even though it was theoretically improbable.

Matthew Ismay's flickering presence awaited his gaze, even though it was a bright, sunny day with people milling to a fro across the sidewalk. Ghosts might not usually manifest in daylight like this, but Ismay was relentless. He held out a hand, urging Sam to join him on some journey to a different plane, and this time, Sam accepted the risk willingly...

Sam didn't feel his body tumble from the bench or hit the floor. By the time he lay on the sidewalk trembling convulsively, his mind had entered a totally different world.

Sam was back in the abandoned motel, his senses heightened until he saw every minute detail, every roach cross the floor, every fly that buzzed around clots of blood and tissue that splattered the walls.

The young hunter saw everything just a little too clearly.

He was outside a room, but this time it was not the room he had envisioned before. This place was carefully locked and barricaded as if it held some prehistoric monster. Extra wooden planks had been hammered to every possible exit save for one door, and that had three recently fitted locks protruding from its edge.

As Sam took in the new horror scene, someone began to approach the secret room. The newcomer held the knife from his earlier vision, and as the stranger neared Sam knew it was the killer, even though his features were still masked by darkness and some ungodly cloud.

The killer fumbled in a pocket with his free hand and managed to pluck out a jangling bunch of keys. Sam guessed correctly that he was about to open the securely locked door.

While the man struggled to find the right key for each lock, Sam let his gaze fall further back into the adjoining room. Something white and glistening had caught his eye, and he couldn't help but look at whatever it was.

Sam's head spun momentarily as his eyes refocused as if he were using binoculars. The white, glinting thing became sharp and focused, and with it came the realization that there was not one but many.

If Sam hadn't been simply a fly-on-the wall he would have balked. The second room had a table propped against its farthest wall, and the things garnishing it and catching the sunlight from the window above were in fact bony-white human skulls.

They appeared to have been bleached or worse to remove any last vestiges of flesh, making them perfect trophies.

Sam tried to count just how many people must have died to make such an evil shrine, but in the end he turned away, sickened by what he was being forced to see. *Just how long have the murders been going on here?*

The keys clattered down hard as the killer dropped them, foul curse words coming from his mouth every two seconds, and Sam returned his attention to the secret room the murderer was now entering. Matthew Ismay had wanted Sam here to see this. This was the end of the yellow brick road he had been forced to walk, and Sam had no illusions what might lay at the end of it.

The door swung open laboriously, its hinges groaning as rust rubbed on rust after years of not being used. Inside, the room was dark, and the killer had to walk into its center just to catch a glimpse of his special prisoner.

Sam's presence followed, his eyes narrowing to strain through the dimness to see who or what was cowering in the gloom. As his pupils adjusted to the dark, Sam finally caught a glimmer of movement and almost gasped in surprise.

Matthew Ismay shook as he recoiled into the corner, shying from the killer's taunting blade. The young boy looked pale, but not as white as he had appeared during his 'manifestations' to Sam.

"Leave me alone. You won't get what you want from me." The eleven-year-old's voice was high-pitched and terrified, but there was something in his delivery that told Sam the fear was not of dying. He didn't care if the killer took his soul for some yellow-eyed demon, but he did care what his death might mean.

Sam pulled back, suddenly trying to escape what he was seeing. It was too confusing for his assaulted brain to compute. *What are you afraid of? What does your death mean?* The words echoed in the hunter's mind, but he couldn't ask them because this wasn't real, was it? Matthew was already dead, so that meant he was seeing the past, wasn't he?

The images in Sam's subconscious lurched and he felt himself physically clutching his head in the real world. Voices called to him, asking if he was alright, but he couldn't wake up to answer. The movie had one last reel of film for him to see, and he couldn't leave the drive-in until it was over.

This time, the visualization was of the outside of the motel. The decaying structure sat ominously in the distance, its wooden roof partially caved in on the whole left wing of rooms. Outside the remaining intact parts stood two trucks, one very old freightliner, and a more modern Dodge Ram. In the back of the Ram, Sam sensed but could not see yet more bodies...

* * * *

Dean slid the Impala on to East Wisconsin Avenue and began to look for somewhere to park close to the library. Usually he'd leave the old girl anywhere without giving it too much thought, but after Val's threats he wasn't taking any chances.

He cursed under his breath as he realized he was going to have to pay to park, and was just about to consider driving around the block when he spotted a crowd gathering around a small roadside bench.

Dean frowned and let the car come to a stop, suddenly forgetting the chances of getting a ticket. He didn't know why, but somehow he knew he had to see what was going on. Sliding the lever on the steering column into park, Dean quickly clambered from the Chevy and jogged across the street.

"Excuse me, somthin' going on here, ma'am?" Dean tried to gently push through the small crowd as he questioned a wiry framed woman who looked at least a hundred.

"Some young man collapsed on the side walk. Won't let anyone call an ambulance." She shook her head, worriedly.

Instinctively, Dean kicked into big brother mode before he knew for sure it was Sam on the ground. "Sam?" He called through the mob. "Sammy?"

Sam was sitting up, but to Dean he looked like he should be lying down—preferably in a hospital bed. He was whiter than Ismay's spirit, and a thick glob of blood had trickled from his nose and was congealing on his upper lip.

"It's okay. I'll take it from here." Dean began waving off the crowd. The last thing Sam needed was an audience to one of his nightmarish revelations. "He's my brother. I can take care of him..."

The onlookers took Dean's explanation and began to move away, some disappointed that they weren't going to get some excitement in their dreary lives—even if it only was likely to be gossip to spread.

When the last 'gaper' had vanished, Dean eased Sam back up onto the bench and pulled an extremely creased handkerchief from his pocket. "Dude, wipe that blood off your face, you look like crap again."

Sam looked at his brother blearily but did as he was told. "Thanks for reminding me how bad I look," he sighed. "At least this time I think it was worth it."

"Worth it? Sam, you're gonna die in one of these fits or whatever they are. Each one gets worse, and the kid is a relentless lil' S.O.B. He won't stop just because you're hurting." Dean spun around so that his back was facing Sam. This was the third time they'd had this conversation and it wasn't getting him anywhere. *Maybe the Sat Navigation wasn't such a bad idea...*

"Listen, I think I finally know what the kid wants, and we have to hurry!" Sam tried to get up and face Dean off, but his knees refused the command to stand and he flopped weakly back down. "Dean, I don't think Matthew Ismay is dead!"

Dean abruptly turned back and looked at his brother as if he had gone completely mad. "Are you nuts? What was that we saw, a freakin' mirage?"

"Listen," Sam leaned forward, intent on being heard whether Dean believed his theory or not, "This time I saw everything, the motel, and more. There's a room, it's locked, hell, barricaded, and the killer was there. He has Matthew locked inside, cowering in a corner like some animal." Sam's expression changed from desperate to pleading. "Dean, we have to save him."

"Sammy, you can't save someone who is already dead. I know it was sad, but you were at the hospital. He's dead." Dean finally gave in to his brother's puppy dog look and took a seat beside him on the bench. "Whatever he's showing you must be the past," he concluded.

Sam shook his head, even though it still throbbed. "No, you said it yourself; demons can make you believe anything. What if Matthew is like me? What if he has gifts the demon wants. It said it had plans, remember?"

Dean did remember, although it was something he wished he didn't have to. He shot Sam a look, but didn't respond.

"Dean, what if the demon had the kid abducted and made the hospital staff think he died? Some kind of illusion like the truck..." There was excitement in Sam's voice as he convinced himself what was happening. "I think Matthew can somehow project himself and he's been trying to let someone know he's not dead. That's why the E.M.F. showed zilch and the rock salt didn't hurt him. He's not a spirit!"

"Let me get this straight, you think an eleven year old kid is somehow able to float around, forcing you to have visions because he's got some kind of psychic gig going on," Dean winced, "like you?" He added grudgingly. "So how come he can do more stuff than you or Max could and he's so young?"

Sam didn't even blink. He'd already thought that fact through and was ready with an answer. "Some scientists think that psychic and psychokinetic abilities are controlled by a part of the brain normal people don't use, but that people like me and Matthew have tapped into. What if Matthew's tumor is pressing on that area accelerating the growth of his abilities? Maybe that's why the demon took him first?"

Dean let a low whistle out through his teeth. "Whoa, you've been looking this whole psychic boy stuff up? You're getting way out there into the twilight zone, you know that right?"

"But what if I'm right? What if the kid isn't dead and we do nothing? He doesn't have long before the tumor is inoperable. We have to at least check this out." Sam pressed hard, knowing that no matter how much Dean thought Sam was losing it, his brother would never risk a child's life.

"I'll make you a deal." Dean watched Sam for a reaction. He still suspected Sam was letting the kid and the visions get the better of him, and he wanted to be sure they made the right move for everyone's sake. "I vote we find Ismay's grave, and if the body's not there, maybe, just maybe I'll buy this whole projection deal. If the body is there, we salt and burn the bones, job done." He shrugged. "The way I see it it's a win, win situation."

Sam inhaled and took the time to glance up to the library clock face. How many hours did Matthew Ismay have left before there was nothing the doctors could do for him? How many hours before the demon put its plan into motion? "Let's do it..." Sam pushed up from the bench and this time forced his knees to lock. If his theory was right, they had a kid to find, and not very much time to do it in.

* * * *

Oak Hill Cemetery Neenah, Wisconsin

The earth was dry and hard, its clay content and lack of rain making any kind of excavation difficult. Digging into the cement-style soil was like ramming a spade into steel. The motion jarred every muscle in Dean's body, but actually only got him a few measly inches further into the ground with every lunge.

Sweat poured from the elder Winchester until he gave in and dropped his spade for a second to tear off his t-shirt. He tossed the soaked tee on top of the neighboring tombstone and then began to dig again, cursing under his breath for once again getting the short straw.

Damned if he knew how his little brother did it, but whenever there was a body to unearth Dean got the digging, and Sammy got the babysitting or lookout duty. "I am so gonna get me a one-sided coin for times like these..." Dean took out his frustration on the ground, using his upper body strength to take out another few inches of earth until his spade clanked against something solid.

Dean pulled back and took a long, deep breath before mopping his drenched brow with his forearm. The motion left a swatch of dirt across his forehead but Dean never noticed. He glanced warily around the empty cemetery, searching for mourners who might see his totally illegal act and call the police.

It was a risky business exhuming a body at the best of times, but in broad daylight like this, it was plain buckets of crazy. That was why Sam had been strategically placed to look out for possible trouble.

"Long legs are better for climbing my ass," Dean grouched as he took a peek at the tree Sam had concealed himself in. "Next time I get to play monkey; Sammy boy definitely gets to be the ghoul with the spade." He brought the tool up over his shoulder and plunged the sharp edge into the top of the casket.

Matthew Ismay had no relatives and his burial had been a simple one. The cheap, thin-lined coffin gave way with ease to the ghost hunter's spade and Dean leaned back, expecting to be overwhelmed by the sight of Ismay's bloating body.

Dean's eyes widened. "Well I'll be damned, little brother." He raised a brow and then knelt down, brushing away loose dirt to check if there was anything at all in the casket. A few rocks lay at one end, and Dean guessed they'd rolled there

because the coffin had probably been lowered at an angle. "Guess we got ourselves a motel to find, and fast."

Dean dropped the spade and reached out to grab the solid earth walls that surrounded him. Digging down to a casket was hard work, but clambering up the hole was a bitch with no one to give you a hand back out.

He cursed as the dry soil crumbled in his hands. "Where's college boy when you need him..." As if in answer, an outstretched palm appeared over the earthy ledge and Dean grabbed it appreciatively. "About time you made your sorry ass useful..."

Dean paused as he was tugged from the grave not by Sam, but a tall, bearded old man with beady, mischievous eyes that danced in the sunlight.

"You one of those college kids who think it's funny to come dig up my cemetery, boy?" The man's brow crinkled questioningly and he gestured to the mess Dean had made. He appeared neither angry nor reproachful, but simply curious as to Dean's motives.

Way to go, Sammy. Not only do you get to sit out of the sun, but you get my ass canned too! "No, sir," Dean began with the truth, carefully spinning a lie to follow. "I'm with the police department. We're investigating Matthew Ismay's death." He let his eyes fall to the kid's tombstone and waited for the old timer's next move.

"Sonny, don't you think I know you have to get a court order to exhume a body?" He smirked playfully, looking over into the grave, his eyes twinkling with some bizarre form of mirth. "And of course, the police wouldn't send one half naked and very scruffy young man. They have professionals for this kind of thing."

"Let's just say we're in a hurry. We have reason to believe the kid isn't dead, at least not yet." Dean knew the man, whoever he was, wasn't buying his story, but he had to try. What he needed right now was some Sammy intervention to save the day or he might just be getting arrested for grave robbing.

The bearded stranger's upper lip twitched and he crossed his arms. "But of course you're in a hurry. You're looking for somewhere, aren't you?"

Dean took a step back, and his eyes narrowed in both surprise and suspicion. The guy before him should be demanding I.D. and getting ready to call the cops, but instead he was being all-too helpful. In fact, he seemed to know just a little too much for his presence at Ismay's graveside to be random.

On the other hand, with no body in the casket, and no real clue where the elusive motel was, Dean was prepared to take the risk of dancing with the devil if it saved a kid's life.

"We have reason to believe the kid," he pointed at the tombstone again, "is being held captive in an old motel. Someplace off the beaten track that hasn't been used in years. We know part of the roof is caved in. Anything like that ring any bells?"

The old man pondered the question. "I think you mean the old Melrose place. I used to play there as a kid. It hasn't been used since the fifties. Too far out to get any business, you see."

Dean winced, uncertain how to take the new information. Things were coming together just a little too easily, and the more he thought about it the more he was convinced he and Sam were being set up. *And where the hell is Sam, anyway?* The thought, coupled with the stranger's openness, brought worry to the young hunter's heart and he whirled, sudden concern flushing his face.

When Sam's long, gangly legs appeared on cue and he jumped from the lowest branch of his hideout, Dean let out a sigh and turned back to quiz the old man more.

For Dean, though, there would be no more playing quizmaster. The stranger with the white beard and thinning hair had vanished. The cemetery was once again the empty, solitary place it had been before.

"What are you staring at so intently?" Sam scooted over to Dean's side and glanced around, uncertain what had turned his brother into a wide-eyed gawker instead of his usual cocky self.

Dean's gaze strayed from the plethora of granite monuments around them just long enough to shoot his brother a perplexed look. "You didn't see the old guy? Hell, my ass could have been on the line if he'd have been security or a cop."

Sam's confused expression matched Dean's and he shook his head lightly. "Dean, nobody has passed me. I haven't seen anyone since you started digging. There was nobody here."

"Dude, I'm not the one who sees things, remember?" The aggravation in the elder Winchester's tone made it quite clear he thought Sam had missed the old timer. After all, what other answer could there possibly be? "He was over six feet, grey thinning hair and a beard."

"Nobody walked, floated, or drove by that tree, Dean."

Dean grabbed his t-shirt from the tombstone and pointed down into the grave. There was really no point in arguing, but something very weird had just happened. "You were right about the kid. No body, no nothing. What's more, the guy who 'was never here' just happened to know where to find your mystery motel. In fact, he offered up the information without me really having to say anything..."

Sam inhaled and leaned against the cool exterior wall of the vault behind Ismay's grave. Either he really had missed the old guy, or maybe they were being led into another trap by the demon. The thing had toyed with them like this before and it could certainly be doing so again. "If we find the motel we could be walking straight into a demonic ambush."

Dean nodded, slipping his t-shirt back on. "Yeah, but if we don't, your kid is as good as dead..."

* * * *

Melrose's Motel Just South of Neenah, Wisconsin

Dean pulled the Impala to a halt and reluctantly shut off the engine. It hadn't taken much for the brothers to find out where the "old Melrose place" was actually situated, but that didn't mean he liked the idea of actually visiting the dilapidated dive- there was just too much of a chance that the demon might be here.

Not that Dean didn't want to send its yellow-eyed ass back to hell, because he wanted nothing more. But still, even at the thought of the thing he tended to see his father's face after the events in Missouri.

It was like John now personified the thing that he and Sam hated so much. In Dean's eyes, entering the decaying motel was like walking into the cabin all over again.

"This is as close as we can get with the car." Dean raised a finger towards their target and pulled out his forty-five, checking to see that he had a full clip. "Looks like there's more than one bad guy in there," he noted, wincing at the sight of both trucks parked outside.

Sam nodded. He hadn't seen anyone but the killer, but he clearly recalled the Freightliner and Dodge from his vision. "The kid's important to the demon. They wouldn't risk leaving him with just one guard."

Dean stuffed his favourite silver automatic back under his jacket and his head tilted slightly as he asked, "I don't suppose you can see through walls as well as minds?" A grin appeared. "Because it would be real helpful to know how many of the demon's goons we're dealing with."

"Sorry, even I have my limits." Sam grinned back before exiting the car and heading for the trunk.

The younger Winchester already had his Glock stuffed in the back of his jeans, but selected a rock-salt filled shotgun and holy water to add to his arsenal. He might

not be dealing with spirits, but the rock salt provided an alternative to actually shooting someone if Ismay's guards turned out to be human minions.

He tossed Dean a similar weapon and his brother began sliding shells in until the pump action Remington was full. "So, any ideas on how we get into this place without Mr. Slice and Dice and his buds seeing us? I mean they gotta have lookouts, right? Did you see anything that might help while under projection boy's influence?"

Sam lightly closed the Chevy's trunk to avoid making undue noise and took a fleeting glance in the distance at the motel. All he kept thinking about were the white glistening skulls that had glared at him so malevolently in the last vision. Then, he realized the garish items just might have shown him a way in.

"I think there's a window around back we might be able to get through. It's close enough to where they're keeping Matthew and we can use the tree line for cover most of the way over." Sam licked his lips. "Just be careful what you tread on when you climb through..."

"Don't tell me, there's a toilet on the other side?" Dean rested the Remington on his shoulder and his face puckered at an old and unpleasant memory. He'd once climbed through a window and planted his boot right down a rather unkempt toilet bowl. Sam had ribbed him about that for weeks.

This time, Sam wasn't laughing. "No. Nothing that nice."

Dean shrugged but didn't ask his brother to elaborate. They'd both seen enough bad things in their time to know when a subject was "off limits" like now. "Okay, so let's play cavalry, dude," he offered instead, jogging into the undergrowth to their left as if he were tracking some wild animal.

Sam followed, keeping close to his big brother, shotgun at the ready.

As they grew closer to the rear of the motel, Dean's gait slowed and he began scanning the ground for any kind of booby trap. There could be hidden snares or alarm wires anywhere and he didn't intend to walk the Winchesters right into one.

Just before they reached the edge of the tree line, Dean paused and dropped down to his knees. He didn't speak, but instead pointed downwards with his finger to something near his toe cap.

Sam recognized the trip wire instantly. It had been placed at just the right height to catch an unsuspecting visitor. Too bad for the bad guys that John had been a marine. Dean and Sam had been trained to look for such devices from childhood. It wasn't exactly something kindergarteners should have been taught, but it had saved their lives many times. "Snare, or something worse?" Sam whispered, watching as his brother skilfully traced the wire to its final destination.

Dean gently brushed away a section of "fake" undergrowth to reveal sharpened spikes nailed to a lattice section of wood. It didn't take much imagination to realize what kind of damage the booby trap could do to a human body. "Ouch." The elder brother winced. "I'm thinking definitely something worse."

Dean stepped over the wire and then tugged his hunting knife out, disarming the grotesque and archaic weapon. When it was safe to proceed, both brothers slid down the small earthy embankment to their target.

Sam stowed his shotgun under his jacket and tugged out the Glock, taking position on one side of the filthy motel window while Dean waited poised on the other with his forty-five.

After a quick nod, Dean made the first move, swinging his arms outward and spinning around to point his weapon through the window. When he thought it was all clear on the other side, he lowered his weapon a touch and held it in a one-handed pose while he jerked open the stiff-sliding frame.

He tipped his head forward, checking again for bad guys before clambering over the ledge. "Here's Johnny!" The elder hunter couldn't resist the '*Shining*' quip as he dropped down onto the skull-filled table.

As he became aware of what he was trampling he turned his head, repulsed at what one human could do to another. *Why the hell would anyone worship a demon*

that asked for that kind of allegiance? Dean shrugged off the word *demon* purposefully and as Sam followed him inside put his attention back on finding Matthew Ismay.

The door to the heavily locked room lay ahead, just as Sam had described it. Dean inhaled, brushing a sweating hand across his mouth in thought. *This is still too easy.* He brought the automatic back up to chest height and his finger tickled the trigger expectantly. "Wanna do the honors, Sammy?" he mouthed, nodding towards the three heavy duty locks they had to get through.

Sam eased past his brother, ducking his towering frame until he was level with the locks. He licked his lips and then pulled his lock-picking tools from his jacket pocket. Each lock gave way to his tinkering within just one minute. Before he opened the door, Sam looked back to Dean, apprehension, fear, anticipation all apparent on his boyish features.

Dean nodded stoically and held his weapon ready, just in case this really was an ambush.

Sam pushed gently on the wood, and when it didn't yield right away he struggled with the urge to kick at it. Instead, he eventually put his shoulder to the door and bounced on it with his weight behind the move.

The corroded hinges gave way, and finally the door surrendered. Sam moved forward cautiously, his brother only a short distance behind playing bodyguard, automatic swinging in wide, protective arcs.

"Sam..." The voice was hollow, weak, dying. It was more than Sam could take.

Forgetting any caution he had once had, the younger Winchester dived into the shadows, into the gloom he knew held the frail and shivering form of Matthew Ismay. "It's all right. I finally understood your message. We're here for you..."

Sam let his lanky legs bend into a crouch, and as his eyes adjusted to the gloom he at last met Matthew face to face. The boy had dark rings under each eye and his sorrowful expression showed the pain he felt every waking moment. Dried blood pock-marked his features where it had dribbled from his nose while he slept on the concrete floor.

"You have to hurry. They know you're coming." Matt's voice sounded nasal and thick, his throat and nose clogged with yet more clotting blood. "You have to know..." he struggled to even form words. Each effort to breathe or make coherent sentences cost him vital energy.

"Shush, whatever it is you can tell me later." Sam slid an arm under Matthew's perilously thin body and quickly picked up the eleven-year-old, clutching his head close to his chest to stop his neck lolling backwards. The kid was so light it was difficult for Sam to believe he wasn't younger. But then, the tumor was eating away at him, and maybe even now they were too late to stop it.

Sam stood from his squat position and turned to face Dean. He didn't have to say any words. Just the look of gratitude was enough. Dean had trusted Sam's instincts even when it looked like they were waltzing right into a trap. He had walked into a demonic lair to save this kid, facing his own fears about the demon along the way. To Sam, even though it was his gifts that had brought them here, Dean was the real hero. Dean the protector, the fighter, the big brother who would always be there.

Dean's eyes twinkled and Sam realized his brother had probably guessed his thoughts. He might not have real mind-reading abilities, but it was just uncanny how close Dean got when it came to what Sam was thinking sometimes.

The small show of amusement was short-lived. When Sam moved into the light and Dean saw Matthew for the first time his brow creased and he immediately turned into big brother for not one, but two very special people. "I'll take point," he offered, fully intending getting in the way of anyone or anything that dared to cross their path.

Sam wanted to argue but knew he couldn't. He probably now cradled the life of the most important of all the kids the demon was hunting. He now had to be "big brother" protector too, just like Dean.

"Can you make it through the window carrying him?" Dean queried, sweeping the room with his weapon without looking back.

Sam was about to give an affirmative when he stole a glance towards their escape route. Things had suddenly changed. "Err...Dean, I think we might need a plan B."

At the sound of uncertainty in his brother's voice, Dean whirled and immediately spotted the reason. Standing outside the window was a goon that looked like someone right out of a Hell Angel's magazine.

The newcomer was tattooed all the way down the right side of his face, wore a red-checked bandana, and had a scowl to match the rest of his scar-covered features. "Trying to take a little trip with our merchandise, bucko?" He spat through chipped, unkempt teeth.

Dean shrugged. "Heard you had a special offer on gifted kids and didn't want to miss the sale." He kept the forty-five pointed at the goon, but backed up towards the door they'd just exited, unsure if he was toying with a man, or a demon.

Sam edged back too, noticing the man at the window was not their only problem. "Dean..." From the side room, another bad guy had appeared, and this time the corroding blade in his hand made him all-too familiar.

Dean took a chance and took his eyes momentarily from his target.

As the killer moved into the light, both brothers gaped as at last their foe's features became visible. Never once had Sam seen the mystery murderer's face during the visions; had he, things would never have gotten this far.

"You set us up right from the get go, you sonofabitch!" Dean felt his finger tighten on his weapon's trigger and he kept it aimed at the man before him rather than the minion at the window.

Black eyes flashed and dull laughter filled the room. "One special kid as an offering got me brownie points, but two? Hell, I think I just moved up the corporate ladder a little, don't you?" Nick lifted the knife in his hands and twisted it in front of him. "Course, I would have enjoyed gutting you freaks a whole lot more, but the master has plans."

"You knew back at the bar who we were?" Sam recalled now where he'd seen the man, or rather demon, before. "Did you make me see the visions too?"

Nick scoffed. "Your little friend there provided those free of charge. He lured you here with the best of intentions, and I let him." He chuckled, eyeing Dean with a sadistic smirk. "And you thought I was just some brainless brawn back at the bar. You people will never learn..."

Dean smirked back cockily. "Yeah, well I got the brainless brawn right. Two outta three ain't bad." *Shit! How the hell do we deal with these freaks without the Colt!*

Nick seemed to read his mind. "You don't. You belong to us now." He took a step forward. "Shame for you that the master is only interested in Sammy boy. Looks like I get to add another skull to my collection tonight..."

Another 'follower' appeared behind the fake bartender like some kind of demonic bodyguard. He held an old but probably very effective shotgun in his hands, but at this point didn't attempt to take aim. The room now had three bad guys, one of which at least was pretty much unstoppable.

"Time for a tactical retreat, Sammy!" Dean let off four rounds straight at Nick's kneecaps. If Nick was possessed then the human part of him would live, but hopefully the move would knock him off his feet right now and buy precious seconds.

The plan half worked, and the demon stumbled forward, his followers unsure how to proceed until he barked a command.

Using the distraction, Sam backed completely into the barricaded room and settled Matthew back on the floor, then returned to the doorway. In the half a second he'd been away, 'bodyguard dude' had advanced on Dean and was just asking to take a slug.

Dean considered another leg shot, but hesitated just long enough for Sam to get there first.

Sam pulled his salt-filled shotgun from beneath his jacket and gave the six-five behemoth attacking his brother both barrels. The goon took the salt right in the gut and was blasted backwards with the impact. His momentum carried him arms flailing straight into his boss's gruesome, fly infested altar.

"Sammy!" Dean spun around, checking where the first bad guy had gone. Instead of catching a glimpse of his quarry, he soon realized that 'knee capping' the demon hadn't had a very lasting effect.

Nick's rather cumbersome form sprang from the motel room floor with surprising agility, his rage making him forget just what and who he was here for. In a fit of uncontrolled wrath the bartender slashed out with his recently sharpened weapon and only Dean's panicked cry saved Sam from a fatal stab wound.

Sam jerked back intuitively at his brother's yelp and Nick's knife caught the side of his jacket, merely slicing at his flesh instead of plunging right through into his stomach.

The blade glanced off his ribs, causing a thick red welt on his t-shirt where the blood instantly soaked through. Sam ignored the stinging sensation and expertly dodged another lunge whilst digging a hand deep into his pocket.

He had one last weapon, and it might buy them another minute. "Time for a bath, dude." Sam retrieved the holy water he'd gotten from the Impala's trunk and sprayed it straight into Nick's eyes.

Nick recoiled, grabbing at his boiling, scab covered flesh but he didn't run. Behind him, the two other goons were regrouping. The only way out through the window was now cut off, and the Winchesters' only sanctuary was back into the tiny barricaded room.

"Sam, in here..." Matthew's quivering voice called to the younger hunter and Sam sensed backing up truly was their only option.

"Dude, we go back in there and we're walking into our own graves." Dean shot his brother a look of despair, but knew there was no place else to go. "Hell, no way is that freaky sonofabitch bleaching my skull for his next party trick!"

Dean squeezed on his trigger repeatedly, emptying his clip into Nick's legs until the demon was thrown back against his buddies. Instead of reloading, Dean stuffed the auto in his jeans and tugged out the Remington.

As he gained a tight grip on the butt, he backed up until he was inside Matthew's 'cell,' keeping an aim on the bad guys until Sam managed to tug the door closed.

"Dean, no way can we keep this door closed on our own," Sam shook his head and swiftly looked around for anything in the shadows they could use. Because the door swung outwards, other than their own weight on it, there was little they could do. There would be no wedging a dresser up to stop anyone entering- not that there was a dresser in the room anyway.

"Sam, you can do it..." Matthew struggled to sit up, but his fatigued muscles wanted to sleep forever. "I'm too tired...so tired...but you're stronger." He coughed, "I know you've done it before..."

Dean shot the kid a look and couldn't help but feel compassion. He stole a glance to the door and didn't quite know whether to cradle the dying kid in his arms and comfort him, or make a last ditch effort to stop the bad guys entering. In the end, he decided surrender of any kind wasn't an option and joined Sam to try and hold the door shut.

"Just what the hell is he talking about, little brother?" Dean put a hand over Sam's and felt the door straining against their grip. The demon's underlings were already swinging on the door handle to open it the other side. Once Nick recovered from the holy water he would probably blast it open with sheer wrath.

Sam knew what Matthew expected, but he couldn't do it. His gifts were weaker, less trained. He couldn't hold off the demon with the power of his mind alone. *I can't do it. I don't know how!*

"Sam," Matt hacked again, this time bringing up congealed blood that had drained down his throat. "You have to concentrate...think about what you need to do. Focus on the door...nothing else matters but the door. I'm too weak..." With the last strength ebbing from his body, Matt's head lolled backwards, but he still remained conscious- barely.

"I can't control it," Sam begged, shaking his head in misery, "the only time I've ever moved anything was in blind panic for someone's life. I never had power over anything."

Dean felt the door shudder and then whoever was on the other side seemed to suddenly loosen their grip. If they weren't trying to yank the door open, that probably meant one other thing. "Sammy, duck!"

Both brothers took a swan dive for the floor just as part of the door exploded in on them. Shards of rotten wood and splinters rained down as buckshot blew away the lock section and part of the framework.

"I'd say those blind panic powers ought to be kicking in right about now, dude, because we're about to get our asses kicked by the demon bartender and the waiters from hell," Dean winced and put a hand to his brow as he noted a sliver of wood had cut into his temple. *Damn, near scalped me already...*

Sam scrambled up until he was resting back on both arms, staring wildly at the half-demolished door.

"Now, Sammy!" Dean barked out the order and hoped he sounded enough like their father to jog Sam into action. Sam might not be the obedient soldier Dean was, but he still respected John's training and what it stood for.

As Dean snapped his orders, Matthew seemed to stir. He swallowed hard, trying to get out words through blood-clogged sinuses. "You can do it, Sam. Just feel it...you have as much power as they do if you can just harness it..."

"Listen to the kid." Dean had no clue whether Ismay was even in his right mind he looked so sick, but if Sam believed, then maybe that was enough. As he watched, Matt's eyes rolled back and the hunter feared their failed rescue was too late anyway.

Ignoring Sam and the doorway for just a moment, Dean rolled across the floor to the kid's side, Remington in hand. "Hey there, buddy," he soothed, rolling Matt's head onto his lap. "You gotta stick with us, ya hear? I haven't kicked butt all afternoon for you to just give in, okay?"

Matt's eyes opened and lit up for the briefest of moments and a smile played across his greying lips. "The floor," he whispered, letting his gaze roll sideways, "the floorboards are loose. Tried to pry them up when they first brought me here...you can get out, under the wood... under motel..."

Dean followed the kid's gaze and spotted the raised wood. The flooring was old, just like the motel, and maybe, just maybe with his strength he could finish what the kid couldn't. "You gotta hold 'em off, Sammy, while I get us out of this roach motel."

Dean scrambled across the bare floor to the raised, rotting planks, glancing once to see if his brother understood him. Sam didn't acknowledge he did, but instead scurried into the far corner, tugging something from his pocket in his panicked race against time.

Dean hoped Sam's move meant he had a plan, and so he concentrated on his own task at hand. Looking at the planks he spotted what looked like dried blood on the edges, probably where Matthew had scraped with his fingers until they'd become raw. The elder brother grimaced but flicked out his hunting knife and wedged it under the raised edge.

Using the adjoining board as leverage, he quickly broke the insecure piece off and grabbed at the next plank with his free hand. He yanked back hard, putting all his strength into tugging the next section of board away from the nails that held it. In the end, the wood lice-infested piece of lumber snapped, its far end crumbling under the pressure.

Dean repeated the procedure until there was a hole big enough for even Sam's towering frame to squeeze through. He peered down beneath the motel and wondered just how many rats were living in the darkness. *Damn, I hate rats...*

Another shotgun blast hit the doorway, forcing Dean to look up from his escape route. This time, the buckshot had obliterated what was left of their protection. Only the topmost half of the door and its hinges remained, swinging helplessly from the attack, and that too would soon be gone.

The remnants of the door abruptly blasted inwards as if some unearthly zephyr had caught it unawares. Dean held a hand up to instinctively to protect himself, knowing that this was the demon's work. When it was safe to move his palm from his eyes, Nick stood before him where the door had once been.

The demon's face still held the scars from the holy water, some having burnt deep to the bone, but he still managed a small leer as he entered the make-shift prison. He looked around, at first only seeing Dean and his charge.

Nick's eyes narrowed, zeroing in on the escape route Dean had made in the floor. For an instant, he even considered the fact that perhaps Sam had already fled the scene.

The demon's momentary hesitation was enough.

Sam pounced from the shadows, eyes fixated on his target. He didn't have the physical strength to toss Nick, but Matthew had convinced him he had the mental power to do it, just like he had at the hospital in Missouri.

Nick howled as his legs tore unexpectedly from beneath him and he was slammed into the motel wall like a doll. Sam winced, realizing his 'aim' was a little off, and tried again.

This time, Nick was almost ready for him, and a psychic tug of war ensued. One minute Nick was pinned to the wall, suffering a taste of his own medicine, the next he was mentally tossed into the gloom where Sam had scrambled only seconds earlier.

Dean watched, awestruck at what his brother had achieved, and when Nick didn't reappear from the darkest reaches of the room, raised a brow.

"You gave me the idea." Sam sat on the floor, panting, but couldn't help a small smile at his brother. "Roach motel," he grinned, holding up a small piece of chalk he'd had in his pocket.

Dean squinted but still couldn't see Nick. He could, however, hear the depraved cursing coming from where the demon had been trapped inside Sam's improvised protective circle. "I would say impressive, but I don't want your head swelling any bigger than it already is." He whirled towards the doorway, sensing company. "Not to mention it ain't over 'til it's over..."

Nick's two goons were waiting. One didn't appear to have a weapon, but the other still held the shotgun from earlier. Neither man seemed sure what to do until their 'superior' began spitting vile comments their way from where he was held out of sight. Each comment made it clear what would happen should they fail in their mission for 'the master.'

"Back off, dudes, I'm not afraid to use this thing," Dean still gripped the Remington, but knew its rock salt load would only slow the men down. He glanced to his still bleeding brother. "Sammy, get the kid out while I baby-mind the Olsen twins here..."

Sam appeared dazed, his body and mind's strength sapped from overexertion. Eventually, he gulped and clambered on hands and knees to Matt's side. The eleven year-old appeared unconscious until Sam tried to lift him. As Sam's arm curled under his back, Matt stirred. "I knew you...could do...it. There's so much we can do, Sam..."

"It's okay," Sam shot Dean's escape 'tunnel' a glance and wondered if he should use it or try to brush past the goons while Dean held his weapon on them. The lead bad guy fidgeted under Sam's gaze. *He's gonna try something...* "You can tell me

later," he finished as he scooped up Matt and carefully began to clamber down the small opening in the floor.

Nick, still invisible in the darkness, realized his quarry was escaping and what his fate would now be. His father, the master, never took kindly to failure. There was no compassion among demons, only allegiance or deceit. "Kill them or you'll burn! You'll all burn!" More tainted language followed, and as Sam's head vanished beneath the floor of the motel, the lead goon finally decided he wanted to keep his skull a little longer.

Dean saw the move coming and emptied two shells into the aggressor before he could get close. The bad guy dropped his own weapon and clutched at where the rock salt had bit into his flesh making a terrible burning sensation under his skin.

While Dean's attention was taken with goon number one, the second bad guy decided for a full frontal assault even though he had no weapon at all. He charged like a bull, and before Dean could get off another shot, the two crumpled to a heap on the floor.

Winded by the collision, Dean dropped the Remington momentarily and was forced to reach out, struggling to reaffirm his grip before the bad guy got the upper hand.

He grabbed the wooden stock with the tip of his fingers; only to lose contact again as his foe slammed a right hook straight to his jaw. Dean took the blow with a grunt and brought his knee up straight into his enemy's gut. To the guy's credit, he faltered only briefly and then tried slugging Dean in the face again.

Dean yanked his head to the left so fast it hurt, dodging the punch before finally snatching his shotgun's barrel with his outstretched hand. There was no time to turn the weapon and aim, and no room to maneuver it anyway. He simply brought the Remington down hard on his opponent's head and hoped he hadn't done too much damage.

The man tottered, lurching forward until his unconscious mass slumped down on top of Dean.

Dean groaned, ignoring Nick's now desperate screaming as he shoved the dead weight away and made a mad dash for his escape route. The first bad guy was stirring, and he really didn't want to be around for a second fist fight with Olsen number one.

As darkness enclosed him, Dean could hear Sam up ahead frantically talking to the kid he was now being forced to almost drag in the cramped conditions. There was little room beneath the motel, and definitely no room to actually carry Matt.

Dean fumbled in his pocket for a Maglite as he shuffled along on his stomach. Once he'd retrieved the tiny flashlight he twisted the lens, illuminating under the Melrose Motel's decking.

To his right, an inquisitive rodent cocked its head, nose twitching before scurrying away into a hole in the woodwork. *Great, rats, I knew it!*

"Dean, hurry!" From somewhere ahead Sam's voice beckoned him on.

Dean pushed his elbows and knees to work faster until he could see the opening Sam had exited via. It looked like the longer-legged Winchester had actually kicked his way out through a mite-infected section of decking, and he was now looking around for the company that would surely follow.

Matthew Ismay still lay in his brother's careful grasp, but Dean noted Sam seemed to be struggling to bear his weight. Blood from the cut to his side had turned his brother's t-shirt a glaring shade of crimson, and that coupled with exhaustion from the visions was finally taking its toll. As he watched, Sam seemed to sway on his feet, his eyes blinking desperately as he tried to stay in control of his muscles.

Dean tugged free from the motel's underbelly and didn't waste time trying to brush away the dirt and cobwebs that had covered him. Instead, he took stock of the situation.

As far as he could tell no one was following- yet. That didn't mean they wouldn't once the 'Olsens' freed Nick. All he and Sam had to do was make a dash across the open ground to the Impala and hope they made it first. Looking at Sam, that might not be so easy.

"Dude, you look like..."

"Yeah, crap, I know," Sam countered, tired of the insinuation. "Now can we just get to the car?"

Dean offered up the Remington he'd recovered and gently took Matt from his brother's arms. "You're bleeding, man. Let me take the kid."

Sam reluctantly let go his grip on the now unmoving eleven year-old and tried to break into a jog at the side of his brother. Any life that had been left in Matt seemed to have waned away as they'd escaped, and Sam now feared he wouldn't even make it back to the hospital. Everything they had done would probably be for nothing. He didn't care about the cost to himself, but Matt had suffered, both at nature's hand with the tumor, and now the demon too. *Why? Why were we given these gifts? All they bring us is torment, grief...death.*

A shot landed at their feet as they ran, kicking up dusty sods of earth and making it all too apparent they were being pursued again already. Sam didn't seem to notice, his mind was already foggy with defeat and his body weary. He glanced back and was thankful their followers were at least the human kind. Perhaps Nick was still bound inside the protective circle.

Dean picked up the pace, hoping he wasn't jarring Matt too much as he lengthened his strides towards the Impala. Another shot rang out, ricocheting from the Chevy as it took out a chunk of metal from the passenger door. "Sonofa..." He reached the hood and turned, looking for his brother.

Sam was trailing behind, hand clutched to his side where the rusted blade had nicked him. "Go! Start the car!"

Dean nodded, yanking the rear door open and placing Matt carefully across the seat. He left the door ajar, knowing Sam would want to travel with the youngster.

More bullets bounced off the ground, but Dean ignored them and jumped behind the steering wheel, keys at the ready. As he cranked the ignition and floored the gas, Sam dived into the back of the car, his legs still dangling outside as Dean pulled a one-eighty and headed back for the open road.

"You two okay back there?" Dean dared to glance in the rear view as Sam tugged himself into a sitting position. He knew damn well neither of them was 'okay' but he needed to know that neither had been clipped by one of the bullets that had been flying around.

Sam shook himself and eased Matt's head onto his lap. He checked for any new injuries, but all that he could see was a fresh stain of blood from the kid's nose. He slid a finger to Matt's neck, feeling his pulse. It was weak and thready. "Nothing new," he said morosely. "But he's dying anyway."

Dean checked his mirrors again and swallowed hard. He'd never really known the kid, and yet he felt a connection, maybe not to the extent Sam did because of the shared gifts, but a connection nonetheless. He didn't want to see Matt die, not here, not anywhere. "Never give in, Sammy, you should know that. Did you give up on me back in Missouri?"

Sam thought back, recalling Dean lying bloodied in his arms just like Matt was. It was something he'd never wish to experience again, but here he was, *and all because of the damn demon.*

"Sam..." Somehow, Matt's eyes fluttered open.

"I'm here," Sam offered sensitively, holding the kid as the car bucked over rough spots in the road.

"Don't feel bad, Sam. You tried," Matt's expression was one of happiness, even though he knew what was happening. "Better for me to die free than with the...the demon."

At the mention of the word Sam recoiled, thinking of his mom, Jess, the skulls, and the horror Matthew had probably witnessed. "Why? Why are we so important to them?" He couldn't help but ask.

Matt inhaled sharply and then began to cough. Each hack becoming deeper and more intense 'til his body shook with the effort. When the bout finally abated he trembled in Sam's grip, desperate to answer before succumbing. "The balance, Sam...we're the balance...without us..." His eyes slid gently closed, and even though his chest still rose and fell pitifully slowly, Sam knew there would be no more answers.

What does that mean? The balance between what? Why couldn't I understand the visions sooner? I could have stopped this, had the answers I need, saved a life... My fault... Sam was jarred back to reality by his brother spitting out cuss words as he glanced behind.

"Shit!" Dean hit the Chevy's brakes and pulled the car's steering wheel hard to the right, forcing the Impala to lean heavily, its frame groaning with effort. "We got a tail. It's the Dodge, and he's catching us up."

"I thought this thing was supposed to be fast for a classic?" Sam turned, momentarily taking his attention from Matthew to the vehicle chasing them. Dean was right, the Ram was definitely gaining.

"Hey," Dean shot a pained look at his brother for daring to insult his 'baby,' "This thing was built for comfort not superspeed. Besides, he must have got a booster to be catching us up this fast..."

"Now what?" Spooks, Sam could deal with, but he was no stunt driver. "We don't have time for any detours, we need the hospital!"

Dean took another tight turn and almost growled at his younger sibling, "Maybe you wanna come up here and drive?" He rolled his eyes. "On second thought, maybe not..." He slid the car onto the main highway and began to pray under his breath.

Dean was not a friend of the law. How could he be when he was not only officially dead, but also an officially dead suspected murderer? However, on this occasion he was willing to bend and actually seek out a cruiser.

Cops tended to pick their spots for speed traps, and of course Dean knew how to best avoid them. Right now, he was searching one out like the Impala was a 'cop seeking' raven black missile.

Dean glanced at the speedometer needle and whistled. "Man, that overhaul worked wonders."

"What are you..?" Sam asked, bewildered at his brother's driving tactics. Suddenly, it all became clear. "Dean, we got a cop on our tail!"

"Bingo!" Dean's face cracked into an ear-to-ear grin as the cruiser's siren began to wail and its lights began to whirl in a kaleidoscope of color behind them. "Let's see if the 'Olsens' want to follow us now..." As he watched, the Dodge slowed and inconspicuously slinked off onto a side road. "Guess not," he shrugged brashly.

Sam peered through the rear window. "So now what? How do we get rid of the cops?"

"We don't," Dean answered somewhat smugly. "Consider them our escort. Hell, everyone gets out of the way of the cops, right?"

Ten Minutes Later...

Dean kept his foot on the gas until he hit the outskirts of town and then slowed somewhat, knowing that he had to be more cautious wherever there was a chance of causing an accident.

The cruiser behind him matched his speed but didn't try to intercept, the driver all-too aware of what the consequences might be in a built up area.

At the sight of the children's hospital emergency entrance, Dean slowed more, hitting the Chevy's horn to let people know he was coming in fast, and that he had someone who needed help on board.

"Dean..." Sam glanced back at the cop car as the Impala ground to a halt and then pushed open the heavy rear door to try to carry Matt into the E.R.

Dean ignored Sam's plea and the wailing police siren, and scooted to the back of the car, plucking Matt from his brother's arms with the intention of carrying him inside. Sam protested, but was in no shape to fight off his sibling.

"I'll take it from here, Sammy." Dean glanced at his brother, bleeding and forlorn, and he knew Sam thought there was no hope for Matt. Maybe he'd even *seen* it. "Sam, you need to get that cut checked out..."

Sam just nodded dolefully, but didn't attempt to move. He'd had enough fighting demons to last him his entire life, or at least that's how it felt right now. *Kids, why does it always have to be helpless kids...*

Dean wanted to console his brother, to tell him it was normal to feel that way, but he was out of time. Two of Wisconsin's finest had exited their cruiser, guns drawn, and if he wanted to get Matt inside first he had to move.

Offering a quick glance at the cops as they shouted him to stop, Dean bounded through the hospital doors and up to the duty nurse. Some of the already waiting patients shot him a dirty look as he 'jumped the queue' but Dean didn't care.

"Excuse me, miss, I need some help here." The elder Winchester felt Matt's weight move just a fraction in his arms and it gave him hope that maybe there was still a chance. "He has a tumor...you should have his records..." Dean had never felt so powerless, so unable to fight off what was happening, and it hurt just as much as if it were Sam he was gently cradling. "Matthew Ismay," he explained, "I think you might have him listed as deceased..."

The young nurse took one look at the spindly child in Dean's arms and immediately pushed away the shameless thoughts she'd had the moment she'd set eyes on the hunter. "Bring him through." She hopped from her seat, frowning, and ushered Dean into a cubicle. While he set Matt down, she vanished, reappearing a second later with a doctor.

"We can take it from here, young man..."

Dean nodded absentmindedly, but didn't want to move until he had answers. He stepped back through the curtain grudgingly and then remembered he had another injured party to deal with.

Sam was still probably in the Impala, bleeding all over the leather. *Why don't I just get the interior redone in red, it would save me a helluva lot of cleaning.* Dean shrugged as he recalled how he'd bled all over it himself back in Missouri.

First he had to ditch the cops, and then he could work on getting Sam cleaned up and looking half-human again.

"Hold it right there, buddy." Dean turned, knowing his police 'escort' had finally caught up with him. Both patrolmen had their weapons trained on him, and the people in the waiting area were looking decidedly spooked.

He raised his hands, wondering if he should slip out one of his fake detective I.D.s and 'wing it' or admit the truth- he'd been speeding to save a life. "Dudes, chill," he smirked, "I can explain everything..."

* * * *

Children's Hospital of Wisconsin, The Next Day

"So, is psychic boy gonna tell me just how he tossed the demon yesterday?" Dean stole a glance at his brother as he maneuvered the Impala through an automatic

barrier at the hospital. "I mean, pretty impressive, dude, even for you." For once, he wasn't kidding.

Sam's gifts never ceased to amaze the elder Winchester, but sometimes he held back on discussing it because he knew it freaked his brother out. Sometimes, it freaked Dean out too. That was why he'd waited until now to bring the subject up; because it was obvious Sam was still sulking over Matt's condition. Heck, knowing Sam he was shouldering the blame all to himself for not finding the kid fast enough.

Sam wound down the side window and peered out, abruptly feeling smothered by the subject. He'd moved things before- even tossed a demon once, but never because he'd actually *planned* it. The gifts had come spontaneously, at least until the previous day.

Somehow, Matt Ismay had helped him focus his abilities and use them as a weapon against the bad guys. The only problem was, without Matt, Sam wasn't sure it was something he could repeat. The kid had knowledge and intuition he just hadn't learned about his fledgling powers yet. If Matt lived, Sam suspected even though he was only eleven, he could easily end up being some kind of mentor. The tumor had advanced his abilities growth, who knew what he'd also managed to learn about the demon? *We're the balance...*

Sam shook himself and turned back to his brother as Dean expertly tucked the Impala into an empty space. "I don't think it was me," he finally admitted, rubbing his temple as if another headache was about to set in. "At least, not all of it. I think Matt helped me channel whatever it was, kind of like a guy with a limp needs a crutch, I needed Matt..."

Dean nodded at the idiom but didn't speak. He could tell Sam was having a hard time, and that was nothing new. No matter how hard he tried to put some fun or humor into their lives, no matter how hard he tried to shield his brother, Sam would always end up feeling low like this.

Dean climbed from the Chevy and checked out the charges for the hospital lot. Maybe if he got some good news about the kid for Sam, he could drag 'dimply smile' back from where it had been hiding. He groaned as he saw the fees but still slipped a hand into his pocket to sift through his loose change. *Man, it's expensive to be sick in this town!*

"So, my turn at questions and answers." Sam cupped his hands on the Chevy's roof, "Are you going to tell me how you ditched those cops, or not?" He looked on impatiently as his brother checked the coins in his hand and then looked up, smirking.

"Told you, Sammy, I'm charmed!"

Sam huffed, teasingly. "Dude, no offense, but no way you're any match for the Halliwells."

"At least I'm not a boring 'Gilmore Girl,'" Dean chuckled and spun around to lock the Impala. As he slipped the key in the lock he spotted a red sixty-nine Charger two cars up and whistled. "Whoa, check out those lines...she's got the most gorgeous a..."

"Dean!" Sam groaned, cutting his brother off from further thought. "It's a car, not a pin up."

"Not just a car," a familiar voice offered. "It's a classic, right, Dean?"

Both brothers turned to see Val smiling at them, hands on hips.

Dean nodded, suddenly speechless, and gawked further when the pretty nurse headed for the gleaming V8. "She's yours?" He asked incredulously. "You threatened the Impala with the crusher and you drive that?"

Val hunched her shoulders in a swift shrug and quickly opened up the Dodge. "Cars I get, people are just..."

"Crazy," Dean grinned, finally admitting he and the brazen nurse were on the same wavelength. "So," he cleared his throat, trying to become a little more serious.

"Is there any news about Matthew? The doctors said it might be this morning. We came as early as we could..."

Val's face visibly changed. She'd been happy to hear the kid wasn't a ghost at all. Not only did it prove her theory that 'the hereafter' didn't exist, but it also meant the youngster might survive. Now it looked like that wasn't going to happen.

"Matt made it through the surgery, but it didn't go well. He's in a coma and the doctors don't hold out much hope he'll ever wake up. I'm sorry. I know how hard you two worked to save him, I really do." Val watched as both brothers shared a look. They were clearly upset, but she wasn't sure of their reasoning. Was it simply just another ghostbusting case to them? Where they upset because they couldn't interrogate the kid about how he'd 'projected' himself?

Sam convinced her otherwise. His soft, almost tearful voice cracking as he begged, "No chance at all?"

"I wished I could say I believe in miracles, but I really don't," Val admitted, climbing into her car and tossing her purse onto the vacant seat, "I don't believe in miracles, and I don't believe in ghosts."

Dean leaned on the Charger's door, peering in through the open window, his face perfectly serious. "How can you be so sure? In your job don't you see miracles every day? There has to be something more out there than us, right?"

Val patted the Dodge's steering wheel. "This car? It belonged to my husband. He idolized the damn thing just a little more than he even loved me." The nurse screwed up her face as bad memories brought moisture to her eyes. "One day he was driving home from work when a truck shed its load. He never even knew what hit him. A steel sheet slammed straight through the windshield..."

"I think we get the picture," Dean consoled, "but if brings so many bad memories why did you keep it?"

Val smiled. "Because it was Tony's, and for awhile, like you, I believed if his will was strong enough, Tony could come back. I waited; I waited so long, but nothing. Not even in this damn thing that he adored!" She was angry now, angry at a world that would deny her even one last vestige of hope that love could live on after death.

Realizing she'd said too much in front of two relative strangers, Val plucked a tissue from the glove box and rubbed at her streaming eyes. Eventually, when her vision cleared, she looked to Sam, hoping to change the subject. "How's your side? Hopefully not too sore?"

"Sore? Heck, he pulled through three stitches last night trying out a new yoga move!" Dean answered for his brother, wiggling his eyebrows with just a little too much fervor.

"Dude, that was so not yoga..." Sam looked sideways and then crossed his arms resignedly. Dean would never let the whole yoga thing drop, even if he had partaken in it himself since the accident in the Impala.

"Riiiggght," Dean exaggerated, "Some martial arts crap or something. Suurreee..."

The brothers' mirth brought a smile back to the nurse's face and she cranked the engine of her classic. The Dodge roared to life, its grumbling V8 challenging even the roar of the Impala. Dean scowled with a slight pang of 'car jealousy' but then winked as Val began to pull from her spot.

She smiled back, tapping the brakes lightly to address Sam. "Still want to know how your smart-Alec brother lost the two traffic cops?" Val waved an arrest sheet in the air and then tore it in two. "My brother works traffic, remember?" She laughed before powering up her window and heading out towards the lot's exit.

"No way, man, of all the cops in Wisconsin you're lucky enough to get *her* brother?"

"Told you I was charmed, Sammy." Dean winked again and headed back to the Impala, hands in pockets.

Sam scurried behind, still not getting something. "So, gonna tell me why the self-confessed babe magnet that is Dean Winchester didn't just try to hand over his cell number to one very pretty nurse?"

"Oh, because I think the husband, Tony, might have something to say about it." The elder Winchester pulled out his home-made E.M.F. meter and pointed it at the Charger now vanishing into the milling traffic on the highway. Even at this distance, the meter was red-lining. "That thing makes *Christine* look like a pussycat." He slipped the meter back in his pocket and climbed into the Chevy.

"You're not going to tell her?" Sam joined his brother in the car, incredulous that they were letting a spook get away.

"What do you want me to do? Say 'Hey, you're wrong, your husband is with you everywhere you go, just like you hoped. Now I gotta get rid of his spook ass?' C'mon, Sammy, he's watching over her." Dean shrugged, and then a playful grin spread across his features. "Either that, or he really does love the car more than his wife."

"Dean!" Sam slammed a mock-punch into his brother's arm but then sobered, "Seriously, Dean, we're just leaving Wisconsin? Leaving Matt, leaving," he shot the highway a glance, meaning the ghost of Val's husband.

"Dude, I feel for the kid as much as you do, but we're not doctors. We did our best and there's nothing more we can do here." Dean fumbled with the Impala's keys, trying to think of something useful to say, but he was never the philosophical one. "I know you wanted to save him, to have answers to everything, but at least we know more now."

"Know what? I mean, what the hell is "we're the balance" supposed to mean?" Sam's tone wasn't angry, but it was clear that frustration was building the more he thought about things. "All I know is that some damn demon is hell bent on taking certain kids for reasons unknown. The harder I try to understand, the more people die!" he slammed a fist into the dash, taking out pent up rage. "And what about the guy in the cemetery? Was he a bad guy too? Are we being watched that closely?"

"Hey!" It was Dean's turn to raise his voice. "You didn't just stumble on this, the priest and his note played a part. Now, I don't know him, or the guy in the cemetery, maybe I never will, but they're either with us, or they're working for Mr. Sparkly eyes the fire freak. The way I figure it, the priest at least is like you, Max, and the kid. That means eventually, we *will* find answers, Sammy. You're not alone in this."

Sam looked to the floor. "No, we just feel alone. Can you imagine how it must have been for Matt to learn what he could do and have no one to confide in? No family?" *No big brother.* "How terrifying to know that demons do exist, and that one of them is after you? He was just a kid!"

"He *is* just a kid, Sam. He's not dead." Dean slid the keys in and fired up the Chevy's engine. When the roar of ignition dulled, he looked over to his woeful brother with a glimmer of hope. "You have to think of it this way, little brother, Matt isn't dead, he's just someplace the demon can't hurt him anymore. I have a feeling when this whole gig is over, a lot more people will be wishing they were there too..."

Dean didn't say anymore, he just headed out for the highway towards Melrose's motel. It was doubtful Nick was still held in the protective circle there, but if he was, the Winchesters had one last debt to pay in Neenah, and damned if they wouldn't enjoy sending his demon ass back to hell.

As he steered the roaring car down the empty track to the motel, dust clouds billowing in its wake, Dean never even noticed the stranger watching from the roadside. Some might have said the fresh rain spattering the car's windshield had obscured the hunter's view, others might have given a more startling reason- perhaps the stranger wasn't even visible unless he so wished it.

The old man's head cocked to one side and he smiled, his almost-white beard twitching with amusement just as it had back in the cemetery. Matthew Ismay's soul had been saved from the demon's grasp, the balance, although skewed had been saved from further harm.

The stranger's eyes twinkled with satisfaction as he watched the Impala and its very special occupants disappear from view over the horizon. For now, he could leave, free in the knowledge that something very big, and very bad had been averted. That day would come again, however, because the powers of darkness were relentless in their pursuits. And when that day came, he had no doubt he and the Winchesters would meet again.

A small breeze blew across the nearby road surface, churning yet more spirals of dust in the air like mini-whirlwinds. The old-timer turned into the gust, his insubstantial form melting down into the zephyr and vanishing as quickly as it had appeared.

In the Impala, the Stones' 'Gimme Shelter' blasted from the overburdened speakers, but for some, until the crusade was over, there would be no shelter, no peace, no respite.

The End